

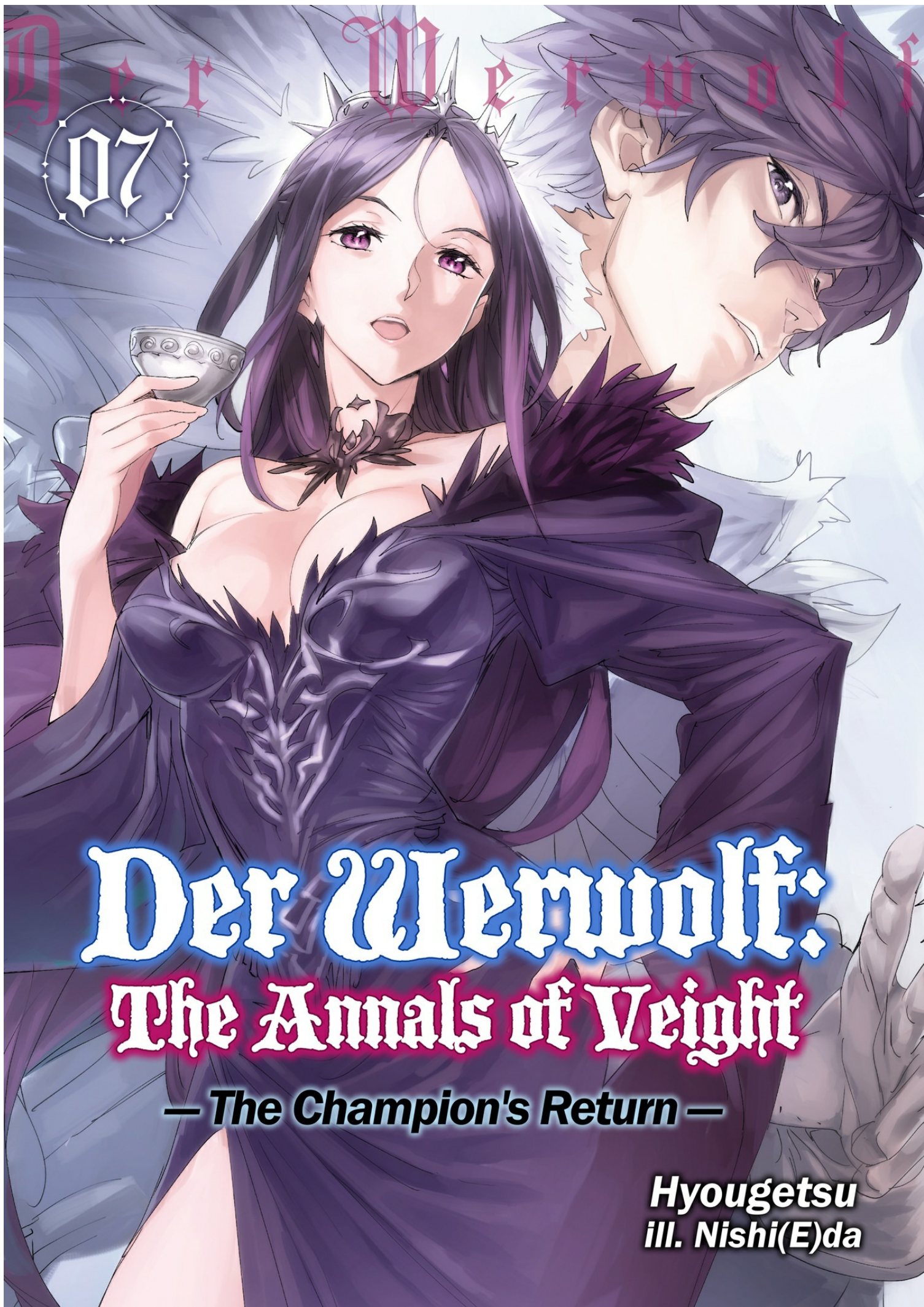
07

Der Werwolf

Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— The Champion's Return —

Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da



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Character

Veight

A former human who's been reborn as a werewolf. Now serves as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and is also a member of the Southern Commonwealth.



Parker

A necromancer of the demon army and one of Gomoviroa's disciples. He himself is an undead skeleton, but often uses illusion magic to disguise his appearance.



Rite

Originally worked for the Senate, but after meeting with Veight became his Vice-Commander. A master of epoch magic.



Natalia

A private in the Mage Corps and Eleora's friend. Due to their close age, Eleora treats Natalia more as a trusted aide than a subordinate.



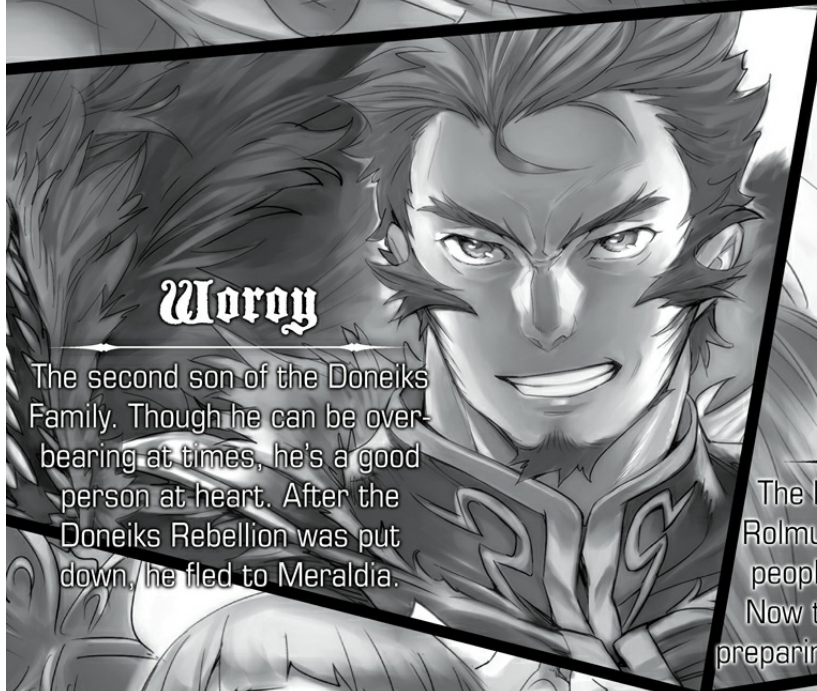
Airia Lutte Aindorf

Viceroy of the trading city of Rynheit, and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor. Despite her stunning looks, she prefers to dress in men's clothing.



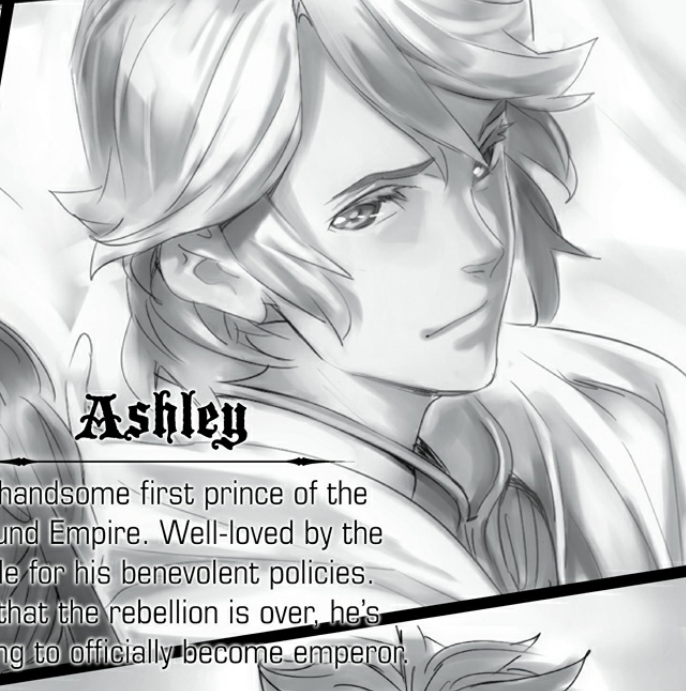
Eleora

The eldest daughter of the Originia Family. Has the backing of the demon army and became the hero of the Rolmund Empire after successfully suppressing the Doneiks Rebellion.



Woroy

The second son of the Doneiks Family. Though he can be overbearing at times, he's a good person at heart. After the Doneiks Rebellion was put down, he fled to Meraldia.



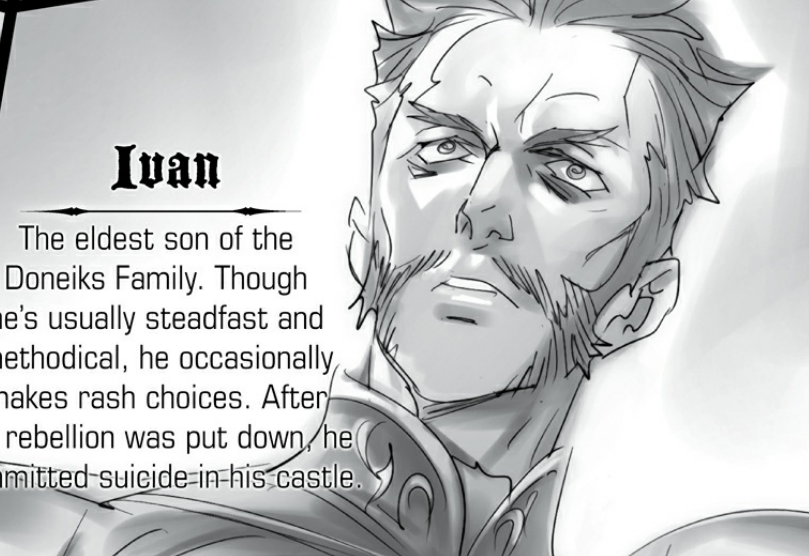
Ashley

The handsome first prince of the Rolmund Empire. Well-loved by the people for his benevolent policies. Now that the rebellion is over, he's preparing to officially become emperor.



Ryunnie

Ivan's only son. After the Doneiks rebellion, he fled to Meraldia with Woroy.



Ivan

The eldest son of the Doneiks Family. Though he's usually steadfast and methodical, he occasionally makes rash choices. After his rebellion was put down, he committed suicide in his castle.



The story so far

In order to secure lasting peace for Meraldia, Veight traveled to Rolmund with Eleora so he could install her as its empress.

With the death of the previous emperor, Bahazoff the fourth, Prince Ashley was next in line for the throne. But in an uproar, Prince Ivan assassinated Lord Doneiks—second in line to the throne—and attempted to pin the blame on Ashley. This resulted in a protracted civil war that delayed the coronation and forced Ashley to come to Eleora for aid. She agreed, and upon joining the fray, she swiftly started captured key Doneiks castles. Many of the nobles who were sitting on the fence saw which way the wind was blowing, and quickly swore their allegiance to Prince Ashley, further cementing the Doneiks family's demise.

Soon enough, Veight succeeded in defeating both Prince Woroy and Prince Ivan, bringing the revolt to an end. Though Veight knew Ivan would need to die for his crimes, he promised the prince that he would protect his son, Ryuunie, and his brother, Woroy. Ivan thanked Veight for his kindness and, with the parting words "I'm glad I was able to meet you," committed suicide in his stronghold, Kinjarl Castle.

Afterwards, Veight escorted Ryuunie and Woroy to Meraldia, where they would be safe from Rolmund's retribution. Now, he returns to Rolmund to complete his original task: seat Eleora on Rolmund's throne.

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Chapter 7

A fierce civil war followed the death of Rolmund's emperor, Bahazoff the Fourth. That war, which had been started by the emperor's nephew, Prince Ivan, was now known as the Doneiks Rebellion. I'd taken part in the war as one of Eleora's generals, and had somehow managed to steer the outcome into a victory for Prince Ashley. However, considering how many people died in this needless conflict, I couldn't really be happy about the results. The only thing I was proud of was rescuing Ivan's brother, Woroy, and his son, Ryuunie, and delivering them safely to Meraldia. Even so, I was worried that if these bloody conflicts continued, I'd lose my human conscience and become a werewolf in body and soul. Of course, I loved my werewolf comrades, but when all was said and done, I was still human. In fact, it was because I was human on the inside that I'd managed to make it this far. I wanted to hold on to my humanity if possible.

Those were the thoughts whirling around in my head as I made my way through the tunnel back to Rolmund. Upon reaching Eleora's fortress, I dropped off the supplies I'd brought with me from Meraldia, and stationed a few civil officers who'd come with me from Krauhen there. They'd serve as messengers between me and the Commonwealth Council. Once all that was sorted out, I headed back to the imperial capital with Ryucco and my werewolves.

"Gods blast it. I'm freezing. No one told me it was gonna be this bloody cold."

As we rode in our carriage, Ryucco looked reproachfully up at me, shivering in his seat. After a few seconds of consideration, I responded, "Larger animals can deal with the cold better. Doubling something's height only quadruples its surface area, but multiplies the amount of warm blood, fat, and tissue it can have by eight."

This was the same reason larger pots of stew took longer to cool than small ones.

"I ain't asking for a science lecture here! Though that *is* useful to

know...thanks for the tip, Veight.”

Still shivering, Ryucco brought out a notepad and wrote what I said down. I handed him a small children’s coat I’d bought in one of the villages we passed through and started explaining our strategy.

“I’ll handle all the politics and diplomacy, so you start analyzing all the magical technology Rolmund’s developed.”

“You got it.”

“Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

Ryucco pulled the coat’s fluffy hood over his head and gave me a questioning look.

“I want you to study the empire’s history and traditions and copy it all down for me.”

“Sure, I can do that. But why do you want their history?”

“The old Meraldian Senate tried to bury a lot of the region’s history. We’re missing some important details that I hope Rolmund’s records can shed light on.”

Meraldia’s historical records didn’t have any information on the things I was most curious about—namely the histories of past Heroes and Demon Lords, as well as any mentions of past reincarnators. Rolmund’s histories went back centuries further than Meraldia’s so I was hoping they might have some anecdotes.

“Draulight, for example.”

“You mean the northern city?”

Draulight, the city of peaks, did indeed sit on Meraldia’s northern tip. Ryucco was at least familiar with the name, it seemed. There was a very specific reason I was interested in that city.

“The truth is, in Rolmund, Draulight’s the name of one of their Heroes.”

Depending on who you asked, he was either known as the Slave Swordsman,

or the Rebel Hero. Supposedly, he was the one who'd emancipated Rolmund's slaves and led them to Meraldia, where they formed a new nation. It was because of his actions that the old republic in Rolmund eventually crumbled, and was replaced by the imperial system. His actions had led to a period of great turmoil in Rolmund, so he wasn't looked fondly upon by history. That was why, despite the magnitude of his achievements, there weren't too many records of his life and deeds in Rolmund. Ryucco pulled his vegetable case out of his pocket as he nodded along to my explanation.

"Want a puff?"

"Thanks."

I selected a stick of dried burdock and chewed on it thoughtfully. Ryucco took a carrot stick for himself and looked out the carriage window.

"Heroes are a real threat, that's for sure... Last thing we want is Master ending up like the last Demon Lord."

"Yeah, Master's not invincible. If she had to fight someone as strong as a Hero even she wouldn't come out unscathed."

That was certainly one of my worries. But another big reason I wanted to investigate this was because I wanted to know if the old Demon Lord had been reincarnated again. After all, if he'd been reincarnated once, it was feasible that it could happen again. And if he had, I needed to know where he'd gone. Of course, I realized this was wishful thinking and that the chances of him being reincarnated were exceedingly low. But even so, I wanted to have hope.

"I had Kite chronicling the empire's history before, so you can just take over where he left off. He'll investigate all the promising leads when we get back, so you don't have to dig too deep."

"Alright, should be a piece of cake. Looks like my magic's gonna come in handy after all."

Ryucco pulled his bag closer to him and opened it. Inside was a vast space far larger than the dimensions of the bag. I'd christened the bag "Ryucco's Rucksack," though I only called it that in my head. Meraldian didn't have a word for knapsack that alliterated with Ryucco's name, so it wouldn't sound clever to

anyone else.

Ryucco was a space mage, meaning he could bend dimensions. However, he was only skilled at manipulating the space in his vicinity, which meant he couldn't teleport. This was mostly because instead of actually calculating spatial coordinates, he relied on his lagomorph instincts to cast spells. Because of how wary lagomorphs were by nature, they were always keeping an eye on their immediate surroundings. As a result, they had an intrinsic grasp of the area around them.

Ryucco finished his carrot and pulled a daikon stick out of his case next. As he started chewing on it, he said, "I'll grab every interesting magical gizmo Rolmund's got, don't you worry."

"Just don't go overboard, okay?"

If you start stealing state secrets we'll have a diplomatic crisis on our hands. I was a little jealous of Ryucco's massive inventory of magical items, though. Thanks to his spatial magic, he could even reduce their weight, making them easier to carry around in his knapsack. *Maybe I should start learning space magic too... Though I guess as a werewolf mage, the only items I'd really need to carry around are spare clothes.* I probably wouldn't be able to make efficient use of space magic, really.

We spotted a few suspicious people tailing us on the way to the capital, but I didn't want to make a scene, so I let them be. If, as I suspected, they were Bolshevik spies, capturing them would do more harm than good. I had my werewolves keep an eye on them, but once we neared the capital they vanished. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

Soon enough, we reached Rolmund's capital.

"I grew excited when I heard a fellow disciple would be joining us here in Rolmund, and yet..." Parker heaved a momentous sigh. "To think it would be you of all people, Ryucco!"

"Shut it, skullface! Why don't you put some meat on your bones, huh!?"

“I can’t, whatever I eat just falls out of my mouth!”

“That’s cause you don’t have a throat, fool!”

Ryucco guffawed heartily while Parker picked him up and hugged him. Every one of Master’s disciples were problem children in one way or another, but now the worst of the lot had all gathered in one place. That assessment included me too, of course. *Well, Melaine’s not around to scold us so I guess we can be as silly as we want here.* With Ryucco still in his arms, Parker turned toward me.

“Oh yes, there’s something important I need to tell you. Lord Bolshevik wants to meet with you.”

“With me?”

Now that’s a surprise.

Parker repeated himself, with added emphasis, “Yes, *you*. Not Eleora.”

“Hmmm.”

What could the esteemed Lord Bolshevik want with a boring old vice-commander like me? Parker added, “You may not have been part of the most critical battle that won this war, but without you, Eleora would have lost. Plus, you rescued Woroy and Ryuunie and sent them to Meraldia. My guess is that Lord Bolshevik is afraid of you.”

“Well, I did make quite the scene. Alright, let’s see what he has to say.”

I was pretty curious what his motives were myself. Besides, I had a little unfinished business with the Bolshevik family.

After greeting Eleora, I headed straight to the Bolshevik manor in the capital. I announced my arrival, and was ushered into the main hall, which was empty save for a single young man. I doubted the owner of the manor would be waiting for me in the hall like this, so I surmised he wasn’t Lord Bolshevik. But judging by how well-dressed he was, I doubted he was a servant either. He was a noble of some kind, I was pretty sure. From the way he carried himself, I could tell he was a soldier, too. *Which means... Ah, I know who he is now.* This was

Lord Bolshevik's younger brother, Jovtzia. It had taken me a while to remember that name because of how difficult it was to pronounce. I stepped forward, and the young man gave me a hostile glare.

"Welcome to the Bolshevik Manor. Are you Lord Veight?"

"I am indeed. And you are?"

I wasn't sure I'd memorized his name correctly, so I decided to play it safe and have him introduce himself.

The young man puffed his chest out proudly and said, "I am Lord Bolshevik's younger brother, Jovtzia Worbern Bolshevik."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Veight Gerun Friedensrichter."

I gave my full name and bowed to Jovtzia. Despite my courteous introduction, Jovtzia's gaze remained hostile.

"Why did you exile Woroy to Meraldia? As his cousin and his sworn friend, I have a right to know what plans you have for him."

Suddenly a group of butlers and servants rushed into the main hall. They must have been watching from somewhere discreet.

"Master Jovtzia, you're being rude to our guest!"

"Lord Bolshevik will be furious if he finds out, Young Master!"

From Jovtzia's point of view, I'd chased Woroy out of his homeland. Not only would Jovtzia never be able to see Woroy again, but he didn't even know if the prince was safe or not. Of course, a little critical thinking would have made it obvious that if I was Woroy's enemy, I would have just executed him. However, it was clear Jovtzia was too upset to think clearly. Also, it was theoretically possible I'd had him exiled just so I could kill him quietly without causing a scene. Jovtzia's worry was understandable. *You've got some good friends, Woroy.*

Smiling, I walked toward Jovtzia. I only stopped once we were so close there wasn't even enough space for us to draw our swords. Since he was standing with his back to the wall, it looked like I was cornering him. I grabbed Jovtzia by

the collar and hoisted him off his feet. In the brief moment it took for him to recover from his shock, I took a letter out of my pocket.

“I have no obligation to tell you anything.”

But I will give you this. Confused, Jovtzia looked down at the letter in my hand. When he saw the words “To my masochistic friend” written in a hasty scrawl on the envelope, his eyes went wide. Woroy had written this letter for Jovtzia when he was leaving Rolmund. In fact, he’d written letters to all of his close friends. I thought back to the conversation I’d had with him.

“I bet they’re all worried about me. If possible, could you deliver these letters to them? I’ve asked them all to help you too.”

Jovtzia scrutinized the wax seal on the envelope for a few seconds, then nodded to himself. When he looked back up at me his expression was serious again, but the hostility was gone.

“...Very well.”

Careful not to let the servants see what I was doing, I slipped the letter into Jovtzia’s pocket while still holding him by the lapels. The people to whom these letters were addressed would easily be able to tell they really were from Woroy just by reading them. At least, that’s what Woroy had said. I gave Jovtzia a brief smile, then put him down and straightened his collar.

“Excuse me. We’ll meet again sometime.”

Jovtzia nodded silently, then bowed and ran off. He probably wanted to read his friend’s letter as soon as possible. I turned back to the watching servants and gave them a wan smile.

“Where can I find Lord Bolshevik?”

“Ah, please come this way, my lord.”

Relieved that the altercation between me and Jovtzia was over, the servants hurriedly led me up the stairs to the second floor. *Now then, what kind of person is Jovtzia’s older brother?*

As I sat down on the parlor’s sofa, a well-dressed young man walked into the

room. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, and wise beyond his years. But at the same time, he seemed oddly laid back.

“My apologies for making you wait when I was the one who extended this invitation. I am the current head of the Bolshevik family, Shallier Worbern Bolshevik.”

Lord Bolshevik flashed me a winsome smile, his tone polite. He reminded me of a used car salesman. I could tell from his scent that he didn't have an iota of respect for me, nor did he like me in the slightest. He had the stench of an enemy. Feigning ignorance, I got to my feet and greeted him with a smile.



“It’s a pleasure to make your—”

“Oh, please, don’t get up. There’s no need to be so formal.”

The lord held out a hand and urged me back into my seat. On the surface, he was just playing the part of the gracious host, but I had a feeling that wasn’t why he’d interrupted me. There was no kindness behind his words. With my introduction cut short, I had no choice but to sit back down. *I don’t like this guy.* Still smiling, Lord Bolshevik sat down across from me.

“It’s an honor to finally speak with you, Lord Veight. You’re even more impressive than the rumors claim.”

Lord Bolshevik didn’t mean a word he said. From the looks of it, he was the complete opposite of his brother, Jovtzia. I decided to let him set the tone of the conversation, though I remained wary. Before continuing, Lord Bolshevik bowed his head to me.

“I’m deeply grateful for the mercy you showed the Bolshevik family when we surrendered to you.”

“I had nothing to do with that. Princess Eleora was responsible for your lenient treatment. I’m simply a foreigner who happened to get caught up in this civil war.”

I tried to brush off his praise, but Lord Bolshevik just grinned and replied, “Oh no, it’s all thanks to you that this senseless war was brought to a close with minimum casualties on both sides.”

“Senseless war? Are you not related to the Doneiks family by blood?”

Lord Bolshevik shook his head.

“That’s irrelevant. Regardless of our relation, it’s wrong for a noble to incite a war and send his peasants to their deaths for his own personal gain.”

You’re not wrong, but you’re the last person I want to hear that from. That being said, I didn’t smell a lie from him, so his words were sincere at least. Lord Bolshevik added, “In the end, Ivan was killed while Woroy and Ryuunie were exiled to Meraldia. Personally, I think this is the best resolution we could have hoped for.”

Again, you're not wrong, but I don't wanna hear it from you. But again, I didn't smell a lie from him. Lord Bolshevik then closed his eyes and bowed to me again.

"On behalf of the Bolshevik family, I sincerely thank you for saving Woroy and Ryuunie's lives. You have my utmost gratitude."

What the hell? That's not a lie either? No, hang on. He might just be a sociopath. It was impossible to discern whether a sociopath was lying based on the smell of their sweat, since they didn't have a conscience. Confused, I asked, "You're thanking me even though it's because of your surrender that the Doneiks family lost?"

"Correct. My feelings do not always have to align with my decisions. As the head of the Bolshevik family, my duty is to ensure the safety of my people first and foremost."

Again, that was the right mindset to have for a noble. The Bolshevik family held a lot of land and influence within North Rolmund. In fact, before the arrival of the Doneiks family, they had been the most powerful noble family in this frigid land. Indeed, that was why the Doneiks family sought an alliance with the Bolsheviks to begin with. Eleora's family, the Originias, had sought an alliance with the new but wealthy Kastoniev family for the same reason.

However, the Bolsheviks had surrendered to Eleora while Ivan's rebellion was still going on. The biggest factor in Ivan's defeat was losing the support of his most powerful allies. Honestly, I was surprised Lord Bolshevik wasn't ashamed of himself, but considering the same thing had happened dozens of times during the Warring States period, I could understand his decision. It was only because he'd surrendered so soon that his lands had gone unmolested. On top of that, his family was the only one in North Rolmund that hadn't been punished in some way for their involvement in the civil war. I had no doubt that the other North Rolmund nobles resented Lord Bolshevik for that. Feeling a bit spiteful, I decided to needle him a bit.

"As a result of your swift decision, your family didn't lose any of their territory. But I wonder how the neighboring nobles feel about that."

"I imagine they're not happy," Lord Bolshevik replied nonchalantly. "But those

families have all been ruined, so no matter how much they may hate me, there's nothing they can do. All I did was fulfill my duty."

Ahh, this guy's the ruthless type. I was starting to get a little scared of him. Still smiling, Lord Bolshevik added, "Supporters of Her Highness Princess Eleora will be granted most of North Rolmund's lands, will they not? I simply wish to help them settle in here."

I couldn't decide if he was practical, or just heartless. Either way, he wasn't someone I wanted as an ally. That being said, he *had* surrendered to Eleora, meaning he was technically in her camp now. If I got into a fight with him, it'd make Eleora's faction look weak. Not only that, but since he'd surrendered peacefully, Eleora had no way of punishing him. As much as this guy gave me the creeps, I had no choice but to play nice with him. It was part of the job description.

I nodded in response to his words and replied, "I'm happy you feel that way. I'm sure Princess Eleora will be glad to hear that as well."

Lord Bolshevik's smile grew.

"It's an honor to hear that, Lord Veight. It's reassuring to know I've been accepted by Eleora's most trusted confidant."

"Hahaha, you think too highly of me."

I shook my head, but Lord Bolshevik pressed on.

"Not at all. Without you, this war would have ended differently, I'm sure of it. Your actions have shown me just how powerful Meraldia is."

His praise didn't make me feel happy in the slightest. *Man, I wanna go home.* Maybe it was time to change the topic.

"By the way, Lord Bolshevik, have you met with Prince Ashley already?"

Lord Bolshevik gave me a troubled smile and replied, "No, not yet. Prince Ashley seems rather wary of me, and I've had trouble securing an audience. It's quite a shame, really."

You're saying you don't have any connections to Ashley's faction? Do you really think I'm stupid enough to believe that? His words just now were 100% a

lie. They reeked of falsehood.

It seemed Lord Bolshevik was as friendly with Ashley's faction as he was with Eleora's. If a new conflict broke out between Eleora's and Ashley's factions, he'd immediately side with whoever had the advantage. He was as opportunistic as most of Ashley's supporters, but he was ten times shrewder than all of them. Originally I'd wanted to ask him about the Sternenfeuer cult, but now I realized that was dangerous. I couldn't afford to let him find out what I did and didn't know, or what intel I was looking for. *I think it's time to call it quits.*

"Thank you for inviting me here today, Lord Bolshevik. It was an honor. I look forward to working with you in the future."

I bowed to the lord, bringing our meeting to a close. He nodded amicably and got to his feet.

"No, thank you for coming. Hopefully we can meet again soon. You make for a wonderful conversation partner."

You've gotta be kidding me.

As I left the mansion, I found Jovtzia waiting for me in the garden. He bowed to me as I passed, half-hidden by the trees.

"After examining the magic seal and the penmanship, I have confirmed that the letter is indeed authentic. Know that I will do my best to aid your cause."

I should have known Woroy did something special to his letters. He'd also written them on paper he didn't normally use. Because of how rare the paper was, it was difficult to forge and served as the perfect authenticator. It was reassuring knowing that Jovtzia was on my side. Having a supporter within the Bolshevik family would make a huge difference.

But is he really fine with betraying his older brother? Well, considering how different their personalities are, I guess it's plausible that they don't get along. As far as I could tell, Jovtzia was a dyed-in-the-wool soldier who valued honor and integrity. I nodded silently to him and walked past.

This meeting had been an exhausting ordeal. I was looking forward to getting

back to Eleora's manor and eating dinner with everyone. Sadly, it seemed my days of political intrigue were just getting started. Still, I wanted to wrap things up quickly so I could keep my promise to Airia and return by the summer solstice.

"You went off somewhere the moment you got back, and now you return without saying anything?"

Eleora gave me an exasperated look as she nibbled on a scone. It seemed my friends had started a tea party in my absence. Mao, Parker, and Ryucco were all in attendance. Eleora's adjutant, Borsche, and her friend Natalia were present as well. The princess took a sip of brandy-infused tea and heaved a sigh.

"It's a relief to have you back. Mao and Parker are capable enough aides, but I get worried whenever you're not around."

"You've got Lord Kastoniev and Ser Lekomya to help you out too, don't you? Plus you've got Borsche and Natalia and the others to help you on the military side of things."

"I know, but you're the one who came up with this ridiculous scheme, so I need you here to see it through."

Fair enough. Eleora flashed me a wry smile before her expression turned serious.

"My current concern is Lord Bolshevik. From what I've heard, he practically forced his father to retire when he took over as family head a few years ago."

"Yeah, Woroy told me he can't stand the guy either."

Initially I'd just thought Woroy was biased because he was friends with Jovtzia, but now that I'd met Lord Bolshevik, I knew his assessment had been spot-on. I summarized my conversation with Lord Bolshevik for Eleora and the others.

"Lord Bolshevik might be a capable commander," Borsche said, raising an eyebrow. "But it's clear he cares nothing for those under his command."

Eleora nodded in agreement, "Yeah, he's even worse than I used to be. He

looks at everything like it's a game of Shougo and picks the most efficient strategy, regardless of the cost."

I agreed with their appraisal, but something nagged at me.

"While I agree that he's an unprincipled opportunist, there's one thing I don't get."

Parker, who currently had Ryucco in his lap, cocked his head.

"And what's that?"

"He ostensibly betrayed his sworn allies in order to protect his serfs and vassals. But at the same time, his sympathy for Woroy and Ryuunie is genuine. Isn't that weird?"

While those two feelings weren't technically contradictory, prioritizing one side would inevitably mean sacrificing the other. Normally, someone who cared about both their allies and their people would be more conflicted about their decision.

"Especially because I got the feeling that he didn't hesitate at all when he made his decision."

Ryucco grabbed a scone off the tea tray and started gnawing on it.

"That's 'cause he's a piece of shit, right?" he said.

"I mean, that's not wrong, but...I can't help but wonder."

How could he be that decisive while still caring about both Woroy and his people? From my conversation with him, I didn't get the feeling that he was a hypocrite. No, there was something more to him. Suddenly realizing something, Eleora spoke up.

"There's a certain group of people who are quite good at being decisive. Isn't that right, Natalia?"

Natalia, who'd been in the middle of patting Ryucco's head while she handed him another scone, twitched. She hadn't expected the discussion to turn to her.

"O-Oh, yes! It's exactly as you say, Your Highness!"

She totally wasn't listening. Eleora gave Natalia a knowing smile, then turned

back to me.

“I’m talking about religious zealots. Their perspectives and values are pretty different from those of normal people. Because of that, it’s sometimes hard to understand the decisions they make or the actions they take.”

Calling them zealots was perhaps a bit harsh, but I understood what Eleora was getting at. And she had a point.

“That would explain it,” I said, nodding my head in understanding. “Lord Bolshevik doesn’t seem to regret betraying the Doneiks in the slightest. But at the same time, his concern for the members of the Doneiks family is genuine. And to him, those two things aren’t contradictory.”

Mao pulled a sheaf of documents out of his bag and turned to me.

“This might be related, then. According to the documents we recovered from the Doneiks estate, the Bolsheviks have been persecuting Sonnenlicht believers in secret.”

Natalia looked up in shock. I had forgotten she was the daughter of a Sonnenlicht bishop.

“But Sonnenlicht is Rolmund’s official religion!”

Mao shrugged his shoulders in response. “The Bolshevik family’s been trying to limit Sonnenlicht influence in their territory for some time now. In fact, they asked the late Lord Doneiks to help them. Though it’s possible Ivan and Woroy weren’t aware of that.”

So the Bolsheviks were at odds with the Sonnenlicht Order. There was one plausible theory that explained Lord Bolshevik’s strange conduct then. Hesitantly, I gave voice to that theory.

“Is it possible that Lord Bolshevik is a heretic?”

Eleora and the other Rolmund natives lapsed into thought. After a few seconds, they turned to me and nodded unanimously.

“I would say that’s highly likely,” Borsche said.

Natalia nodded again, and Eleora added, “Long ago, there used to be a religion called Sternenfeuer in North Rolmund. It’s been stamped out now, but

it used to be really influential. Perhaps...”

“Mhmm. I heard from Woroy that the Sternenfeuer cult is still around even today. It’s possible Lord Bolshevik is a Sternenfeuerist, or is harboring Sternenfeuerists in his territory.”

If Lord Bolshevik really was a Sternenfeuerist, I could see him not caring about the Doneiks family, since he’d consider them heretics; especially if betraying them meant he’d be able to protect his own people, who ostensibly followed the same religion. But if he was a zealot, that made things difficult.

“This isn’t good,” Eleora muttered, a grave expression on her face. “If he really is a Sternenfeuerist, that means we have a heretic in our camp. Unlike Meraldia, Rolmund’s Sonnenlicht church has no tolerance for heretics. We need to confirm whether or not he is one.”

Ryucco finished licking scone crumbs off his fingers and said casually, “Why not just tell the bigwigs in the Sonnenlicht Order that you think he’s a heretic? As long as they don’t reveal us as the guys who ratted Bolshevik out, we’re clear.”

“We don’t know for sure he’s a heretic, and we don’t have any evidence that he is. After all, we can’t afford to make secret Doneiks family documents public,” I replied.

On top of that, Rolmund loved making people guilty by association. If Lord Bolshevik was outed as a heretic, the resulting scandal would be big enough to hurt Eleora, too. *Wait, I’ve got it.*

“On the whole, I like your plan, Ryucco. But before we report Lord Bolshevik, we need to find some proof, and also make some connections with the Sonnenlicht high order.”

“And how’re we gonna do that?”

Ryucco’s ears perked up. It seemed he was happy I’d praised his idea. I shoved a scone into my mouth, grabbed my coat, and got to my feet.

“I’m gonna go pay the Sonnenlicht leaders a visit. Eleora, you get everything ready. Try to be as quick as possible. Mao, you look for proof of Lord Bolshevik’s heresy. How you choose to conduct the investigation is up to you.”

“Oi, you think the Sonnenlicht bigwigs are gonna agree to see you just like that?”

Ryucco gave me a dubious look. I winked in reply and said, “You might not know this, but Meraldia’s Sonnenlicht Order has ordained me a saint. The patron saint of pilgrims.”

“Are you kidding me!? You’re a werewolf, for fuck’s sake!”

Thanks to all the religious sanctuaries I’d set up along Meraldia’s highways, I’d been made into the patron saint of pilgrims. That was back when I’d been fighting Eleora. Eleora nodded, and started giving orders.

“Borsche, contact Bishop Zanawah from the third parish. Tell him I need to see him. Today.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

As Borsche hurried out of the room, Eleora turned back to me.

“Bishop Zanawah’s from East Rolmund, and he has the support of the Originia family. He should be able to get you an audience with one of the cardinals.” Eleora gave me a bitter smile. “You can trust Bishop Zanawah. When Natalia’s father was exiled for heresy, he’s the one who kept the rest of her family from being punished as well.”

“He definitely sounds trustworthy then.”

I glanced over at Natalia. For a moment she looked conflicted, but then she gave me a weak smile. Her family and her father’s disciples still hadn’t been fully cleared of suspicion, and they were only allowed to remain free because Eleora was acting as their guarantor. If anyone within our camp was suspected of religious wrongdoing, Natalia would end up in grave danger.

Nobles who got into secular trouble were often protected by the clergy, and clergy who got into religious trouble were often covered for by nobles. However, that system of mutual protection had its limits. We couldn’t afford to be too reckless. Eleora was protecting a number of other people too, so we couldn’t risk antagonizing the Sonnenlicht Order. If I messed up, a large number of Eleora’s subordinates would be in trouble. I needed to tread carefully. But since I was a nonbeliever myself, I was a little worried I wouldn’t be able to

keep my act up.

Bishop Zanawah met me on the steps of a large cathedral tucked away in a corner of the capital. Evening was beginning to fall.

“My apologies for the sudden visit, Father Zanawah.” I bowed my head, and the elderly bishop led me into the cathedral with a smile.

“Allies of Princess Eleora are always welcome here.”

That’s not a very bishop-esque thing to say.

“And what about Eleora’s enemies?”

Zanawah’s smile turned into a smirk. “Naturally, they’re welcome as well, but I might suddenly find myself too busy to help them. God is constantly giving Man new trials, after all.”

It seemed Zanawah was the kind of bishop I’d be able to get along with. *Thank god.* Relieved, I followed the bishop into his room. Within the Sonnenlicht Order, each member of the clergy, regardless of their status, was allowed only a single small room inside the church they presided over. It was one of the ways they tried to emphasize their teaching that everyone was equal. Zanawah offered me a seat on his sofa, then sat down across from me.

“So what is it you need from me, Lord Veight? I was not informed of your business here.”

Hmm, what’s the best way to broach the topic? Zanawah was part of a large organization, so even if I told him I’d found a heretic it’s not like he’d be able to do anything on his own.

“The truth is, I’ve heard rumors that the clergy in North Rolmund have been facing many troubles as of late.”

“North Rolmund, you say?”

Zanawah gave me a puzzled look. He genuinely didn’t get what I was hinting at here.

“People are telling me a certain noble in North Rolmund has been persecuting Sonnenlicht priests.”

I avoided giving a name, and continued pretending as if this was all hearsay. So long as I hid behind the pretense of relaying rumors, I could say whatever I wanted. This was a tried and tested way to badmouth people without looking like an asshole. *Though, I do feel kinda bad about doing this. Sorry, Lord Bolshevik.* Zanawah gave me a weak smile and replied, “Ahh... I know who you’re referring to. You speak of the duke who recently changed sides, correct?”

“Yes.”

I knew it, the Sonnenlicht Order’s had Lord Bolshevik marked for a while. What I had to say wasn’t anything new to Zanawah. The bishop peered at me.

“However, that duke now serves Her Highness Eleora. Why would you bring up something that might harm her cause?”

Sounds like the good bishop’s just as political as I am. He’s sharp, too. For a few seconds, I wondered how best to reply, but in the end, I decided to just lay everything out there.

“Because his support is what might harm Eleora’s cause. I don’t want the princess losing influence because of his indiscretion.”

“I see. You have a point.” Zanawah nodded sagely. After a moment of consideration, he added, “The Sonnenlicht Order has long had trouble with the Bolshevik Family and their attitude toward religion. Of course, there are plenty of nobles who dislike the order, but of those who hold titles of Duke or higher, it’s only the Bolsheviks.”

That made sense, considering those with influence tended to avoid rocking the boat. After all, the more powerful you were, the more you stood to lose. Zanawah sighed.

“I have heard Lord Bolshevik does not even require his people to follow Sonnenlicht’s tenets,” Zanawah sighed. “And as I’m sure you’re aware, Lord Veight, those tenets are important for more than just religious reasons.”

“I know.”

I gave Zanawah a halfhearted reply, but he was getting into his speech now.

“Those tenets exist to guide people towards a more prosperous society, and to protect them from danger. Those who do not follow them sow strife for the rest of the empire.” Zanawah looked out a southward-facing window and added, “Take, for example, praising the sun. Those who do so frequently are more likely to survive the winter. No doubt because the sun’s sacred rays are good for one’s body.”

Ah, so that’s how you came to that conclusion. Though they’d come to that answer in a different way than me, they weren’t wrong. The more I listened to Zanawah, the more I realized that his religious beliefs were rooted in practicality, not mysticism. That intrigued me.

“Did you know the ritual to praise the sun doesn’t exist in Meraldia?” I asked, leaning in closer.

“Oh?” Zanawah gave me a curious look. I decided to give this wise bishop a few more tidbits of knowledge to chew on.

“You see, Meraldia gets a good amount of sunshine year-round. Even if people don’t spend a set amount of their day basking in the sun’s rays, they get enough of them. Which is why all of Meraldia’s Sonnenlicht believers are still healthy despite doing away with the ritual.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

Zanawah’s curiosity was well and truly piqued now. He quickly copied down what I’d said on a piece of rough parchment.

“I have another piece of evidence supporting my theory. It is my belief that the Sun God granted us the tenets of Sonnenlicht in order to make our lives better. And that those who follow his tenets are fated to live longer, healthier lives.”

“I agree.”

I didn’t believe in god, but I did think the Sonnenlicht commandments were based on logical reasoning. From there, the two of us had a lengthy conversation about Sonnenlicht rituals. I’d originally come in the hopes of having a short chat with Zanawah, but before I knew it, we were engrossed in our discussion.

“According to the sacred texts, when someone’s illness persists for a long time, they should go on a pilgrimage. Why do you think that is, Lord Veight?”

“I’ve heard from a doctor that a change in location can be good for one’s health. It’s possible the local air or food or climate is responsible for someone’s illness, so going somewhere else to recuperate can help.”

“I see. That seems logical.”

I saw Zanawah jotting down a few notes, and I added, “But I believe there are some other benefits to going on a pilgrimage as well.”

“Such as?”

“The majority of Sonnenlicht believers are farmers. They rarely get to leave their villages. But by forcing them to travel via pilgrimages, the nation gains three valuable benefits.” Completely forgetting my original purpose in coming here, I started lecturing Zanawah on the benefits of travel. “First, there is an economic benefit. Travelers spend money on food and lodging, which in turn drives the economy by circulating money around.”

“Oho...spoken like a true noble. What are the other two then?”

“Second, there is a cultural benefit. Pilgrims will return to their home village with some of the exotic tales and goods they encounter along their way. Some of those might include superior farming practices, while others will simply be new songs and dances.” I took the cup Zanawah offered me and downed the lukewarm water inside it. “Finally, there is a military benefit.”

“How so?”

“You see, nobles will be forced to maintain their roads so that pilgrims can use them year-round. But well-paved roads are also essential to quickly move armies around. It’s because Rolmund’s system of roads is so extensive that the emperor’s influence can reach as far as the frontier regions.”

I had no idea who’d come up with the Sonnenlicht religion, but they were a genius, whoever they were. As Sonnenlicht was the only recognized religion in the empire, it was every noble’s sacred duty to secure safe passage for pilgrims. For the central government back in the capital, it was really convenient that there was religious pressure on the nobles to do something the emperor

wanted them to do in the first place.

“The reason Meraldia’s tenets are different than Rolmund’s is because Meraldia has a different history and geography.”

Wait, hang on a second. I didn’t come here to discuss Sonnenlicht. I mean sure, it’s fun to have an intelligent debate for once, but I have more important things I need to worry about right now. Unaware of my inner thoughts, Zanawah beamed at me.

“Wonderful. Your theories are simply wonderful. I’m glad you understand that even believers should critically examine their own faith.”

“As a bishop, should you really condone people questioning your religion?”

“Absolutely.”

Zanawah pumped his fist into the air, his eyes glimmering with excitement. Like Eleora, this man was clearly a scholar. *No wonder Eleora likes him.*

“Think about it. Why did God grant us these tenets? I doubt it was to make our lives more miserable. These tenets are God’s gift to us. The more we question and examine them, the closer we grow to his love.”

Speaking quickly, Zanawah started binding the notes he’d taken with a thin piece of string.

“Of course, the pope and his cardinals are much more orthodox,” he continued. “Sadly, I can only indulge this hobby of mine in secret.”

Yeah, you don’t want to be branded a heretic. I should probably be careful too. Humming happily to himself, Zanawah pulled out another piece of parchment, this one of much higher quality.

“Of the eight cardinals, the man I am closest to is Traja. I can write a letter of introduction to him for you. From our conversation, I can tell that you are a man worthy of seeing the inner workings of our Order. I’m sure your meeting with him will be beneficial.”

“What do you mean by ‘the inner workings of your Order?’”

“You’ll see.” Zanawah finished penning his letter, then put it in an envelope and sealed it with wax. “Within the Sonnenlicht Order, those of higher rank are

granted more knowledge. As I am only a bishop, there are many things I am not allowed to know.”

“But I am?”

“That is for Traja to decide. He is the keeper of the scripture. You can find him in the Wiron Library in West Rolmund.”

I took the letter of introduction, got to my feet, and bowed to Zanawah.

“Thank you very much, Father Zanawah.”

“No, thank you. Our discussion was most enlightening. Truly, I am blessed to have met you.”

It's kinda embarrassing to be praised that much. Thank god he's a reasonable guy, though. I was glad the scholars of this world all seemed to be rational, level-headed people.

That aside, I was surprised Eleora had connections like this. She might be more fit to be empress than I'd initially thought. It was only thanks to her that I'd secured an audience with a Sonnenlicht cardinal. Considering how capable she was, I wished Eleora would have more faith in herself.

I thanked Zanawah for the letter of introduction, then headed back to Eleora's manor. It took half a day to reach the Wiron Library, and I needed an appointment to enter. It was too late to go today; they were already closed. Upon returning to the manor, I was treated to a strange sight.

“Alright, I've finished fixing up the idiot duo's Blast Rifles. Jerrick, got any requests for yours?”

“If you can, I'd like you to make it sturdier and easier to maintain. Even if that lowers its firepower, I just want to be sure it'll always work.”

“You got it. Smart thinking, really.”

Ryucco was standing atop a low table, trying to look as imposing as he could as he scribbled formulas down on a piece of diagram paper. He seemed to be using Jerrick as an assistant.

“What're you guys doing?” I asked as I entered the room. The lagomorph

turned to me, his nose twitching proudly.

“Yo. I’m remodeling everyone’s Blast Rifles. Looks like everyone had a few issues with them, so I thought I’d fix ‘em up.”

Jerrick added, “A lot of the guys had trouble aiming when they transformed, and they’re all saying it’d be nice if they could shoot one-handed.”

“Why do they want to shoot one-handed?”

“They said they want to be able to hang from a tree branch with one hand and fire their rifles with the other,” Jerrick shrugged in reply. “That way, they’ll only have to worry about enemy projectiles, and they’ll have a high vantage point to shoot from.”

“Makes sense.”

I’d initially just given my werewolves the Blast Rifles so they could fight while remaining disguised as humans, but it seemed like they’d gotten pretty attached to them.

“They’ve got a bunch of other annoying demands too. Just look at this!” Ryucco pointed to a section of his diagram labeled “idiot duo” as he said that. “Those stupid brothers can’t aim to save their life, and they always charge in like morons. So I widened the rifle’s barrel and redesigned it to fire from point-blank range.”

So you made it into a shotgun. I guess that does work better for the Garney brothers, though. Wait... Are “Flame Blaster” and “Blaze Blaster” supposed to be the guns’ names? Worried, I took a closer look at the blueprints Ryucco was pointing to. From the looks of it, everyone had asked for all sorts of weird modifications on their rather uniquely named weapons.

Monza, for example, had asked for a sniper rifle she’d dubbed “Evening Dew,” but increasing the rifle’s precision and range had required delicate retuning that made it more fragile. Fahn, on the other hand, had asked for a firepower-heavy rifle she’d called “Raging Chrysanthemum.” It could only fire a single shot before needing to be repaired, but it had as much force as an anti-tank rifle. And Hamaam had had his barrel shortened so he could hide his gun beneath his cloak. He’d named his “Tiger Claw.”

What is with people and naming their guns? I sighed and said, “If you customize everyone’s rifles, they’ll be harder to maintain or replace if they get broken.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll look after everyone’s weapons. Besides, I can teach Jerrick how to do basic maintenance and stuff. Speaking of which, here’s your ‘Big Boss,’ Jerrick.”

Hang on, is that seriously what its name is? Ryucco puffed his chest out proudly and said, “This baby’ll last for a hundred years.”

“Thanks! I hope that means it survives long enough to be recorded in history!”

Please don’t start putting gun names into history books. I knew it was hard to stop Ryucco once he got going, but as a military commander, I wasn’t really happy about the fact that everyone’s weapons were now ten times harder to take care of.

The next morning, Ryucco grabbed as many werewolves and mage corps soldiers as he could, then took them all to one of Eleora’s forts and opened up a gun customization workshop.

“Order up!”

What is this, a ramen stall? I sighed to myself as I saw all the unique gun models lined up on Ryucco’s workbench. Then again, my werewolves were like the special forces of the demon army. There weren’t many of them, and they weren’t suited to open warfare, but they were great for accomplishing difficult missions that required smaller teams. So maybe it was better to let each individual have their own customized equipment. Sadly, I was neither a gun fanatic nor a military historian, so I couldn’t be sure.

Oh, but I had heard about the Jaegers. They were light infantry who’d run around in small groups and fight from cover, rather than line up and shoot at enemies in formation. Basically, their tactics matched what those of modern infantry had become in recent years. Eleora’s mage corps weren’t skilled enough to manage those kinds of advanced maneuvers yet, but my werewolves were mobile enough that they might be able to pull them off. From the reports my squad leaders were giving me, it sounded like they were unconsciously using

skirmisher tactics already. They were splitting up into two-man or four-man squads, and avoiding clumping up with their allies.

“A werewolf Jaeger unit, huh...”

I hadn’t planned on making my werewolves into Jaegers, but now that I thought about it, it wasn’t a bad choice. The teenager in me was thrilled with the idea. *Guess I’ll let each squad get their own custom equipment and let them specialize their fighting styles.* If the results turned out good, I’d formally adopt the policy and reorganize them into a true ranger unit. *Yeah, a werewolf Jaeger team sounds cool.*

Beefing up my werewolves’ firepower was great and all, but it didn’t seem like there would be another civil war anytime soon. Lord Bolshevik was a shady figure for sure, but as far as I could tell, he wasn’t trying to raise an army and revolt. *Well, obviously not.*

Lord Bolshevik was considered a traitor by the other North Rolmund nobles, so he had no allies to call on right now. The Bolshevik house only employed 6,000 troops, and they were all pikemen. Eleora’s army alone could crush them. I was in fact discussing this very topic with Eleora right now.

“I don’t know where Lord Bolshevik’s ambitions lie, but I don’t think he’s going to try and fight us. At least not with an army. I bet he’ll try to do as much political maneuvering as possible though,” I said.

Eleora nodded.

“Agreed. Based on what you’ve said, my guess is he’s trying to forge a secret alliance with Ashley. We need to keep an eye on him, but that’s all.” She gave me a knowing smile and added, “That aside, I see you got along quite well with Bishop Zanawah. He rarely ever writes letters of introduction for people he’s meeting for the first time.”

I thought back to our discussion yesterday, which was a bit embarrassing in retrospect.

“I get along with scholarly types pretty well. People like you, for example. After all, we’ve all dedicated our lives to the pursuit of truth, right?”

“I suppose so.”

Eleora’s comment reminded me that Zanawah’s letter of introduction had proved quite useful. I’d been able to secure a meeting with Cardinal Traja a few days from now. Sonnenlicht cardinals were revered by the people, and they were usually busy traveling across Rolmund giving sermons and performing blessings. It was hard for them to make time to speak with people, so without a letter of introduction, it would have taken me half a year instead of a few days to get an audience. Eleora cocked her head as she read the address listed on the letter.

“I figured you’d get along with Zanawah, but I don’t know what this Cardinal Traja person’s like. ‘Keeper of the scripture’ is the most cushy job among the cardinal posts, though.”

“Really?”

“All they do is take care of the old Sonnenlicht texts. People often say the keeper of the scripture is just a glorified second-hand bookshop owner.”

Seriously? Seeing my worried expression, Eleora smiled gently.

“Don’t worry. Zanawah is familiar with all eight cardinals. I’m sure there’s a reason he chose Traja.”

“I sure hope so.”

Though I’d wanted to make connections with a somewhat more influential cardinal...

A few days later, I left the capital to meet with Cardinal Traja. My meeting was scheduled for the day after tomorrow. It would only take a day to reach the Wiron Library, but I left a day early to give myself some buffer, just in case.

“Meraldian Jaeger squad, form up!” I shouted, standing in the middle of Eleora’s courtyard. My werewolves lined up in their respective squads, forming five columns.

“Sorry man, I was only able to get this many done on time.”

Ryucco, who was wearing a bandana today, looked apologetically up at me.

Even someone as skilled as him couldn't modify 50-odd guns in a few days. The fact that he'd managed 20 in under a week was a superhuman feat as it was. Sure, he'd had help from some pretty dexterous assistants, but that didn't change the fact that he was a genius.

I smiled proudly at him and replied, "Nah, this is more than enough. Thank you, Ryucco."

"I-I didn't do it for you, you damned buffoon! I just wanted to show off how good I am!"

How clichéd of a tsundere can you be? Fortunately, Ryucco had already gotten to Monza and Hamaam's guns, so my guards for this trip were all set. He'd also finished guns for the squads led by Fahn, Jerrick, and Skuje.

"Veight, look at my rifle! It's so cool! My brothers' rifles are really cool too!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

Skuje's squad was made up of him and his three brothers. All of them were in their teens. I didn't really want to put kids in danger, and they were also the future of our village, so I'd done my best to keep them off the front lines thus far.

"Hey Ryucco, why'd you do these guys' Blast Rifles before the other squads'?" I whispered to Ryucco with a frown.

He scratched his head and replied, "Isn't it obvious? You really think those brats would just sit quietly while I worked on everyone else's stuff?"

"They must have really begged you, huh?"

"Yeah," Ryucco nodded with a sigh. "They all transformed and started shouting at me to do their guns next. I thought they were gonna fuckin' eat me!"

"Uhh...sorry about that."

I'd have to discipline them later. Ryucco sighed again and shrugged his shoulders.

"You can't really blame 'em though. Boys like their shiny toys."

Yeah, I guess. I slung my own Blast Rifle—a newly modified one Ryucco had made just for me—over my shoulder and prepared to depart. He'd actually made mine first, and it had an odd lever on the stock whose function was quite unique. It shifted between a spot that had three stars and a spot that had one star. When I'd first tested the lever out, I'd more or less been able to tell what it did. Afterward, Ryucco's explanation confirmed my suspicions.

"Well, I just hope I don't end up having to use my Ryuuga," I muttered.

"See, even after all your bitching, you named your rifle too, didn't you?" Ryucco smirked.

"Shut it."

"Your naming sense is so weird, too."

"I said, shut it."

I'd picked the name of an MMO character I'd made back in my old life for my gun. The other werewolves had taken to calling it Sugar, since they didn't know Japanese and that the name I'd chosen meant Dragon Fang. Ryucco jumped excitedly up and down as he continued needling me.

"If you were gonna name it anyway, you shoulda just called it something cool like Boom Boom Cannon or King Shooter-Tooter."

"Hell no."

I still don't get these guys' naming sense. As I was mulling over name choices, Parker walked over to me. He was dressed in a noble's hunter outfit, and looked ready to travel.

"Sorry I'm late. I had Ryucco make me a new Blast Rifle, so you can count on me in fights too."

"Yeah, that Rock 'em Sock 'em should be able to handle even your ridiculous amounts of mana, Parker."

Ryucco casually tried to name Parker's gun for him, but Parker brushed him off with a smile.

"Thank you. Indeed, my *Penance* should be able to defeat most enemies in one shot thanks to my magical prowess. I am a mage, after all."

“Oi, call it the Rock ’em Sock ’em!”

“Look, I can even hide it inside my ribs!”

Their exchange could hardly be called a conversation at this point. They were just talking at each other. *Let’s get out of here before they get any worse.*

Together with our 20 werewolf guards, Parker, Mao, and I left the capital. As we passed through the capital’s gates, I spotted a knight carrying a Bolshevik flag heading toward us.

“Oh, is that one of Lord Bolshevik’s men?” Monza asked conversationally.

I shook my head and replied, “No, his crest is a little different. That’s one of Jovtzia’s men.”

Lord Bolshevik’s crest had a tiny crown in the center of the design to denote that he was the head of the family. The knight’s flag was missing that crown, meaning he wasn’t Lord Bolshevik’s man. It instead had a sword, the crest of the Bolshevik family’s third son. Chances were our meeting here was no coincidence. As we drew close to the knight, I slowed my horse, and he wordlessly bowed his head to me. Normally one dismounted off their horse to pay their respects, but in the busy capital that was impractical, so a simple nod of the head was sufficient. As he bowed, one of the decorative chains on the knight’s sheath fell to the ground with a clang.

“What a careless knight,” Monza smirked to herself.

“Hm? Oh, yeah...”

I nodded to Monza, but I found it strange that the knight didn’t seem flustered by his supposed faux-pas. Those decorative chains were what knights used to challenge fellow knights to duels. Normally letting your chains drop, even by mistake, was considered extremely rude. Depending on the situation, you might even be punished for it. But the knight just casually got off his horse and very slowly picked up the chains. All while staring at me. It was obvious this was a message of some kind.

Once he’d gathered up the chains he bowed to me again, mounted his horse, and rode off. As we continued forward, I pondered the meaning of his actions. /

feel like I remember reading about something like this in the history of the Three Kingdoms. There was a scene where someone was trying to warn his allies of impending danger. I'm guessing this is something similar?

I turned to Monza and said quietly, "Watch out. Lord Bolshevik might try to ambush us."

"Huh!? What makes you say that!?"

"That just now was a warning from Jovtzia. He can't really meet with me due to the current situation, so he used that roundabout method instead."

Monza blinked a few times.

"I have no idea what you mean..."

Werewolves weren't really good at nonverbal communication like this. I smiled sadly and said, "And that's why I'm your leader. Look, just trust me. Pass the message on to everyone."

"You got it."

Parker, who'd been watching the exchange, suddenly said, "Are you sure he's after us? He might be targeting Eleora instead."

That was certainly a possibility. But it shouldn't be a huge problem.

"Let's send a messenger to Eleora. She's being guarded by the rest of the werewolves though, so she should be safe."

"I suppose so."

"Plus she's got plenty of her own men around her, and a bunch of people in the capital support her. No one should be able to openly oppose her right now."

Even crown prince Ashley was indebted to Eleora. Mao turned to me.

"By suppressing the Doneiks Rebellion, Eleora has won the hearts of the citizens and the army," he said, a wan smile on his face. "Not only did she quickly bring the war to a close, she did so with an overwhelming victory and few casualties."

As a trader, Mao's job was the one most impacted by war, so he understood the feelings of common citizens best. He knew how much war could hurt them.

“Though...I could have made a great deal more money had the war dragged on a while longer...”

Never mind. I take it all back. This guy's pure evil. Parker turned to Mao and asked curiously, “Mao, how do you make so much money in a foreign country you know nothing about?”

“As a trader of rock salt, I have a decent knowledge of various ores. Ores don't rot, you see, and their value varies greatly from region to region.”

According to Mao, he was having his people buy up a bunch of resources that were abundant here but rare in Meraldia, then shipping them over via the tunnel we'd come in.

“Things such as gems and gold are especially profitable, since their scarcity gives them value regardless of their utility. Low-quality gold that's considered cheap here still fetches a high price in Meraldia.”

“If you're making money either way, you could at least buy up metals that are actually useful,” I grumbled.

But Mao shook his head and replied, “I'm afraid not. That would be overstepping my authority.”

“How so?” Parker gave Mao a quizzical look.

Mao smiled thinly and said, “If I started importing resources with practical value into Meraldia, eventually those resources would become essential to the nation's continued operation. But if Rolmund's political situation were ever to grow unstable, I'd be unable to import those resources in the quantities needed to keep things running.”

Now that you mention it, you've got a point. It's like how countries ruined themselves by importing petroleum from the Middle East, then collapsed when they couldn't anymore. But while Mao's argument made sense, something still felt off.

“Since when were you such a good Samaritan?” I asked.

“When all's said and done, I am a *Meraldian* trader,” Mao replied with a shrug. “If I don't trade responsibly, then my primary customers will lose trust in

me. On the other hand, selling shiny trinkets for a premium will hardly impact the economy.”

Mao was oddly principled, in some ways. Sure, he was a greedy scoundrel, but that wasn’t all there was to him. After a few seconds, he seemed to remember something else and added, “Incidentally, I heard something interesting about the climbing equipment the miners here use.”

“They use climbing equipment?”

“Indeed. Prospectors in Rolmund scale mountains to look for ore veins. Apparently their equipment was developed by some man named Draulight two to three hundred years ago.”

Draulight, huh? That would mean the modern-day prospectors and hunters that spent time in the snowy mountains all used tools that had been developed by an escaped slave.

“Three hundred years ago this place was full of demons, so no one was crazy enough to try mountain climbing, since they’d have to deal with both demons *and* the cold.”

“Makes sense.”

As a result, Rolmund hadn’t invented any specialized climbing gear back then. Trying to climb the mountains in those times was paramount to suicide. However, the Slave Swordsman Draulight had invented tools that hadn’t existed before to help him climb, and achieved the impossible. His pursuers hadn’t imagined he’d lead the escaped slaves over the mountains, so they hadn’t been at all prepared to give chase. They’d entered the mountains with inadequate equipment and were never heard from again.

“For example, take their wool clothing. Normally, when you make clothes out of wool, you cut all the fat out. But Draulight kept as much of the fat in his wool clothes as possible. Do you know why?”

Fat, huh? Fat repels water, doesn’t it?

“To stop his clothes from getting wet in the snow? Since you lose body temperature fast when you’re wet. And when you’re cold, you die.”

“Precisely... How is it you’re so sharp, Veight?”

“I am the disciple of a great sage.”

It sure was convenient being able to use that excuse. Unfortunately, I’d forgotten there was a fellow disciple riding with me today.

“I never knew that, and I studied under Master, too...” Parker muttered from beneath his hat.

“That’s because you can’t feel the cold anymore. You’re dead, so of course you wouldn’t be able to tell these things.”

“Really?” Parker tilted his head.

Can we please drop this already? In an attempt to change the subject, I turned to Mao and urged him to continue.

“Any other examples?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Supposedly he also pioneered using ropes and iron stakes to stabilize yourself during the climb so you don’t fall off. Furthermore, he noticed that the sunlight reflecting off of pure white snow harmed your eyes, so he created translucent blindfolds to protect them.”

Those are all pretty modern techniques... Was he another reincarnator? According to the stories, Draulight had been born to a family of warriors. Supposedly he’d spent most of his youth at the arena, but fighting had nothing to do with mountain climbing. More so, he’d managed to create improvised climbing tools that hadn’t existed in the world before then. That was clearly unusual, especially considering how modern those tools and techniques were. Some of the legends claimed he’d even slain rare aquatic beasts and used their pelts as waterproof insulation, but those tales seemed suspect.

Of course, there were non-reincarnators who were ahead of their time, like Eleora, but Draulight’s case felt different somehow. Eleora’s achievements were rooted in years of focused research, and her technological achievements were extensions of already existing inventions. Even if she hadn’t, someone else would have eventually made those discoveries. But in Draulight’s case, there had been no previous knowledge to build off. On top of that, he hadn’t been taught anything except how to fight. So the fact that he knew about mountain

climbing was clearly strange.

Since there were no other cases of anyone else like him, I was starting to think Draulight might also have been reincarnated. That being said, he was a historical figure who had long since died. So even if he had been a reincarnator, he would have reincarnated from a much earlier time than me or the old Demon Lord. However, I had no idea if these modern mountain climbing techniques had been around in the 1700s.

Unfortunately, no one knew anything about what happened to Draulight once he'd passed the Northern Peaks. All I knew was that the oldest city in Meraldia—as well as the nation's northernmost city—bore his name. However, no one in Meraldia was aware of the origin of the city's name. My hypothesis was that Draulight never made it to Meraldia. In order to let his comrades escape, he'd stayed behind in the mountains to fight their pursuers. He must have died there, or he would have gone down in Meraldia's history as a visionary and a Hero as well.

After he led the first successful escape, hordes of slaves had started fleeing Rolmund, which resulted in the eventual collapse of the republic. When Rolmund reorganized itself as an empire, the first emperor spread misinformation that Meraldia was a land inhabited by monsters and that all the escaped slaves had met a grisly fate in order to deter other slaves from attempting to flee. Moreover, in order to prevent any more mass escapes, the first emperor established a permanent military garrison along the mountains. His plan worked. Communication between Rolmund and Meraldia was completely cut off, and the two countries went down very different paths. That eventually led to the present situation.

While the Hero Draulight may have fallen before completing his mission, he undoubtedly changed the course of history. That was the conclusion I came to as I guided my horse down the highway.

“Mao, thank you for that intriguing report. If you learn anything more about Draulight, let me know.”

“Hm? Oh, sure.”

Monza cantered over to me as Mao nodded.

“Boss, there’s people in the forest to our right.”

“Yeah, I sense them too.”

In fact, I’d been feeling that something was off for a while now. The section of the highway we were in was pretty far from the capital, and it cut straight through a forest. This was the perfect place for an ambush. Fortunately, Jovtzia’s warning had given us ample time to prepare. I grinned at Monza.

“It’s time for a hunt. Follow the strategy I told you guys.”

“Ahaha, this is gonna be fun!”

Monza grinned back.

I had no idea how many foes there were, how well-equipped they were, or what they were even after. All I did know was that they were probably sent by Lord Bolshevik. That, and they were probably thinking they’d have an easy time taking out a mere 20 mage corps guards. The assailants probably thought we weren’t much of a threat on the open highway. After all, without bulwarks to hide behind, mage corps were powerless. And that was true, for normal mage corps. But this was my werewolf Jaeger unit.

I turned to my guards and shouted, “All squads, charge to your right!”

We’d settle things before the enemy even had a chance to attack. By bringing the fight to them, we’d be able to make use of the cover the trees provided as well. Furthermore, all of my werewolves were skirmishers capable of using hit-and-run tactics. Monza, Hamaam, Fahn, Skuje, and Jerrick led their respective squads into the forest. On the highway, there was the slight risk of running into other travelers. But within the forest, my werewolves could transform freely without fear of being seen. Also, since Ryucco had modified their Blast Rifles, they could fire them even while transformed.

Meanwhile, Parker and I were in charge of guarding Mao. I got off my horse and dashed a short distance into the forest. Soon enough, I found a suitable hiding location to set up an ambush. Honestly, I wanted to go in guns blazing and show off the power of my Ryuuga, but I needed to stay back and cover Mao and Parker.

“Parker, can you guard Mao by yourself?”

“Just so you know, I’m a horrible shot. I’m a mage, not an archer.”

I guess that’s fair. Staying behind was clearly the right choice.

Once they were in the forest, my werewolves all transformed and split up. As they advanced, they used their howls to communicate with each other. Strangely enough, none of them were running into any humans. If Lord Bolshevik meant to take us down, he would have prepared at least as many troops, if not more. There’s no way a werewolf would miss the scent of a clump of people that big.

“Who’re you?”

“A comrade?”

Not only that, but I was hearing unfamiliar howls mixed in with the rest. There were no humans to be found; everyone seemed to be searching for something, and there were howls I didn’t recognize. This could mean only one thing. I transformed as well and shouted, “Gather!”

The werewolves responded immediately, and soon enough there were people all around me.

“Boss, I can’t find any humans anywhere!”

Jerrick and his squad loped over to me, their Blast Rifles slung over their shoulders. The other squads showed up soon after. I shook my head and replied, “We might be up against fellow werewolves here. Group back up in your squads and stay alert!”

“Are you serious!?”

If you’ve got any other likely explanations, I’m all ears. If Lord Bolshevik really was a Sternenfeuer believer, it was entirely possible that he was harboring demons such as werewolves by his side. As expected, werewolves I didn’t recognize started showing up before long as well. It was hard to get an accurate count because of how dark the forest was, but I guessed there were around 10 of them. Fewer than us, at least. We had an advantage in both numbers and

firepower, since we also had remodeled Blast Rifles.

The newcomers all had unfamiliar scents. Normally I had a hard time telling other werewolves apart by scent, despite being one myself. But even I could tell these guys weren't people we knew. They were larger than us, and had white fur. One of them, the largest werewolf of the bunch, stepped forward.

"I didn't think you lot'd be werewolves too..."

From the raspy tone of the voice, I guessed she was a woman. I blinked in surprise, and she canceled her transformation. An old woman wearing traditional Rolmundian garb stood before me. But despite her age, she stood straight, and her eyes brimmed with vigor. Old or not, she was formidable.

"My name's Volka. These kids are my sons and nephews. Who're you?"

"Veight. I'm Demon Lord Gomoviroa's Vice-Commander. I assume you already know what my human title is."

"Indeed, we do." The woman who called herself Volka harrumphed. "The Demon Lord, huh?"

She sounded oddly envious. From the looks of it, she wasn't going to attack without warning, so I decided to keep the conversation going a while longer, "What do you want with us?"

"You should know, shouldn't you? We've been hired to kill you."

The moment she said that, my werewolves raised their Blast Rifles. I held out a hand to stop them and replied, "But you're not going to try to kill me right now, are you?"

"Obviously not. If I'd known you and your guards were all werewolves, I would have brought more of my clan with me." Volka glared at me, her gaze as sharp as a knife. Then, after a few seconds, she grinned. "Now here's a real man. Calm, composed, and wise... Well, you're nothing compared to my dead husband, though."

Is it me, or did she just blush? I wasn't about to let my guard down around an enemy, but it seemed like she wasn't a bad person. Volka quickly composed herself and cleared her throat.

“Anyway, we’re enemies. Don’t think I’ll go easy on you just ’cause you seem nice. But I guess we can at least chat for a bit. There’s barely any werewolves left in Rolmund, so it’s not every day you meet new ones.”

“We’re practically extinct in Meraldia, too. That’s why we’re cooperating with humans.”

“We’re no different. For generations, we’ve been serving the humans who’ve sheltered us.”

Everyone’s got their own circumstances, I guess. Volka didn’t mention Lord Bolshevik or the Sternenfeuer cult, but I had no doubt she was allied with him. *Now then, what to do...* If our opponents were werewolves, my men wouldn’t come out unscathed. I had youngsters like Skuje and his squad with me today too, so the last thing I wanted was a fight that would result in casualties.

“I can’t imagine much good will come out of two werewolf clans fighting it out to the death here.”

I tried testing the waters with a vague peace offering, and Volka smiled.

“You can say that again. Besides, even if we fought, I didn’t bring enough youngsters with me. We’d get wiped out for sure.”

One of the younger kids in Skuje’s squad suddenly spoke up, “Then why don’t you surrender?”

“Shut up, Snaak!”

Skuje smacked his younger brother upside the head. *You didn’t have to hit him that hard, you know.* Volka closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Why surrender when we could run? I know this forest like the back of my hand. You outsiders would never be able to catch up to us.”

Are you trying to say you have the geographical advantage? While she had a point, I didn’t want to let potential enemies roam free, or we’d be ambushed again later. *And since it seems like there’s grounds for negotiation, I might as well see how far diplomacy can get us.* I gave Volka a bitter smile.

“Sorry, our youngsters are a little hotheaded.”

“It’s fine. My sons are the same way.”

The werewolves behind Volka fidgeted awkwardly. They were probably embarrassed that their mom was chiding them in public. But while I felt an affinity with these werewolves, they weren't humans. I wouldn't be able to use the same negotiation tactics I usually did. As expected, Volka floated a very werewolf-esque suggestion.

"While we could run, it'd be cowardly to leave without a fight. And I'm sure you wouldn't like it if we escaped either. So how about a duel between clan leaders?"

I knew it. Volka grinned at me.

"Naturally, this clan's leader is me. Surely you, the great Astral Fencer, wouldn't shirk from a duel with an old woman?"

Am I really gonna duel with an old lady? I wasn't fond of the idea, but I knew I couldn't underestimate her just because she was old. Older werewolves were actually more dangerous than younger ones. When transformed, their age didn't really affect their abilities, and they had much more experience than younger werewolves. They couldn't stay transformed for as long as younger werewolves, but that simply made them that much more aggressive.

Since demons believed strength was absolute, there was no way their leader was weak. I had no doubt Volka was formidable. On the other hand, it was only after enhancing myself with magic that I barely had enough strength to serve as our leader. Furthermore, I barely had any combat experience. For the most part, I fought with my wits, not my brawn. Still, if I backed down here, it'd affect my werewolves' morale. The same held true if I lost. There was a lot of responsibility on my shoulders right now. *Man, why does it have to be like this... Well, whatever. Guess I just gotta do it.*

"Just so you know, I'm not that strong."

I dropped into a combat stance. Volka licked her lips with relish.

"Only strong guys say that!"

There was an explosion of snow as Volka transformed and leapt forward. In seconds she closed the distance between us and aimed a roundhouse kick at my head.



I danced backward out of range, but she followed up with a second kick using her back leg. Like the last, this kick had enough power to cave in my skull if it connected. But despite the strength behind them, Volka's kicks were perfectly controlled. As she waltzed across the battlefield, Volka shouted, "You're stronger than you look, kid!"

"You think so?"

I was having a hard time getting a read on her fighting style. I thought she'd try to grapple me, but instead she was using some kind of martial arts. Though werewolves had wolf heads, the rest of our skeletons more closely resembled humans, so our fighting style tended to be more like that of monkeys than that of wolves. Meaning we were very good at wrestling. Especially since that put us in close range of our opponents, where we could make maximum use of our incredibly strong bite. Instead of closing in for a grapple, though, Volka continued launching high kicks at me, one after another. Each kick cut through the air with such speed that it sounded like a blade. They seemed deft enough that if I took any of them head-on, even my werewolf strength wouldn't be enough to save me from losing consciousness. As we fought, the onlookers started cheering for one side or the other.

"Ahaha! Get her, boss!"

"You can do this, Mom! He's nothing!"

"Counterattack already, boss!"

"You've still got it, you old hag!"

Shut up already. I was using my magic to enhance my kinetic vision so Volka's attacks weren't quite a lethal threat. As long as I could follow her with my eyes, I could dodge. Furthermore, it seemed like Volka was only comfortable fighting at kick range. If I could manage to close the distance, I'd have a chance. However—

"A true gentleman asks for permission before approaching a lady!"

The moment I rushed forward for a tackle, Volka countered with a knee to my face. Panicking, I leapt out of the way. But Volka followed up by extending her leg into a front kick. Though her kick was being propelled by only her knee joints

this time, it was still powerful. Unable to completely avoid the blow, I took a glancing hit to the cheek. Not only was Volka a master of kicking, she knew how to keep her opponent at the optimal range for her as well. Plus she knew a bunch of different techniques. *Crap...it's gonna be hard to make an opening like this.* That being said, Volka wasn't quite as strong as the Hero had been. His skills had been on a completely different level. Volka's kicks were formidable, but they wouldn't take me out unless they hit a vital spot. I could make something of this still.

"What're you grinning about!?"

Volka raised one leg high and swung it down at my shoulder. *Perfect, here's my chance.* I grabbed her foot with both hands. To the onlookers, it probably seemed like her kick connected. And to be honest, even though I'd blocked it, it still hurt like hell. But now that I had her leg in my arms, I had leverage. I lifted her leg up and threw her back towards a nearby tree.

"Hraaaaah!"

I used strengthening magic on my arms at the moment of my throw, allowing me to slam Volka against the tree with tremendous force. The entire trunk creaked and swayed as she hit it. *That must have hurt.*

"Ngh... Gah...!"

Groaning in pain, Volka dropped to her knees in the snow. It was only by leaning against the tree trunk that she kept herself from crumpling to the ground. It was the law of werewolves to finish off your opponent. I grabbed Volka by the shoulder and bared my fangs. Though if she surrendered, I was planning to call the match there. To my surprise, Volka suddenly vanished. *What? What'd she do? Wait, hang on.* She hadn't vanished. She'd canceled her transformation. Taking advantage of my momentary surprise, Volka slipped through my grasp. Once she was free she reapplied her transformation and launched a back kick toward my jaw.

"Take this!"

While she did manage to take me by surprise, a desperate attack like that lacked the power to harm me. I could handle her kick no problem. Rather than dodging, I took her kick on the chest and used strengthening magic to multiply

my body weight. In doing so I was able to anchor myself to the ground and remain steady. That caused the force of Volka's kick to rebound, and made her stagger backwards.

"Ngh!?" Volka had probably expected me to at least be pushed back a little by her kick. The unforeseen result caused her to stiffen momentarily in surprise. *Now's my chance.* I grabbed Volka by the waist and hoisted her up in the air. I arched backwards, using a textbook pro wrestling move.

"Don't die, Volka!"

"Wha!? WAAAAAH!"

I swung Volka over me and slammed her head onto the ground. Though the snow cushioned the impact, my Meraldian Suplex had the weight of two werewolves behind it. It was more than enough to knock Volka out.

I got back to my feet and looked down at Volka. She was out cold so there was no need for a countdown.

"Looks like I win. Don't worry, I'll heal her for you guys."

Werewolves were extremely tough, so I doubt this had even caused any lasting damage. But Volka was old, so it was probably best if I healed her anyway. A few minutes later, she regained consciousness.

"Now that was a fight!" Volka smiled, sounding even more energetic than she had before our duel.

Did I use too much healing magic on her? Still transformed, Volka sat down on the snow and looked up at me.

"You're one hell of a fighter, kid. Did you realize right away we're not good at wrestling?"

"Meraldian werewolves love to wrestle," I replied with a nod. "But after watching you fight, I got the feeling Rolmund werewolves don't."

Had I tried that move on the Garney brothers, or Fahn, they would easily have been able to adjust their fall to cushion the impact. But Volka hadn't been familiar with the suplex, so she hadn't been able to adequately defend against

it. The deciding factor had been her lack of experience with my fighting style.

“Ah, you’re right.” Volka sighed. “We prefer using punches and kicks. Our ancestors grew up fighting the giant beasts that used to roam Rolmund, so they didn’t develop any fancy grappling moves.”

Most of North Rolmund’s animals were huge, so that they could store more heat for the frigid winters. I imagined their monsters must have been the same. *Come to think of it, Rolmund’s werewolves are a lot bigger than Meraldia’s. I guess it’s because they need more fat and muscle mass for the winters. Kinda like bears.*

Volka’s smile returned and she added, “Anyway, the fact is I lost. In fact, I’ve never been beaten that badly before! This proves you’re the strongest werewolf in Rolmund.”

“I dunno about that. It was just a coincidence that I managed to win, and...”

Honestly, I wasn’t confident I’d come out ahead if we went for a second round. But none of the werewolves seemed to care about that, and they started heaping praise onto the both of us.

“Yeah, Mom’s right! You’re crazy strong!”

“That old hag of yours is pretty tough, too! There aren’t many people out there that can give Veight trouble!”

“After all, our boss is the famous Hero Killer!”

“He killed a Hero!? No way...”

“Yeah, he did! He killed a real, actual Hero in single combat!”

More like I finished off a wounded Hero. As Volka heard my werewolves recount my battle with the Hero, she turned to me in surprise.

“Seriously? You took out a Hero?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “But he was already half-dead. And even then I was barely able to beat him...”

“Even if he was on death’s door, a Hero’s a Hero. They aren’t easy to beat. I heard Rolmund’s Hero Draulight once crushed an army of ten thousand all by

himself.”

“Just so you know, I’m nowhere near that strong.”

Volka gave me a wry smile and got to her feet.

“Either way, it looks like I never stood a chance. If we want to beat you, we’re going to need a plan.”

“So that means you’re going to stop trying to kill me next time we duel, right?”

From the moment we’d started fighting, I’d noticed she’d only challenged me to a duel as an excuse to try and assassinate me. Humans would never have fallen for such an obvious ploy, but werewolves loved fighting too much to say no.

Volka grinned and said, “I was just hoping I’d get lucky. But I don’t want to get in a real deathmatch with a Hero Killer. We won’t bother you for now. You’re too strong to kill, so we’d just be wasting our time. And Rolmund werewolves never do anything that’s a waste of time.”

“What a coincidence; neither do Meraldian werewolves. Honestly, I’d like it if we could be allies.”

Volka shook her head, dashing my hopes.

“Sorry, but we can’t do that. It pains me to fight a group of fellow werewolves, but we have obligations to fulfill.”

“I guess if all it took to be friends was to be part of the same race, then humans would never fight amongst each other.”

“Hahaha, you can say that again!” Volka’s grin grew wider and she added, “But seeing as we are fellow werewolves, I’d like to ask for a favor. If anything happens to us, will you help? We can barely survive in this barren tundra as it is.”

“Yeah, of course. I know just how prejudiced Rolmund’s Sonnenlicht sect is against demons... Though I see the Sternenfeuer cult is different.”

Volka shot me a sidelong glance as I casually threw that out there.

“It’s good for werewolves to be perceptive. But it’s rude to pry into a widow’s private affairs.”

Widow, huh... As I was mulling over that word, Volka turned to her tribe and shouted, “Alright boys, we’re leaving! Don’t forget to pay your respects to the victor!”

At Volka’s command, all of the Rolmund werewolves brought their right hands to their chests. *I guess that’s their version of a salute.* They then turned on their heels and vanished into the forest. If they’d still wanted to fight even after our duel, I’d planned on using my Soul Shaker to stun them, then have my werewolves gun them down. Fortunately, I didn’t have to resort to such drastic measures. Once we could no longer smell Volka’s people, Monza sidled up to me, her eyes sparkling.

“Want me to tail them?”

“No.” I shook my head. “For now, they’re still our enemy. If we tail them with a large squad, they’ll notice us. And if we send just you, you’ll get killed by them. We’re dealing with werewolves this time, not humans.”

“I guess so.”

Monza shrugged her shoulders, and I turned to the rest of my werewolves.

“Everyone, cancel your transformations and return to the highway! We’re heading to the Wiron Library as originally planned!”

As we headed westward, I thought back to the Rolmundian brethren we didn’t know we had. *So they’re being hunted by the Sonnenlicht Order and sheltered by the Sternenfeuer Cult...* I didn’t have all the pieces I needed just yet, but if things went well, I’d be able to turn Volka and her clan into allies. Parker, who’d been keeping his Blast Rifle trained on Rolmund’s werewolves during the entire encounter, finally lowered his gun and muttered, “From the looks of it, I doubt they belong to the Sternenfeuer Cult. The way they reacted when we mentioned the Demon Lord makes me believe they still follow the old demon ways.”

“Yeah. I guess their numbers must have dwindled since they were forced to fight the humans here without ever once having a Demon Lord to lead them.”

That realization made me feel bad for them. The climate here was harsh, so they must have had an even harder time surviving than we had.

“I want to help them somehow, but... Hmmm...”

There was nothing I could do for them right now. After all, they were working for our enemy.

The only human among my entourage, Mao, whispered, “I see werewolves have it tough too. Despite your overwhelming strength, you’re the ones who’re backed into a corner.”

“It’s true. That’s just how strong you humans are.”

I sighed, and Mao furrowed his brows.

“As a human myself, I don’t feel particularly powerful. Are we really that strong?”

Werewolves had evolved to hunt humans, but even we were terrified of human settlements. It turned out humans were very good at hunting down intruders in their midst. Which was why werewolves had long since abandoned the lifestyle of sneaking into human communities and preying on the residents. As time passed, I had no doubt humans would grow even stronger. My old world’s history proved that much.

I gave Mao a sad smile and said, “You are, trust me. You’re all far stronger than you realize.”

“I see...”

As a former human, I could say that with confidence.

Wiron Library was where the Sonnenlicht Order’s sacred texts were stored. The library itself was more of a massive temple that stretched across all of Mount Wiron. It actually reminded me a lot of Mount Hiei in Kyoto.

“Everything on this mountain is part of the Wiron Library?” Fahn, who had never been a big fan of reading, looked up at the library in awe. I told her what Eleora had told me.

“The official reason why it was built here was that if it was in a major city,

there'd be a risk of it getting burned down in the event of a war."

"Uh-huh. So what's the real reason?" Monza asked skeptically, her curiosity piqued.

I nodded and replied, "The truth is this is practically a Sonnenlicht fortress. If you look closely, you'll realize the library is built more like a military castle than a storage complex for books."

"Ahh...you're right. Even this gate is built perpendicular to the stairs. And that tower over there looks like a castle turret."

After having experienced a few siege battles for themselves, my werewolves had gotten good at discerning whether or not a particular building was designed for warfare. As I climbed up the stone steps to the library, I explained, "Normally you want to put a temple within the city so it's easier for pilgrims to reach. On top of that, it can serve as an administrative building. Basically, city temples are the perfect connection to the secular world. Meanwhile, this temple is a military outpost that exists to fight against heretics."

Jerrick examined the temple's structure for a few seconds, then asked, "Hey, boss? I don't know that much about human religion, but shouldn't priests and bishops and stuff be above fighting? Why do they have all these troops and a castle and all that?"

"If pretty words alone were enough to protect people, no one'd have to suffer," I said. "But it's not. It takes swords and soldiers to protect a religion. The same way we all protect the Demon Lord with our lives, these guys protect the Sonnenlicht faith with theirs."

"I see."

The temple had a few inns that catered to pilgrims, and I set my werewolves up in one of them. I then told Fahn and Parker they'd be in charge while I was visiting the cardinal.

"Mao, you come with me."

"You want me to accompany you?"

Mao, who'd been looking forward to resting, frowned at me.

“You and Parker are my best negotiators. Since Parker’s got his hands full keeping the werewolves in line, that leaves you to be my assistant.”

“But I’m a Mondstrahl believer.”

“Yeah, and we worship the Demon Lord. It doesn’t matter what your religion is. Come on.”

Come to think of it, I didn’t bring a single Sonnenlicht believer with me.

Because of how close the Wiron Library was to the mountain’s summit, pilgrims rarely ever came to visit, and the streets were all empty. It was so quiet that there were just two old guards protecting the entrance to the temple proper.

“I guess it’s true that this is a post where everyone gets to take it easy.”

“Was there really any point in coming here?”

Mao and I continued whispering furtively to each other as we passed through the library’s gates. However, as we passed the two wizened guards, I noticed both of them had the distinctive scent of fighters. A moment later the scent disappeared as the two of them adjusted their poses to look less threatening. *These guys are experienced, all right. They’re not just any old veterans.* I walked closer to Mao and whispered, “Be on your guard here. If you’re not careful, you’ll get hit with divine punishment.”

Mao picked up on my implied meaning and nodded.

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

As soon as we entered the library, apprentice priests showed up to guide us. They led us into a room occupied by a man in his mid-30s. He struck me as too young to be a cardinal, but he was wearing a cardinal’s robe.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Veight Gerun Friedensrichter. I am the manager of the Wiron Library, Traja.”

So he really is a cardinal. There were eight cardinals who presided over the Sonnenlicht Order in Rolmund. The reason there were eight was to prevent an easy majority from forming, and so that there were enough cardinals that

multiple different viewpoints would be represented. Traja was supposedly the lowest ranked of the cardinals, but he still wasn't to be underestimated.

He held so much power and influence over the Sonnenlicht believers that most nobles couldn't even compare to him. If he so wished it, he could rally the people against Eleora and destroy her popularity in an instant. I needed to be careful about what I said. I gave Traja the traditional Rolmundian Sonnenlicht greeting and said, "It is an honor to meet you, Cardinal Traja. I am Veight, the man who has received the blessing of Ryunheit's Sonnenlicht bishop in Meraldia."

Cardinal Traja smiled faintly at me.

"Thank you for your contributions to the order. I have heard that you have been named a saint, so there is no need to be so formal with me. After all, I am the lowest ranking cardinal."

"But even so, you..."

After a very Japanese back-and-forth exchange about politeness, I ended up agreeing to speak less formally to Traja. He led us to a table and offered us chairs, then sat down across from us. I handed him the letter of introduction Zanawah had written, and he quickly skimmed over it.

"Is Brother Zanawah doing well?"

"Yes, very. He's quite passionate about his research."

"I see he hasn't changed. He was in fact my first disciple and he has been offered the post of cardinal multiple times. But he keeps refusing, claiming that he wishes to interact with the faithful directly."

Traja gave me a sad smile. *I see, so that's your relationship with Zanawah.* The cardinal neatly folded up my letter of introduction and said in a cheerful voice, "According to the good bishop, you are a wise and composed theoretician, as well as an avid pursuer of the truth."

Why does that not feel like praise? However, Traja's smile remained cordial, and he opened the box of cookies resting on the table.

"If Zanawah speaks this highly of you, then I can rest easy knowing I can speak

my mind. So let me be frank... You're a demon, aren't you?"

Isn't that a bit too frank? I was momentarily taken aback, but I quickly recovered. Traja seemed like the kind of man who appreciated boldness.

"Yes, that's right."

"Lord Veight!?" Mao screamed in surprise, but I figured Traja had invited me here despite knowing I was a demon. All I could do was see this through to the end. Traja's smile grew wider.

"Amazing. I see now why Zanawah spoke so highly of you." Traja took a cookie from the box. "I imagine your thought process went something like this: 'He invited me here despite knowing my true identity, meaning there's no point in denying it now.' Am I correct?"

"You are."

Damn, he saw right through me. It seemed this empire's religious leaders were quite competent. Traja popped the cookie into his mouth, his expression growing serious.

"The reason I was able to discern your true identity was because I read numerous reports from Sonnenlicht believers scattered across the empire. Each individual report didn't amount to much, but together these fragmented accounts allowed me to piece together the truth."

His words didn't smell like a lie. It appeared that I'd underestimated the Sonnenlicht Order.

"But rest easy, Lord Veight. The Sonnenlicht Order is not the demons' enemy."

Wait, that can't be right.

"But I've heard that Rolmund's Sonnenlicht Order does not recognize the rights of demons," I replied.

"Correct, it does not. One of our oldest scriptures, the chronicle of the Holy Zahakt Crusade, clearly spells out that demons are heretics and should be purged."

"Then do your words not contradict those scriptures?"

For some reason, Cardinal Traja smiled at that and he said, “In order to understand this contradiction, you first need to learn about the secrets of the Sonnenlicht Order which are hidden to all but the eight cardinals.”

Traja got to his feet and walked over to a door set at the very back of the room.

“Many of Sonnenlicht’s ‘oldest’ scriptures—including the one that details the Holy Zahakt Crusade—were only ‘discovered’ quite recently. And all of the documents these scriptures are based on are actually stored within this library.”

Wiron Library was one of the Sonnenlicht Order’s oldest temples, and it housed all of the religion’s sacred texts since the order’s inception. According to Traja, there were so many documents to sift through that there were still new discoveries about the scriptures every few years. Preserving and restoring those documents was one of Traja’s principle tasks.

“Behind this door lies the holy workshop where old documents are restored.”

Traja opened the door to reveal a workshop where numerous craftsmen were hard at work. Some were writing feverishly on ancient-looking paper. Others were repairing old books’ spines. And a few were mixing new ink. Traja pointed to the craftsmen and said, “It takes a lot of specialized skill and a noble’s education to properly repair books, so all of these craftsmen are given the same treatment as our most honored priests. Ah— Take that copy over to Lady Madal. Tell her the contents are to remain confidential for now.”

After he finished giving instructions to one of the craftsmen, he walked out and locked the thick door. He turned back to me and said, “The documents being repaired right now were actually only just discovered the other day. They’re quite valuable, too...” Traja gave me a conspiratorial grin. “It’s amazing. Every new scripture we find is just a blank bundle of white pages, with nothing written on it.”

I instantly understood what he was implying. *I can’t believe he revealed such a huge secret to me.*

“So what you’re saying is all of the scriptures are fake.”

“Yes.”

At least pretend to deny it! I gave him an exasperated look, but Traja's grin just grew wider. *This guy's dangerous.*

"Since time immemorial the Sonnenlicht Order in Rolmund has been 'discovering' new scriptures whenever the empire needed it."

Shocked, Mao asked, "But why?"

"To guide people towards a better life. As long as we say something was written in the ancient texts, people will follow it without question."

Are you serious? Half-humming, Traja added, "This library gathers all the craftsmen needed to create new scriptures and puts them to work. We have people who know how to artificially age paper and ink, as well as scholars well-versed in the ancient style of writing."

"Are all of them in on the secret too?"

"No, most of them believe we really are repairing and preserving old scriptures here. We split all of the craftsmen up and assign them separate tasks to avoid letting anyone grasp the full picture."

I never expected a cardinal to be this much of a scoundrel. A little worried, I asked, "But doesn't this mean you're deceiving your followers?"

"It does. But a little deception is necessary."

He didn't sound the least bit guilty about what he was doing.

"Since you've already seen this much, allow me to tell you how the Sonnenlicht Order was formed. That way you will be able to understand what our goals are and why we do what we do."

Traja flashed us both a grin. *I'm kinda scared to learn the truth, but this is something I need to know.*

Cardinal Traja sat down in his chair and examined mine and Mao's expressions. Satisfied, he began his tale.

"The Sonnenlicht Order is a religion created for farmers, and it is based around worshiping the sun. All of the knowledge serfs need to farm efficiently is passed down in the form of religious precepts. Furthermore, the religion was

quite useful in turning the citizens into a powerful anti-heretic army.”

I nodded and replied, “By making people attached to the land they lived on, you ensured they’d fight to the death to protect it.”

“You are absolutely correct.”

From what I’d read in history class back on earth, people had fought the hardest in wars that revolved around territory. Primarily nomadic societies didn’t have as fierce conflicts with each other, because they didn’t lament the loss of territory nearly as much. That made sense; if a farmer lost their home, they lost their only means of earning a living. That wasn’t true for hunter-gatherers.

“The devout adherents of Rolmund didn’t just learn how to fight against monsters and the climate, but also how to fight heretics. Incidentally, the largest group of heretics was the Sternenfeuer cult, the religion of fishermen and hunters. Because of their nocturnal lifestyle, they used the stars for guidance and worshiped the night sky. In other words, the opposite of us.”

It seems the real reason for this conflict wasn’t religion, but rather lifestyle choices. Traja sighed before continuing.

“It was at that point that things grew troublesome. In order to protect and expand their farmland, our ancestors started using the holy teachings as an excuse to steal land from others. They had little choice but to follow the teachings in order to gain enough arable land to make a living; still, they left behind an unpleasant inheritance for us.”

“So that’s why there are so many tenets that seem outdated.”

“Indeed. It’s impossible to pretend those tenets never existed, especially when we’re having so much trouble keeping our followers under control as it is.”

Traja’s expression grew grim.

“I realize this is far from an optimal solution, but we can hardly just come out and tell people the scriptures are fake. That would solve nothing. It was only because of these pragmatic, harsh tenets that our ancestors were able to survive in this unforgiving wasteland.”

“Is that why you have stories like ‘Cold Micha?’”

“Correct. I’m impressed you know about that.”

That’s what gave Eleora her trauma after all. For a moment Traja’s serious expression vanished and he flashed me a wan smile.

“But even if we can’t wipe out the old teachings, we can at least ‘discover’ new ones.”

“Won’t that cause problems for the cardinals who’ll follow after you centuries later, though?”

“We’ve been doing our best to make sure that doesn’t happen by making our new tenets as tolerant as possible. There’s multiple ways to do so, too. For example, we can add restrictions to the situations in which certain tenets are applicable.” Traja paused momentarily for breath. “This is the reason we can afford to take a more moderate stance regarding demons, the Meraldian Commonwealth, and even Her Highness Eleora’s policies. If people object, we can always find some new scriptures to placate them.”

Man, why do you sound so proud of your forgery factory?

“Does that mean the Sonnenlicht Order is siding not with Prince Ashley, but with us?”

This was probably not the kind of discussion you wanted to have with a member of the clergy, but Traja was the one who started it, and plain business negotiations like these were easier for me. To my surprise, the cardinal shook his head.

“We cannot show favoritism when it comes to secular matters. The Sonnenlicht Order’s principal goal is to do whatever it takes to maintain the peace within Rolmund.”

“Whatever it takes” is a pretty terrifying way of putting it.

Traja added, “However, it is clear to us that as he is currently, Prince Ashley will not support our cause. And right now a crisis that will shake both the empire and the Sonnenlicht Order to its core is fast approaching.”

“And what, pray tell, is that crisis?”

Traja furtively replied, "According to our informants in the ceremonial rites bureau, Prince Ashley's older sister, Princess Dillier, has received a marriage proposal. That in and of itself is not a problem, but the prospective groom is Lord Bolshevik."

The hell is that guy thinking? Actually, I know exactly what he's thinking. Lord Bolshevik wasn't satisfied being just Eleora's supporter, so he was trying to catapult himself into the center of Rolmundian politics by marrying Ashley's older sister. I had no doubt Prince Ashley would be formally crowned emperor very soon. If Lord Bolshevik became the brother-in-law of the emperor, his position would be stable. But I doubted this marriage proposal would go through so easily.

"Is no one objecting?"

"As of right now, only Prince Ashley's sister and we cardinals are aware he's proposed at all. Prince Ashley's influence is not what it used to be, to put it generously."

Now that's harsh. But it's also true. Prince Ashley had been unable to stop the Doneiks family's rebellion, and when it had happened, he'd been unable to suppress it. Everyone knew Eleora was the one responsible for ending the war.

"No matter what happens, rumors will spread that Prince Ashley is a weak ruler who cannot win wars." Traja sighed. "Everyone is also beginning to realize that while Prince Ashley has a large number of supporters, most of them are incompetent fools. No matter how able he is when it comes to domestic affairs, the unfortunate fact remains that he was unable to stop his relative's rebellion."

I know this isn't an official conversation or anything, but aren't you being a bit too rude? Though I guess I can't complain since it's all true.

"Right now, Lord Bolshevik will be approaching Prince Ashley in his moment of weakness. While Lord Bolshevik may have lost the respect of his fellow nobles, the fact remains that he's a powerful duke with vast swathes of territory."

"You're worried the two outcasts will join forces?"

“More or less. Though I believe two drowning men can hardly save themselves by clinging to each other.”

Seriously, do you have to be this blunt? There was one thing about what Traja said that was on my mind, though. Lord Bolshevik had survived this far by changing his allegiances at the drop of a hat. He was the kind of person to put practicality over obligation or honor. That meant the only reason he approached Prince Ashley’s camp was because he believed there was something to be gained from taking his side. He undoubtedly had some kind of scheme in mind, the kind of scheme that would make normal people balk if they knew of it. I decided to tell Traja of my concerns.

“No, this is a dangerous move. If all Lord Bolshevik wants is to protect his territory and faith, he wouldn’t need to go this far. He must be planning something big.”

“I suspected you would say that.” Traja nodded. “We have our apprehensions as well. The Sonnenlicht Order has supported every emperor thus far, as we believed that was the best way of protecting the peace. But if a heretic becomes the emperor’s brother-in-law, we will be placed in a difficult position.”

If Lord Bolshevik used his wife as a mouthpiece to push his ideas onto Ashley, the kind but weak-willed prince would be hard-pressed to refuse.

“Does it look like Prince Ashley’s sister is going to accept Lord Bolshevik’s proposal?”

“Princess Dillier seems quite eager to accept. Prince Ashley is a bit more hesitant, but I suspect he will fold before long, if the reports are to be believed.”

With the exception of people like Eleora, most of Rolmund’s imperial princesses were political tools that were often married off for alliances or favors. In order to keep them pure, they were given very sheltered upbringings. *So the poor ignorant princess is being deceived by a villain.* I had no idea how Lord Bolshevik had managed to seduce the princess, but things were getting troublesome. There’d be a scandal if word got out, but the fact that the Sonnenlicht Order was keeping it secret meant they had no way of stopping the marriage.

Of course, publicly, Lord Bolshevik was a Sonnenlicht believer, and he'd even been baptized in the Sonnenlicht style. There was no proof that he was a heretic. Furthermore, he was from a powerful family. So long as Princess Dillier didn't refuse him, no one else could stop their marriage. Had the previous emperor still been alive, he could have used his right as Princess Dillier's father to forbid the marriage, but Prince Ashley didn't have that right. I looked up at Traja. He seemed truly uncertain.

"Why not 'discover' a new sacred text that allows you to stop their marriage?"

"They're not that easy to make; we wouldn't be able to complete it in time. Even still, to continue to keep the population at a stable level, we're very tolerant of marriages as long as it's between believers. If we changed the rules now, it'd be contradictory." Traja smiled bitterly at me. "The conflict between Sonnenlicht and Sternenfeuer is not just a religious one. There will be secular repercussions if the order's hegemony is disturbed."

"What do you mean?" Mao asked, confused.

Traja gave him a polite nod and explained, "Right now, we can interfere in any conflict, so long as it is between Sonnenlicht adherents. In fact, we've done so multiple times in the past. But if there's a civil war in Rolmund between adherents and heretics, we won't be able to do anything."

That makes sense. So long as the war was between Sonnenlicht believers, both sides would have to respect the rules of war and treat prisoners with humanity. Of course, not everyone followed those rules, but at least they existed. But the Sternenfeuer cult had no such rules, and the Sonnenlicht rules didn't apply to heretics. Things would get needlessly bloody. I nodded in understanding and replied, "If the empire became split between the Sonnenlicht and Sternenfeuer religions, the ensuing war could last decades, or even centuries."

"Indeed. Not only that, but such a war would fracture the empire."

That wouldn't be too bad for Meraldia in the short term, but it would be hard to predict what the fractured empire would do once the war was over, so I didn't really want that. It was entirely possible the losing side would flee to

Meraldia seeking refuge, and the winning side would use that as an excuse to invade us again. We'd be in especially deep trouble if Sonnenlicht won that hypothetical civil war. Because then the Sonnenlicht believers would hold a grudge against Meraldia for not helping them in their time of need, despite being fellow Sonnenlicht adherents. It would be far better for Meraldia if I could put Eleora on the throne and also get Rolmund's Sonnenlicht church in my debt. Most importantly, this method would cause the fewest casualties.

"I understand. Lord Bolshevik is a danger to us as well, so it would certainly be in our best interests to cooperate. But why did you contact me instead of Princess Eleora?"

Traja gave me a knowing smile and said, "Because you're a foreigner. If the situation starts to deteriorate, we can safely pin the blame on you without harming the empire. Naturally, the other cardinals feel the same about me, since I hold the least power, so I fully understand what it feels like to be in that position. I hope we can get along."

"Ah, I see."

By all rights, I should have been angry at Traja, but what he was saying was logical, so I couldn't really find it in me to get mad. It was far safer for a relatively unimportant cardinal to form a pact with me than it was for the Pope himself to form a pact with Eleora. This way, if things started looking grim, both sides could cut their losses by claiming their subordinates acted without permission. *But man, this guy's like those evil villains you see in Hollywood movies.* Considering the fact that he was willing to sacrifice even his life for the sake of his goals, you could say he was a fanatic of sorts. Honestly speaking though, I liked guys like him. If nothing else, they were easy to talk to.

I nodded and said, "Very well. If the worst happens, you can pin all the blame on me, and I'll quietly return to Meraldia. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes. The last thing we want is to harm the prestige of the royal family, so please take the fall by yourself. But I must say, you're quite a strange man. Wouldn't you normally get angry if someone told you to be a scapegoat?"

"It's a fitting job for a vice-commander, so I'm more than happy to take on that role."

I was planning on returning to Meraldia once my business was done anyway, so it's not like being banished from Rolmund forever would bother me. From my point of view, Traja's proposal didn't require taking on any extra burdens or risks. Plus appeasing Lord Bolshevik was also part of my job. Things were finally starting to go well, so the last thing I wanted was someone getting in the way of my plans. Smiling, Traja held out his hand for a handshake.

"I see Zanawah's assessment of you wasn't mistaken. I thank God for allowing me to meet with such a wise and rational individual."

"Thank you for trusting a demon such as myself."

Us two scoundrels shared a firm handshake. Cunning schemers who could be reasoned with were the best. Mao turned to me and grumbled, "You guys are so evil you make me look like a saint."

"Honestly, that sounds like a compliment..." I replied.

"You have nerves of steel, you know that?"

A cardinal who fabricated sacred texts, and a foreigner who served the Demon Lord. We made for a pretty nice pair. *Alright, time to hash out some details. All for the sake of peace, of course.*

—Cardinal Traja's Speculations—

The enigmatic demon from Meraldia ended up greatly exceeding my expectations. Even though he's a foreigner, a heretic, and belongs to an entirely different race, he was surprisingly easy to get along with. In fact, it shocked me how reasonable he was. But perhaps it shouldn't have. After all, we are both seekers of truth climbing the same mountain. Regardless of whether we started on the mountain's north face or its south one, we met at the same peak. Either way, the werewolf Veight has proved himself a worthy negotiating partner. I need to thank Zanawah for introducing him to me.

Since the time of the old republic, it has been known that to succeed as a negotiator in Rolmund, you need the ability to listen, to see, and to speak. You need to listen to the words of others and keep an ear out for any and all news. You need a discerning eye to see what information is valuable and what isn't.

And lastly, you need a fluent tongue to negotiate skillfully. Lord Veight possesses all three qualities.

Despite being a demon, he understands human society. And despite being a heretic, he knows a great deal about both the Sonnenlicht and the Sternenfeuer religions. Not only that, but he was also willing to entertain my outlandish request. Proof that he knows how to listen.

He also knows how to sift through relevant and irrelevant information. Furthermore, he has the spine to accept harsh truths and not avert his gaze from undesirable information. He's also a veteran general with real foresight. Proof that he knows how to see.

Lastly, he's the first person I've ever met who managed to impress Zanawah enough to get him to write a letter of recommendation. Even I couldn't help but be entertained in my conversation with him—proof that he knows how to speak.

There were multiple points in our conversation where I nearly gave him concessions I shouldn't have, just because he was that eloquent. Truly, what a terrifying demon. Still, his attitude toward negotiation was quite intriguing. Whenever I offered him favorable terms, he was more than willing to offer more favorable terms himself. Honestly, he makes for the perfect negotiation partner. His natural inclination toward kindness means I can easily get the concessions I want out of him. But at the same time, it makes me want to offer him as much as I can, too. I wonder what kind of face he'll make when I offer him everything in my power to give?

After a few minutes of deep contemplation, Traja brought out a pen and a sheet of paper, and placed them in front of me.

"The scriptures we're 'repairing' right now pertain to Sonnenlicht's treatment of heretics. They're meant to be a continuation of the chronicle of the Holy Zahakt Crusade."

According to the current scriptures, Saint Zahakt had been a great warrior who led multiple holy crusades against demons, monsters, and heretics. But there wasn't anything that covered his later years, so Traja had some leeway to fabricate new stories there.

“Incidentally, Saint Zahakt isn’t a real person. He never existed. Everything about his life was fiction crafted to suit the needs of the times.”

Every time Traja happily mentioned how another section of the Sonnenlicht tenets were fake, Mao frowned. From his perspective as a merchant, this venture probably looked like it was all risk and no return. But as far as I could tell, this was the best way to stop another civil war from breaking out. Traja gave me a small smile.

“This appended scripture is going to begin with Zahakt musing: ‘After decades of warring with humans and heretics, I came to realize something.’ But what comes after, I would like you to decide. Whatever you write will become Sonnenlicht canon.”

“Are you sure about this?”

Aren’t you giving me a little too much in return for my help? Traja’s smile turned a little bitter.

“In order to resolve the looming crisis, the Sonnenlicht Order will need to borrow the knowledge of a demon like you. If anything, asking you to write our next discovery is putting us in your debt, not the other way around.”

“I see.”

So what I write here will decide the fate of the empire... Man, this is too much pressure for me. Though I wavered for a moment, I recalled that there were werewolves in Rolmund serving the Sternenfeuer religion. As the Demon Lord’s vice-commander, it was my duty to protect their future. Aiding all demons regardless of affiliation was the entire reason the Demon Army existed. I needed to come up with a convincing monologue for Zahakt that could help them. The biggest issue was that the Sonnenlicht Order and the Sternenfeuer Cult were at war with each other. One of the core tenets of Sonnenlicht was “Combine your strength to push back the night.” In practice, that meant Sonnenlicht followers were unhealthily obsessed with conformity.

On the other hand, the primary teaching of Sternenfeuer was “The sky is the divine canopy which illuminates the truth.” In other words, “I’ll show you the truth, but it’s up to you to do something with it.” Generally, the people who became Sternenfeuer gurus were those who uncovered some truth about the

world. They then taught others how to follow in their footsteps. Basically, Sternenfeuer was more about self-improvement than group conformity. It was inevitable that the two would clash. Fortunately, my predecessors back on earth had left behind an example on how to solve this issue. The best way to eliminate conflict between two religions was to make them more similar to each other. I just had to make Sonnenlicht more Sternenfeuer-like. *And I know just the right tenet to add to make that happen.*

“Traja.”

“Yes?”

“The Sternenfeuer Cult is allied with demons. As a demon myself, I would very much like to bring them over to my side. Plus, doing so will weaken Lord Bolshevik. I’ll be writing these tenets with that goal in mind.”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure my plan would work, but since this was my idea, it was my responsibility to see it through. Traja nodded his assent.

“Very well. If that is your plan, then I have no objections. However, are you sure things will work out as neatly as you claim?”

“These demons may be allied with the Sternenfeuer, but they are not Sternenfeuer believers themselves. The only god demons serve is the Demon Lord.”

“I see...”

Though Traja was wise, he wasn’t capable of understanding how demons thought. For us, strength was everything. So naturally, we only worshiped the strong. Furthermore, not all of the Sternenfeuer adherents were of the same mind as Lord Bolshevik. There were probably plenty of his followers who weren’t all that religious, too. As long as we targeted those people, chipping away at Lord Bolshevik’s strength was a realistic prospect.

I looked up at Traja and added, “I believe it would be ideal to alter Sonnenlicht dogma so that it is more accepting of Sternenfeuer’s ideology. Doing so will help bring people living on Lord Bolshevik’s lands over to your cause. Simply adding Sternenfeuer celebrations to Sonnenlicht canon or making Sonnenlicht festivals happen on the same day as Sternenfeuer ones will be

enough. And if you could find some important historical Sternenfeuer figures and find reasons to make them Sonnenlicht saints, even better.”

“Unbelievable...” For a moment, Traja looked shocked. But then comprehension dawned and he nodded swiftly. “As you wish. That should be a simple enough task.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“But of course. What good are the scriptures if they lead people to fight amongst each other until everyone’s dead and only a barren wasteland remains? If altering Sonnenlicht to be more accepting is what it takes to protect believers, then that’s what I will do.”

After hearing Traja’s reply, I steeled my resolve and picked up the pen. I gave myself a few seconds to collect my thoughts, then began to write.

“At one point in my crusades, I was compelled to join forces with heretics to eliminate a den of dangerous monsters. Once the battle was over, the non-believers and I huddled together in the cold, waiting for the dawn. The heretics who worshiped the north star gazed northward while me and my followers looked east, anticipating the sunrise. But when the sun finally crested the horizon, everyone turned eastward, thankful that they’d lived to see another day. I realized that at dawn, the holy light of the sun graces all men equally, regardless of whether they worship the sun or the stars.”

Will that work? I’d tried to make my sentences read like other scriptures. *Everyone’s worthy of the sun’s grace, regardless of whether they believe or not.* That was the tenet I wanted to add to Sonnenlicht. It was the majority religion in Rolmund, so they actually stood to gain a lot by showing they were tolerant of others.

Traja read over my paragraph a few times, then smiled at me. “You did a splendid job. I’ll add some more context to the story to ensure it fits with past scriptures, but what you’ve written will work just fine.”

It never ceased to amaze me how lightly he treated blasphemy.

“You’re sure?”

“I am. Of course, publishing this will cause an ideological divide among the cardinals. We have oppressed heretics for so long that even those who know the truth are reluctant to recognize their rights. However, what you have written is the very embodiment of the creed ‘Combine your strength to push back the night.’”

Traja’s smile grew wider.

“I should have known you would be familiar enough with the scriptures to come up with just the thing to appease believers, Lord Veight. Leave the rest to me. I’ll convince the other cardinals to publish this.” Traja pocketed the piece of paper containing my addition to Sonnenlicht canon before adding, “From here on out, Sonnenlicht will no longer persecute heretics and demons, so long as they do not oppose us. Of course, it will take time for this policy to take root, but we will make every effort to speed the process along.”

He made it sound so simple, but reforming a religion wasn’t that easy.

“Are you sure you can do it?”

“I can, and I must,” Traja replied, his expression growing serious. “In order for the Sonnenlicht Order to continue existing, it needs to continue changing. Religions are like people—they must adapt to survive.”

Traja glanced out the window, his face solemn.

“On that note, we need to adopt new means by which we transform religion as well. We have already crafted too many scriptures. Soon we will need to sort what is necessary and what isn’t, then stage a proper reform. Though...I suppose that’s one problem I can be forgiven for pushing onto future generations.”

Traja shrugged and smiled again. *And here I thought you were serious about your job.*

“Alright, Lord Veight, we will begin preparations to recognize the rights of Sternenfeuer believers, so could you please start undermining Lord Bolshevik’s influence?”

“But of course, Traja.”

I got to my feet and flourished my cape. There wasn't much else I could do to help, but at least I had an established reputation for convincing people to change sides. I'd get Lord Bolshevik's supporters to turn traitor somehow or the other. At least I already had connections with Jovtzia and Volka. So I had a place to start. *Hehehe, I'm really turning into a villain now.*

For all of Traja's claims that he was the least powerful cardinal, he sure seemed to have a lot of influence. I was actually a bit curious about that.

“Traja, are you secretly one of the most powerful cardinals and just pretending to be unimportant?”

Traja smiled lightly and replied, “Oh no, not at all. The cardinal who is appointed to be keeper of the scripture can never become Pope, nor can they transfer to any other cardinal post. This is as far as my career goes.”

You won't fool me that easily. I grinned and replied, “Isn't that because if someone with as much authority as the keeper of the scripture became Pope, they'd be able to control the entire Order? And I imagine the reason you cannot change posts is because the cardinals do not want too many people knowing the secret of the scriptures. In other words, yours is quite an important post, no?”

“I suppose you could say that. Regardless, I've found I'm quite suited to doing dirty work like this. So important or not, this is the perfect job for me.”

Traja didn't seem proud of what he was doing, but he didn't seem to feel guilty about it either. He added, “Now if you'll excuse me, I have a very important scripture to fabricate. Don't worry, I'll convince the other cardinals to publish it.”

Traja gave me a pure, guileless smile. *I guess only guys like him could survive a job like this.*

—Jovtzia's Frustrations—

“Hmm, so the assassination attempt failed...”

My older brother, Shallier Bolshevik, folded his arms in front of the fireplace. He was staring at a sharp-eyed old woman named Volka. She was the head of an assassination clan that had lived hidden in North Rolmund for generations. Her long years of service had earned her the nickname “The Witch of the Waltz” among her peers. Volka shook her head and replied, “He was too much for me. That Meraldian’s strength is unnatural. Plus, I didn’t expect all of his guards to be the same as him. If you’d known that, you should have told me.”

“Even I was unaware of that fact. Though I was afraid that might be the case, which is why I requested your services. Seeing as no one died, that turned out to be the right call.”

My brother smiled, but Volka didn’t seem placated.

“Save your breath. You should know you can’t lie in my presence.”

“Whoops, I nearly forgot. Anyway, I guess members of the same race aren’t guaranteed to all have the same strength. If you think your clan’s stronger than his, that’s all well and good, but if you really think you’re weaker, then...”

Volka gave my brother a piercing glare.

“You’ll abandon us?”

“You’re the ones who worship strength. If you’re this weak, then I have no use for you.”

Volka was a capricious woman, and there was no guarantee she’d accept every request that people brought her. Occasionally she would even kill the one making the assassination request if she didn’t like them. You could never let your guard down around her. However, my brother seemed wholly unconcerned by her ferocious reputation.

“Well, you did succeed in scouting out the enemy’s true strength at least—without losing a single man, too. I suppose I’ll rely on your services for a while longer.”

“Fine,” Volka said, nodding reluctantly. “We still owe your family a debt for letting us borrow your backyard. But I’ll tell you this much. You’re hardly the man your predecessor was.”

Even though Volka was speaking with one of the most influential nobles in Rolmund, she wasn't intimidated in the slightest.

My brother shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I won't deny that I'm a coward. But when I tried to have Prince Ryuunie assassinated, I lost half of my very best spies. I'm not so foolish as to believe the remaining half can defeat the lord of Crimson Snow Keep."

Volka snorted derisively.

"Indeed. Your entire army wouldn't be enough to stop that man. If you want to kill Veight and his clan, you're gonna need at least ten thousand troops."

If we drafted every able soldier in our lands, we'd be able to muster around 6,000 pikemen. No cavalry or bowmen, since the Bolshevik family didn't train those. My brother stroked his chin and mused quietly to himself, "Ten thousand, you say... I'll see if that can't be arranged."

He turned to me.

"Jovtzia. Has Korzhov said anything?"

Korzhov was the name of my other brother.

"Just that everything is going according to schedule."

"Good. I imagine he's not happy with me, though."

Korzhov wasn't on very good terms with Shallier. But then, neither was I. Volka put her hands on her hips and turned to me.

"You should have let this kid inherit your position. He's got your father's eyes."

"Unfortunately, in the Rolmundian noble system it's always the eldest son who becomes head of the family. Were I allowed to relinquish my position to my brothers, I long since would have."

The fact that Volka didn't react meant my brother was telling the truth. Well, even I knew he'd hated the idea of becoming the family head. But once he inherited the position, he sprung into action. He forced our father to retire, then he started plotting all sorts of schemes that he told no one about. Korzhov and I were both exhausted helping with all his secret machinations, but I

couldn't deny that the Bolshevik family was still around thanks to him. Of course, it was because our family name was still in good standing that I had no choice but to obey Shallier, despite not knowing anything about his greater plans. My brother would even send me to negotiate on his behalf, but he still wouldn't tell me what his objectives were.

"Brother, what exactly are you trying to do here?"

"There's so many unknown factors that I'm unsure of the answer to that myself. I cannot decide if we should advance or retreat."

That's not an answer! Volka sighed loudly. She didn't seem pleased by my brother's answer either.

"Good grief. I get that you want to play at being a tactician, but if you don't tell your pieces what you need, they can't do their jobs."

Just then, one of Volka's subordinates walked into the room and started whispering something into her ear. Volka grinned and turned to my brother.

"Excuse me for a moment. The youngsters are calling for me."

My brother nodded silently, and Volka walked out of the room with the man.

"It'd be easier if she were more motivated to do her job, but I guess dealing with Volka's never easy. She wants something other than money and prestige, but what she's looking for I can't pay."

Volka and her clan chose their jobs. My brother had asked her to help with the Ryuunie assassination too, but she'd chewed him out by saying, "You're asking me to kill a child!? How dare you!" Of course, at the time I hadn't even been aware Ryuunie was the person he wanted assassinated. I'd warned Lord Veight that a potential attack might be coming just in case, but my brother had done a perfect job of keeping the target a secret from me. Had I known he was after Ryuunie ahead of time, I would have objected. Ryuunie was my cousin's brother—he was family to us. It was one thing if he'd been trying to rescue Ryuunie and shelter him here, but I couldn't fathom why my brother would go so far to kill his own kin, especially since he wasn't even a threat. I gave my brother a frustrated glare, and he smiled sadly at me.

"I realize that everyone considers me heartless and that my popularity is

dropping. But if I let myself be shackled by what people think of me, I won't be able to do what needs to be done." My brother sighed. "If only we could do something to rouse the enthusiasm of the other Sternenfeuer members. Now that the Doneiks family is no more, it falls to us to protect our religion."

"Didn't all of this happen because you betrayed Woroy?"

Unable to remain silent any longer, I blurted out the accusation I'd been bottling up all this time. But my brother just smiled and replied, "Do you think our support alone would have been enough to stop the rising tide of Eleora's army? Do you honestly believe we could have driven back Lord Veight and the princess who conquered Meraldia?"

"I think we definitely had a chance."

Shallier shook his head and said, "A 'chance' is not a good enough reason to risk the lives of 6,000 Sternenfeuer followers. I would never commit them to a fight unless victory was all but guaranteed."

"I...guess you have a point."

I knew better than anyone how quickly a lost battle could devolve into a rout. The moment my brother realized there was a possibility that all of our soldiers could get slaughtered, he immediately betrayed the Doneiks family and surrendered to Eleora. Thinking about it, that certainly was the only surefire way to keep our people safe.

"However, Brother..."

Your methods are shameful and dishonorable. Before I could say that aloud, though, he changed the subject.

"That aside, Lord Veight is quite an interesting fellow. Rolmund has been isolated from the rest of the world for so long, but he just waltzed in and blew the doors wide open. Thanks to his whirlwind entrance, I finally have the opportunity I've been waiting for."

"Opportunity? How is this an opportunity? Our generations-long peace was broken because of Lord Veight's arrival!"

"If we're going to fight, we need to choose our opponent carefully," my

brother replied, smiling slightly at me. "Princess Eleora, Prince Ashley, and Lord Veight are the three main actors on the stage. All three of them are virtuous, selfless, and loyal to their stations. While that makes them difficult opponents to deal with, so long as we play our cards right, their actions will lead us to certain victory."

"*Certain* victory? You believe you can win, Brother?"

"Of course." My brother's smile grew wider. "After meeting with Lord Veight I became convinced of that."

"Forgive me for being pessimistic, but I don't think he's someone you're capable of beating."

"You're right. You're absolutely right." My brother nodded in agreement.

I don't get it. He walked closer to the fire and looked wistfully out the window.

"My idea of victory is a little different from what you're thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't tell you. I know you'd object if I did." My brother grabbed two empty glasses from a nearby shelf. "Spring may be near, but the nights are still cold. Shall we share a glass to warm ourselves up before bed?"

"Sure..."

I gave up on trying to pry answers from my brother and accepted the proffered glass. *Fine, just do whatever you want then.*

Upon returning to our inn, I found Fahn and Parker in the midst of a heated argument.

"I just don't think it's right to interfere with the princess' wedding," Fahn muttered glumly.

Parker shook his head and replied, "When human nobles get married, there are political repercussions to consider. Sometimes those have to take precedence over the feelings of the couple."

"And I'm saying that's not right!"

Fahn wasn't having any of it. It made sense, since she had yet to grasp the full importance of human social status. With werewolves, the pack leader could marry whoever they wanted, and none of the other werewolves would care. Furthermore, the pack leader's spouse wouldn't be given any special treatment, nor would their social status change. Unfortunately, human society was a lot more complicated than that. That being said, I had no real intention of interfering with the wedding either.

"Fahn. We're not going to try and stop the wedding," I said. "If the princess gives up on the idea herself that'll be great for us, but as part of Eleora's faction, the marriage of Ashley's sister is irrelevant to us."

In fact, there might even be benefits to letting the marriage go through. If Lord Bolshevik was outed as a heretic *after* he married Ashley's sister, his fall from grace would negatively impact Ashley, not us. His retainers and supporters were already losing faith in him, and another big scandal might be enough to push them into open revolt. Even so, I didn't want things to get so bad that we had another rebellion on our hands. Eleora'd be able to suppress it easily enough, but I'd had enough of war, and there wasn't much to be gained from provoking another one. Everyone in Rolmund already knew how good a general Eleora was thanks to recent events.

We all packed up our stuff and started heading back to the capital. Once we reached the forest, I transformed into a werewolf. I was hoping to meet with Volka and have a proper talk with her before returning.

"Awooooooo..."

To Parker and Mao my howls probably just sounded like normal howls, but to other werewolves they had meaning. However, I had no idea whether or not Volka was within listening range. And even if she was, she might not want to meet with her target. Also, werewolf howls had a very limited vocabulary so it was hard to convey complex concepts.

"Old hag! Get out here!"

"I can hear you, boy! What is it!?"

"Old hag! Get out here!"

“Like I said, what the hell do you want!?”

Sorry, with what us Meraldian werewolves have learned, this is the most I know how to say. Just get over here so we can talk normally. It was impossible to have an actual discussion via howls.

After a few minutes, Volka walked out of the forest and sat down in front of me.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to call out werewolves from other packs with howls?” She grumbled angrily.

“I didn’t even know other clans existed, so no.”

“Neither did I, honestly. But my great-grandmother was fond of telling me that. So whaddya want?”

I explained to Volka that the Sonnenlicht Order would soon stop persecuting heretics and demons.

“Nothing’s set in stone yet, but the leaders of the Sonnenlicht Order aren’t idiots, and they’re not devoted fanatics either. In fact, they’re quite practical. They were easier to talk to than I expected.”

“Mmm, that’s good news. Always nice to know your enemies aren’t idiots.”

Volka flashed me a confident grin, and I added, “You guys are working with Lord Bolshevik and the Sternenfeuer believers right? Why not swap sides to the Sonnenlicht Order?”

Volka considered my proposal for a few seconds, then shook her head.

“We can’t. Not yet, anyway. We owe a generations-long debt to the Sternenfeuer Cult. We can’t just abandon them. The previous head of the Bolshevik family did a lot for us, too.”

I figured it wouldn’t be that easy. On the other hand, it was nice to know that Volka and her clan honored their debts. In fact, I was kind of happy she’d refused me.

“Yeah, I figured. Guess we’re still enemies for now then.”

“Sorry, kid. If you were from Rolmund, I might have said yes. But you’re gonna

go back to Meraldia once this hubbub's over, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

I nodded, and Volka smiled peacefully at me.

"Meaning I've gotta be the one to take care of Rolmund's werewolves. And since I don't have any connections with the Sonnenlicht Order, I can't trust them."

"Gotcha. But since the Sonnenlicht Order is going to be more lenient from now on, why don't you meet with their top brass to make connections of your own?"

Volka thought harder about that proposal.

"Now that might work. I can't say I like the way things have been going over here. But before I make any promises, I've got a request."

"What is it?"

"If things don't go well and we get chased out of Rolmund, will you let us live in Meraldia?"

Volka's tone was sincere. Fortunately, that was an easy enough request for me to grant.

"As the Demon Lord Gomoviroa's Vice-Commander, I hereby grant your request. You and your kin are always welcome in Meraldia."

I could have negotiated some concessions out of her, but I decided to freely grant her request. Volka and her clan were in a very precarious position. Rather than worry them with pointless conditions I didn't need anyway, it was better to grant them some peace of mind. Volka grinned and replied, "You're shaping up to be quite the man. Whaddaya say, wanna marry my granddaughter?"

"No, uhh..."

Seeing my troubled expression, Volka hooted with laughter.

"You even know how to blush sexily! I like you, kid! My granddaughter's still only seven, so I'll ask you again when she's a bit older!"

No really, I'm good. After she was done laughing, Volka lithely got to her feet.

As she made to leave, I asked, “Does the Sternenfeuer Cult have any other demons working for them?”

“Aside from us, there are a few vampires. They’re hiding out in human villages.”

“That’s it?”

Volka gave me a sad smile.

“The demons who can’t hide by taking human form were all wiped out long before the republic turned into an empire.”

Yeah, humans are terrifying alright... As she started walking away, Volka added, “That Bolshevik kid might be spending his time in the capital, but he’s plotting something involving his own territory too. His brother stayed back and is doing a lot of things in his name.”

“Is he trying to raise an army?”

“Dunno. It’s not my business. The whole place has become one big shelter for the Sternenfeuer followers, but I don’t wanna get wrapped up in whatever’s happening. Anyway, be careful out there.”

Volka transformed and started leaping across the trees. In seconds, she’d vanished from sight. These new revelations about Lord Bolshevik’s movements were disturbing, but either way, I needed to report to Eleora and hear her opinion on things, so our destination remained unchanged.

Upon returning to the capital, I made a beeline for Eleora’s manor and explained everything to her.

“I never knew the Sonnenlicht Order was hiding such a huge secret...” As expected, Eleora was surprised to learn that all of the scriptures were fake. “I’ve heard that those who become emperor are told some of the empire’s most vital secrets. I wonder if that’s one of them...”

“Disappointed?” I asked, half-jokingly. Eleora gave me a mischievous smile and shrugged her shoulders.

“Don’t be ridiculous. If anything, this has sparked my curiosity. Let me meet

with Cardinal Traja too. I want to help his cause.”

I knew Eleora would say that. The only people I’d told about the truth of the scriptures were Mao, Parker, and now Eleora. None of my werewolves knew, mostly because they didn’t need to. Eleora also agreed to keep it secret from her mage corps, which was probably for the best.

Once I was done talking about the scriptures, I told Eleora about how Lord Bolshevik was trying to marry Dillier. When she heard that, Eleora heaved a big sigh.

“Dillier is a hot-headed, ignorant woman. If Lord Bolshevik thinks he can tame her, I pity him.”

“Is the princess that bad?”

“At the very least, I always hated talking to her, though I haven’t met her in ages.”

I guess she is that bad. Good luck, Lord Bolshevik.

Finally, I told Eleora about Volka and her clan. By the time I finished that story, Eleora was smiling again.

“So you met some enemy werewolves, and a day later you already won them over to our side? Fast as always, I see.”

“They’re not our allies yet, but they’re willing to negotiate, at least.”

Eleora looked at me like I was some kind of strange creature.

“You’ve only been gone a few days and you’ve already negotiated new alliances, as well as gathered an absurd amount of intelligence on our rivals. I can’t imagine anyone else more fit to be the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.”

That’s because ever since I reincarnated, being a vice-commander was my goal. I much prefer supporting people from the shadows rather than stealing the spotlight. Eleora brushed her bangs aside and gave me a troubled smile.

“Everything is so much easier when you’re around, but I can’t keep relying on you, or I’ll be unable to do anything on my own. On second thought, you’re a bad choice for a vice-commander after all,” she said.

Eleora was making it sound like she was taking it easy, but while I was gone she'd been busy pulling the former Doneiks faction nobles into her camp while also solidifying her base. Also, she was the de facto ruler of East and North Rolmund, which meant she had a boatload of administrative work to handle. There was no way I'd be able to do it all efficiently like her.

"When I think about how hard you have it, I feel like I need to do at least this much to ease your burdens."

Eleora gave me a reproachful glare but then decided against admonishing me. Her expression turned serious and she said, "By the way, Ashley's finally going to be crowned emperor. The date for his coronation has been announced. And we've both been invited to attend."

"Gotcha."

Once Ashley was crowned emperor, Lord Bolshevik would start moving in earnest. All of his schemes thus far had been silent, swift, and effective. *If I'm not careful, he might get the better of me.*

Ashley's coronation ceremony was held within Schwerin's imperial palace, as was customary. The palace had a special hall that was used only for such an occasion, and it had been decorated magnificently for the ceremony. But while the proceedings themselves were quite majestic, a foreigner like me couldn't really appreciate the history behind the whole ceremony. *Besides, we're gonna have another one of these pretty soon when Eleora's crowned empress.*

While most of the nobles and clergymen had been relegated to the spectator stands, as Meraldia's representative I'd been given a seat of honor for the ceremony. In fact, I was in the very front row, next to Eleora. Originally I'd been hoping to sit behind Eleora, as was befitting of her vice-commander, but I'd been told to go here. Eleora, who was bedecked in a resplendent military coat meant for ceremonial occasions, turned to me with a wry smile.

"With how many of my relatives have died recently, I'm second in line for the throne now. That's why we're sitting here."

"Oh yeah, now that you mention it, you're right."

The late emperor's younger brother had been Lord Doneiks, and with his family gone, the only members of the royal family left were Ashley, his sister Princess Dillier, and Eleora. Since Ashley was about to be crowned emperor, his sister Dillier was first in line for the throne, with Eleora second. Furthermore, Ashley was still single. Though once he had kids, Eleora's ordering in the line of succession would go down. But for now, though, Eleora was in a very strong position. Especially since she'd distinguished herself on the battlefield.

However, while all this explained why Eleora had been given such a distinguished seat for the coronation ceremony, it didn't explain why I was getting the same treatment.

"Are you sure I can't just move back a few rows, Eleora?"

Eleora furrowed her brows and gave me an exasperated look.

"Not only are you Meraldia's representative, but you were one of the key figures responsible for putting an end to the rebellion. Ashley can't afford to give you anything less than the highest seat of honor."

So what you're saying is that he needs to show the other nobles that he has strong ties to Meraldia and its supposedly excellent military. Man, if I'd known this was going to happen I'd have brought another one of the councilors along with me. Of course, I knew they were all too busy managing their cities to come here. Sighing inwardly, I resigned myself to watching everything from the front row. Fortunately, all I had to do was sit there, so it wasn't all that taxing.

Sonnenlicht clergymen presided over the ceremony itself. Zanawah was of course also in attendance. Before the ceremony had started, he'd told me, "Strictly speaking, the emperor is only supposed to have power over the material world. But he also has to be recognized by the powers of the spiritual world—the Sonnenlicht Order—for the empire to continue running smoothly. It's for that reason that every newly crowned emperor is also ordained a Sonnenlicht saint."

Right now, Ashley was in the middle of the ritual that would make him a saint—the ceremony of the bitter draught. After placing the crown on his head, one of the bishops offered Ashley a small golden goblet. According to Zanawah, it was supposed to be filled with a very bitter liquid.

“The juice is made from a species of very bitter berry that’s normally used in dyes. Each new emperor has to drink it to signify that they’re resolved to accept all the hardships that come with ruling. That they can accept all of the empire, both good and evil. Though of course the juice used for the ceremony is quite diluted compared to the real thing,” was what he’d said.

Sonnenlicht bishops had to go through the same ceremony, so as far as the order was concerned, the emperor was like a bishop who held absolute power over secular matters. However, when bishops drank the juice, they had to drink its undiluted form. Most bishops were sick for days after drinking it all, but it was a necessary step to show their asceticism.

Ashley solemnly accepted the golden cup and gulped down its contents. Though his juice was diluted, it must still have been quite bitter. His lips twitched a little as he drank, and his dignified expression slipped. However, he quickly regained his composure and returned the empty cup to the bishop. The cardinal overseeing the ceremony, Cardinal Kushmer, approached the new emperor. She gave him a calm smile and said, “Never forget what you tasted today. But never grow too accustomed to that taste either. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

It was important to accept both the good and the evil of the empire, but it wouldn’t do to get too used to its evils. That path led to corruption and stagnation. *At least, I think that’s what she’s trying to say. Come to think of it, Traja must have gone through this ceremony too. Though I get the feeling he gulped his cup down no problem.*

The thought brought a smile to my lips. Of course, while Traja might act like a scoundrel, I knew he didn’t have a selfish bone in his body. He’d accepted the evils of the empire, but he was tirelessly working to improve it.

With that, the coronation itself was over and Ashley was recognized as emperor by both the masses and the church. It was important that the newly crowned emperor had the support of the Sonnenlicht Order as well. If he didn’t, the nobles and common folk wouldn’t follow him. Which was why Lord Bolshevik and his Sternenfeuer adherents had no chance of uniting this country.

Once all the bishops had backed away, Ashley stepped forward to give a speech. It was a very safe speech, one he'd clearly rehearsed beforehand. It seemed he was planning on having a very uneventful and stable reign, like his father before him, who'd been known as "the most boring emperor in history." Unfortunately, Ashley had inherited the throne at a time when the political climate was much more turbulent.

Ashley wrapped up his safe, boring speech with a very boring conclusion, and got a bored round of applause for it. Thus ended the coronation ceremony. There was supposed to be a banquet after this, though, and I was planning on eating and drinking enough to empty the empire's coffers. But before Ashley could officially declare the party started, Lord Bolshevik and Princess Dillier walked up. The imperial princess bowed respectfully to her younger brother.

"Congratulations on your coronation, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Sister."

Judging by the surprise on Ashley's face, he hadn't been expecting this. The surrounding bishops and servants seemed confused as well. Since it was the emperor's own sister speaking to him, the imperial guards weren't sure whether or not they should remove her either. Dillier rose up from her bow and turned to face the gathered crowd.



“My apologies for interrupting the ceremony, everyone, but I have an announcement to make. I, Dillier Voltof Schwerin Rolmund, hereby announce my engagement to Lord Shallier Bolshevik. I believe this union will bring peace and prosperity to Rolmund.”

Dillier had just dropped a political bombshell. *Couldn't you have at least waited until the party for this?* The guests were so shocked by Dillier's proclamation that no one said a word. Even if they hadn't been shocked, they probably would have hesitated to say something since the sacred coronation ceremony had just ended. Taking advantage of the sudden silence, Lord Bolshevik decided to say his piece as well.

“My fellow nobles, now that I have become kin to the imperial family, know that I will do my utmost to support the new emperor in all his endeavors. I hope you will all do the same.”

Lord Bolshevik grinned at the audience. At this point, the shock wore off and one of the nobles in Ashley's faction stood up to protest. Before he could say anything, however, Dillier and Lord Bolshevik stepped off the ceremonial platform and vanished down a corridor. The new emperor watched them go, a stunned look on his face. Not even he knew what to say.

To no one's surprise, the celebration party following the coronation was not a joyous affair.

“That damn vixen! How dare she!”

“What is Princess Dillier thinking!? How could she even consider marrying that traitor!?”

“Lord Bolshevik should have been executed for his crimes, but now he's marrying the princess!?”

The nobles of Ashley's faction were outraged. I pretended I knew nothing about the engagement and drifted from table to table, eavesdropping on other people's conversations while grabbing as much food as I could. Since today's party was a buffet, I knew none of the nobles would eat anything. They'd be too afraid of poison, so I might as well eat everything.

Back in Japan, I'd been able to buy roast beef easily enough at the grocery store, but here they only served meat like that at important parties. Though now, I was craving wagyu beef or sukiyaki. I glanced over to where Eleora was sitting. Surprisingly, she was surrounded by a bunch of nobles from Ashley's faction.

"Princess Eleora, please caution His Majesty against this marriage."

"You want me to warn him?"

"Yes. His Majesty is rather soft when it comes to his older sister. If we're not careful, Lord Bolshevik might start controlling the empire from the shadows."

Wow, these guys really are shameless. Coming to Eleora for help after all they did to get in her way. Eleora elegantly lifted her wine glass and put on her best business smile.

"But, Marquess Knullad, I'm nothing more than a 'barbaric princess who only knows how to fight.'"

"Wh-Where did you hear that?"

"Who knows... Oh yes, Count Magedoff. Weren't you the one who said 'She should just marry herself off to some noble lord and stop sticking her nose in politics.' Or am I mistaken?"

"I-I would never...say such a..."

The nobles awkwardly averted their gazes. *Looks like Eleora's having fun.* If I butted in, people would start saying things like "Oh look, Meraldia's mad dog is at it again," so I decided to just watch from a distance.

Once she'd finished having her fun with the nobles, Eleora grinned and said, "I have a good memory, but I also know how to forgive and forget. If you want me to forget about your past transgressions, you know what to do, right?"

There was something satisfying about watching the nobles crumple before Eleora. Ashley was a skilled leader and a virtuous man. Unfortunately, he had no talent for war and had to rely on others for military affairs. On top of that, Dillier, who was first in line for the throne, had become a pawn of Lord Bolshevik. That meant Eleora, who was still second in line, was getting the short

end of the stick.

“Princess Dillier’s marriage is arranged for next month. Events are moving too quickly. Please, at least convince His Majesty to postpone the wedding date, Princess Eleora.”

“Very well. But of course, you realize I will want something in return, right?”

“Y-Yes. We’re greatly indebted to you, Your Highness. We’ll swear fealty to your cause, so please do something about the marriage!”

Eleora looked coldly down at the nobles.

“And if you’re going to spread rumors about me anyway, you could at least say that I’m sharper than a blade of ice and as radiant as the first bloom of spring.”

“Of course, Your Highness. Please, just show us mercy!”

Since when did you become a sadist? Eleora chuckled to herself, then noticed me watching her. She raised her glass toward me in an informal toast. *She sure has changed.*

Eleora and I slipped out of the party just as it was getting into full swing, and walked briskly down the palace corridors. Eleora’s young supporters and Lord Kastoniev were still at the party. They could take care of whatever schmoozing was left to do.

“This has gotten pretty troublesome,” Eleora muttered darkly. I nodded in agreement.

“I didn’t think they’d announce their engagement right after the coronation ceremony. I assumed they’d want to keep things quiet for a while longer.”

“The coronation ceremony is the most important public event in the empire. If they annulled their engagement now, it’d hurt the prestige of the imperial family. Meaning there’s no way that’s happening.”

So they’re determined to see this through, huh. Neither Ashley nor Dillier had attended the party. I’d figured Lord Bolshevik at least would have briefly shown his face, but even he hadn’t appeared. As a result, all of the nobles had turned

to Eleora to voice their concerns. Dillier's engagement announcement was a crisis that superseded faction politics. Naturally, Eleora was making use of this opportunity to rope in as many undecided former Doneiks nobles and Ashley nobles to her side as possible.

"Are you going to do anything about the wedding date?"

"I should be able to postpone it at least," Eleora said with a tiny smile.

"Rolmund gets buried in snow during winter. And people from all over the empire attend important events like royal weddings, so they're usually held in either spring or fall when it's easier to travel."

"Just like how this coronation ceremony was delayed until early spring?"

"Yeah. But holding multiple large-scale events back-to-back usually isn't recommended, in case something comes up. I could probably use that argument to delay the wedding until early summer, at least."

I nodded along, but then something occurred to me.

"Just making sure, but won't the line of succession change once Dillier marries Lord Bolshevik?"

"Once she marries into his family she'll lose her right to succeed the throne, making me first in line."

So there was no possibility that Lord Bolshevik could end up as the husband of an empress. Which was probably why the nobles weren't up in arms about the announcement, even if it was worrying. *Wait, hang on. What if something happens to Ashley before Dillier gets married? Wouldn't Lord Bolshevik then be married to an empress?* Just as I was thinking that, Lord Bolshevik appeared at the far end of the corridor.

"What a surprise meeting you two here. Good day, Princess Eleora, Lord Veight."

He bowed cordially to the two of us. *Why is it that you're always smiling no matter what the situation is? Maybe I should just ask what you're up to.*

"Lord Bolshevik, what do you plan to do by marrying Princess Dillier?"

Lord Bolshevik rose from his bow, a carefully crafted grin on his face.

“Are you worried about the line of succession?”

“I am.”

Bolshevik’s grin grew wider.

“If Dillier marries into my family, then Princess Eleora will be first in line for the throne. I am simply trying to prove my loyalty by being of service to you, Your Highness.”

That smelled like a lie. Eleora smiled back at Lord Bolshevik and bowed.

“I appreciate your assistance. I pray your loyalty remains unwavering, so that it may be rewarded.”

Oh, it looks like Eleora’s lying too. I was the only honest man left at this gathering, but even that was about to change.

“It would be much appreciated if you would be willing to advise His Majesty on our behalf through Princess Dillier,” I said. “We shall be counting on you.”

“I would be glad to.”

The three of us grinned at each other. Now we were all liars. Lord Bolshevik bowed to us again.

“Now then, I must be taking my leave. I promised Dillier that I would gift her some flowers from the greenhouse.”

The greenhouse, huh? You mean the same greenhouse Ashley loves? I decided to give Lord Bolshevik a fair warning.

“The greenhouse is filled with poisonous plants. Do be careful which flowers you pick.”

“Fear not, I shall exercise caution.”

Still smiling, Lord Bolshevik walked off. It was only after he was completely out of sight that Eleora turned to me and whispered, “Veight, what do you make of how openly he flaunted his ambitions?”

“He was being so obvious about it I’m starting to think he’s not actually after what he says he’s after.”

Of course, it was possible Lord Bolshevik was just getting carried away since

things were going well, but from what I knew of him he was an exceedingly cautious man. I got the feeling he was hiding something. Lord Bolshevik's behavior aside, there was one other thing about this engagement that was bothering me.

We returned to Eleora's manor, and Natalia brewed both of us some tea. As I sipped from my cup, I continued the conversation we'd started in the palace.

"There's no doubt Lord Bolshevik's up to something big. The only question is what... If you were in his shoes, what would you do?"

Eleora pondered my question for a few seconds, then replied, "Once they're married, Dillier will lose her right to the throne. But if something happens to Ashley *before* the marriage, then she'll ascend the throne."

"So you thought of that too?"

"Yeah. Once she's empress, he can marry her and become part of the imperial family."

Just then, Natalia walked back into the room. "Excuse me."

"What is it, Natalia?"

She gave Eleora a worried look, and Eleora gently urged her to continue. Still a little apprehensive, Natalia replied, "Umm, Emperor Ashley is here to see you."

What's this, all of a sudden? Eleora looked surprised as well, but she nodded.

"Alright. What did he say he wanted?"

"He wants to consult you two about Princess Dillier's engagement."

Why are you asking us for advice about your own sister? If anything, we should be going to you. Besides, taking care of stuff like this is part of your duties as emperor. You're supposed to be the head of the Schwerin family. There was a lot more I wanted to complain about, but I held it in. Judging by Eleora's expression, she was thinking the same. The two of us exchanged glances, then sighed simultaneously. Eleora turned back to Natalia with a resigned look.

"Let him in."

"O-Okay."

A few seconds later, the new emperor walked into Eleora's study.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble my sister's engagement has caused you all." The first words out of the newly crowned emperor's mouth were an apology. Eleora smiled sadly at him and shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. We know you're the one who's had it the worst because of her announcement."

"Yes, well..." Ashley sighed. "It seems Lord Bolshevik approached my sister while I was busy preparing for the coronation ceremony."

According to Ashley, Dillier was friends with a lot of noble ladies, and Lord Bolshevik had approached while she'd been attending a private party hosted by one of them. Since the rebellion was over, no one had objected to his presence there, and he'd easily won over Dillier.

"Since she was little, my sister has always looked forward to getting married, but my father and uncle always kept her away from potential suitors."

Imperial princesses were valuable political tools, so it was hardly surprising that the late emperor and Lord Doneiks had wanted to save Dillier to secure the most advantageous alliance possible. Supposedly though, this had made her frustrated, since all of her friends were getting married before her. After hearing about her situation I asked, "So with her father and uncle out of the picture, she felt like she was finally free to pursue her dreams of marriage?"

"So it seems. My sister is a patient woman, but her patience has been sorely tested these past few years."

Ashley understood how Dillier was feeling, which was why he'd been unwilling to stop her.

"I did at least tell her to reconsider, but Lord Bolshevik is from a wealthy, prestigious family, so I didn't have any real grounds to argue. And my sister told me if I kept opposing her wishes she'd go to a convent and become a nun, so..."

Eleora replied coolly, "Then shouldn't you have told her to be a nun?"

"If she joined a convent right after my coronation, people would think I was behind it. I don't want to cause a scene right after taking the throne."

So basically, we had a brother who wanted to resolve things peacefully and a sister who wanted to get married at all costs. Had Ashley known how dangerous Lord Bolshevik was ahead of time, he might have tried harder to stop Dillier's marriage. But he hadn't, and this was what we had to deal with.

"I don't know what I should do anymore..." The young emperor cradled his head in his hands.

You know I'm your political enemy, right? Personally, I just wanted to put Eleora on the throne so I could get back to Meraldia, but I didn't have anything against Ashley. In fact, if he was willing to leave Meraldia alone and treat Eleora nicely, I wouldn't even mind helping him. Which was why I decided to show him some sympathy.

"I understand how you feel, but the threat here isn't your sister; it's Lord Bolshevik."

"Lord Shallier? I've seen what a smooth talker he is, but..."

It appeared Ashley had no idea what lay behind Lord Bolshevik's mask. Honestly, I'd prefer to enlighten him, but there was no telling who might be eavesdropping. I decided to compromise by giving him a carefully worded warning.

"Lord Bolshevik is more ambitious than he seems. If all he wanted was to save his own skin, he could have just stayed under Eleora's protection and not made any waves."

"You do have a point."

"He's quite unpredictable, so stay on your guard, Your Majesty."

I didn't mean it as a threat, just a warning. Ashley gave me an odd look, then nodded.

"I'll be careful. I'm the last surviving male member of the royal family. I realize how much is riding on my shoulders."

"That's not why you're so important," I replied, giving him a reassuring smile. "You are a compassionate emperor, and well-versed in agriculture. It would be a heavy blow to Rolmund and its people if the empire were to lose you."

I meant everything I said. Ashley looked shocked for a moment, but then he smiled. “Thank you. My day has been full of unpleasant surprises, so it heartens me to hear those words.”

The emperor got to his feet, and so did we. He bowed the same way he’d bowed to us back when he was just a prince and said his farewells.

“I may have to return for more advice regarding this incident. But until then, goodbye.”

After he left, Eleora sighed, “You sure know how to flatter people when they’re at their most vulnerable.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose.”

“That’s why it’s so effective.”

Eleora sat back down on her sofa and muttered, “I don’t mind letting Ashley rule, but I have no intention of giving the throne to Dillier or Lord Bolshevik. We need a plan to remove them from power.”

“Yeah. Let’s see what we can come up with.”

Afterward, Eleora and I saw to it that the capital’s security was strengthened. She’d been making steady progress through the ranks, and after Ashley’s coronation ceremony, she’d been promoted to Mage General. She had full authority over all the Mage Corps within the empire now.

“Mage Corps are best suited to urban warfare, so I have a good excuse to bring my own troops here. I can say they’re here to guard the city.”

“In that case, me and my werewolves will focus on covert ops. The enemy’s got werewolves on their side too; we’re the only ones capable of opposing them.”

While we were worried about the present, most of Rolmund’s nobles were only thinking about what would happen after Dillier’s wedding.

“Do they all believe no one would dare assassinate the emperor or something?” Parker muttered, confused. We were holding a strategy meeting, so of course he was present, too.

Borsche turned to the skeleton and replied, “Of course they do. Even if Emperor Ashley is successfully assassinated, that won’t mean Dillier will immediately become empress. It’s a well-known fact that she lacks the ability to lead, so there’ll likely be another civil war.”

Eleora and her younger sister Sophie still had the right to inherit the throne, and there were quite a few other distant relatives of the emperor who technically were in the line of succession.

Borsche added, “Lord Bolshevik lacks the strength to prevent a civil war, or win one if he chooses to back Dillier. All of the nobles with land bordering him are his enemy. He knows better than anyone that assassinating the emperor would be an utterly foolish move.”

All the nobles in Rolmund knew this, so none of them thought Lord Bolshevik would risk assassinating the emperor. But Mao, who was checking over samples of ore he was planning to sell, muttered, “However, if you consider the fact that he’s a heretic, it doesn’t seem so foolish. After all, the emperor is a symbol of Sonnenlicht power.”

Natalia, who was the daughter of a Sonnenlicht bishop, frowned. “You...have a point.” I nibbled on a raisin and nodded in agreement.

“If you’re not part of the Sonnenlicht Order, you have no reason to care about what happens to the empire. In fact, you would want to spark a civil war in the hopes that it’d get so big the empire gets torn apart.”

A civil war between Sternenfeuer and Sonnenlicht followers would mean people wouldn’t listen to the mediating authority of the Sonnenlicht Order either. We needed to make sure we could end any potential civil war without a bloodbath before trying to challenge Lord Bolshevik. Otherwise, the war could potentially drag on for decades. Unfortunately, we had no idea what Lord Bolshevik’s next move might be, so all we could do was stay on our guard.

“Ryucco, how goes the Blast Rifle remodeling?”

“I finished doing all the werewolves’ guns. Here’s the report.”

Ryucco, who was eating a few raisins himself while sitting on Natalia’s lap, dumped a folder onto the table.

“I gave each rifle a serial number. You can find blueprints and manuals corresponding to each serial number in the report. Everything’s there. I made a copy of the whole thing to give to Jerrick too, so you better be grateful.”

“Yeah, thanks. That’ll be a huge help.”

“Heh, don’t mention it.” Ryucco grinned and scratched his ears. “But I didn’t think you’d ask me to upgrade the Rolmund soldiers’ Blast Canes too. You sure you want me to? It means we’ll be giving demon army tech to outsiders, you know?”

I shrugged and replied, “Might as well. They’re allies.”

The magic crests and circuits Ryucco used were more complicated than normal, and imbued with his specialty, spatial magic. It’d take another master of spatial magic to even analyze his upgrades. Eleora was a destruction mage, so she wouldn’t be able to do it. There were a surprising number of benefits to making specialized weapons that couldn’t be mass-produced.

We often held meetings like this so everyone could remain up to date on what everyone else was up to and what they’d discovered. Usually, we’d all eat dinner or have tea together once the meetings were over. As a result, all of Eleora’s trusted aides and all of my men had grown quite close to each other.

At first, I’d intended to keep these meetings brief, but everyone seemed to have so much fun talking that I let them drag on longer and longer. Of course, I *was* the Demon Lord’s vice-commander. When there was important work to be done, that took priority over chatting. In order to make sure Rolmund found the demon army indispensable, I first needed to make sure the empire didn’t get torn apart in a civil war.

For the moment, it appeared as though Lord Bolshevik was doing most of his plotting within the capital, so I had most of my werewolves keep an eye on the city.

“Find out anything new?” I asked Mary, who was disguised as a stall owner near Schwerin’s north gate. Technically Schwerin had multiple north gates, of which this was just one.

Mary smiled and replied, “Well, I’ve found out people really love bread. This stuff sells like crazy. Probably because it lasts a while, and it doesn’t need to be cooked to eat.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

I’d posted a number of my werewolves at various points around the northern perimeter of the city to keep tabs on everyone who came in and out of the capital from that direction. But Mary, who’d originally owned our village’s general store, had gotten really into her cover of being a bread seller and didn’t seem to be doing too much actual observation. Thanks to that, no one suspected her of being a spy, but that wouldn’t matter if she wasn’t doing her job. Fortunately, Monza, who was acting as Mary’s assistant, *was* doing her job.

“I heard that there’s a bunch of pilgrims coming from the north recently.”

“Who’d you hear that from?”

“One of the gate guards.”

In that case, I could trust that information. Pilgrims were welcome anywhere within the empire, and no one asked for their identification papers, so spies and bandits often posed as pilgrims to move around freely. Even the Hero Draught had posed as a pilgrim when he’d been gathering his followers to escape. Pilgrims were the classic disguise in Rolmund. Everyone knew that of course, but no gate guard could legally question them. Plus, since most travelers were pilgrims, it was unrealistic to screen them all anyway.

“Pilgrims, huh?”

I flung my cape back with a flourish and walked up to one of the guards lowering the portcullis. Schwerin, like every other city, closed its gates at sunset. The gate guards were surprised to see a foreign noble approaching them, but they had enough presence of mind to salute anyway.

“Y-You’re the lord of Crimson Snow Keep!”

That was the moniker my enemies had given me, though I didn’t really care what these guys called me. I gave the guards a small bow, then said, “Good work, men. Have you noticed anything strange here recently?”

“No, sir! There’s been no suspicious activity!”

They responded briskly, and in a way that made it clear they hadn’t been slacking on the job. Impressed, I took out a bottle of wine I’d bought off Mary’s stall earlier.

“The situation in the north is still volatile. I realize you all must be exhausted, keeping a constant eye out for danger. Take this as a token of my appreciation.”

“W-We couldn’t possibly accept such a gift...”

Like all loyal Rolmund soldiers, the guard I was talking to politely refused my gift, but it was obvious from the way he kept glancing at the wine bottle that he actually wanted it.

“Now that His Majesty Ashley has ascended the throne, the capital’s defense is more important than ever. This bottle of wine is a reward you’ve earned for keeping the city safe.”

“Yes, sir! In that case, I shall gratefully accept!”

He probably didn’t want to look impolite by refusing a foreign noble’s gift. Hesitantly, the guard took the bottle of wine. Once he’d accepted my gift I took another step forward and asked conversationally, “By the way, I’ve heard we’ve been getting a lot of pilgrims coming from the north recently.”

“Oh, yes. We have.”

The guard smiled cordially at me. I could tell from his body language that he was quite fond of alcohol.

“Would you happen to know why we’re getting so many pilgrims these days?” I asked.

“Yeah. They couldn’t travel during the rebellion, so everyone who wanted to make a pilgrimage is coming now. Besides, we always get most of our pilgrims right after the snow melts. It’s the best time to travel.”

I see. So it’s not necessarily unnatural. But just as I thought that the guard cocked his head and said, “Oh, but there is something strange about this year’s pilgrims...”

“And what’s that?”

“It’s not that suspicious or anything, I just thought it was strange. Normally, it’s our job to direct pilgrims to the inns run by the churches here, and whenever one of those inns gets full, the churches let us know.”

There were multiple church-run inns throughout the city, so it made sense to efficiently distribute pilgrims among them.

“But even though we’ve been getting a ton of pilgrims this year, there haven’t been too many inns filling up. Of course there’s plenty of pilgrims who stay with their relatives or at inns not run by the church, so that’s not too surprising.”

“I see.”

So there were a lot of pilgrims coming into the city, but they weren’t going to Sonnenlicht-run inns. That was only suspicious if you knew what I did. I chatted with the soldier for just a bit longer, then left. It wouldn’t do to get in the way of his work. When I returned to Mary’s stall, I found Mao talking to her with a bag of flour slung over his shoulder.

“Here’s the four bags of flour you ordered. Is that everything?”

“Yeah, thanks. Bread’s a hot commodity, and I sold out today too. I’ll need to bake extra for tomorrow.”

Mary was treating this like a real business, rather than just a cover. I really wanted to give her a stern warning to do her job properly. But while she was technically my subordinate, she’d taken care of me when I was a kid, so it was hard to give her orders. Besides, Monza was working here too. Though she looked bored as she managed the money, her eyes were darting back and forth, following the people passing in front of her. She was looking at them like a hunter stalking its prey.

After dropping off the last bag of flour, Mao walked over to me and whispered, “I looked over the records you asked me to. Lord Doneiks had indeed sent a shipment of weapons and armor to Lord Bolshevik some years past.”

“What kind of armor and weapons, and how much of each?”

“Steel helmets, bucklers, shortswords, boots, *etc.* Most of it was helmets, of which he gave twenty thousand.”

That sounded like a normal enough transaction. Lord Bolshevik had ordered a bunch of equipment for his pikemen from Lord Doneiks. It made sense that he'd prioritized helmets too. Since helmets not only protected a soldier's most vital body part, they also provided a sense of security for the wearer and made them look intimidating to their enemies.

The only thing abnormal about the record was the amount. Lord Bolshevik possessed only 6,000 pikemen. He had no need for 20,000 helmets, unless his soldiers all had three heads. But I didn't even know of any demons who were three-headed. It wasn't as if you needed a bunch of spare helmets either; they weren't the piece of equipment most likely to break. This was definitely worth investigating.

Rolmund might have been an expansive empire, but no single noble had an army numbering in the tens of thousands. Even Lord Kastoniev, the undisputed lord of East Rolmund, had only 3,000 troops. The fact that Lord Bolshevik had requested 20,000 helmets was clearly suspicious. He must have known that too, which was why he'd asked Lord Doneiks to procure them in secret.

I think I know what he's planning. He wasn't going to try and assassinate the emperor; he was going to stage a full-blown coup d'état. Lord Bolshevik was getting ready for an all-out war with the Sonnenlicht Order. The question was, where was he getting his soldiers from, and what was his strategy? I had a hunch I knew the answer to both, but I didn't have any definitive proof. Right now I needed to focus on gathering intel.

"Mao, we need to get back to Eleora's manor right now and get in touch with Bishop Zanawah as fast as possible."

"As you wish."

The situation was probably even worse than I thought. Mao and I hurried through the streets of Schwerin as night descended upon the capital.

The sun had fully set by the time we reached Eleora's mansion, and we lost no time in sending word to Zanawah. He must have deduced our business with him was top secret, since instead of inviting us over, he came to Eleora's manor himself. However, he brought along with him the keeper of rites, Cardinal

Kushmer. She was the same cardinal who'd presided over Ashley's coronation.

"I imagine you would have liked to meet with Cardinal Traja, but..." Cardinal Kushmer gave us an elegant smile and continued, "He unfortunately cannot leave the Wiron Library, so I am here in his place."

Eleora nodded and replied, "Lady Kushmer, as you are the cardinal in charge of the imperial family, this information concerns you as well. We would be glad to have your counsel."

Zanawah and I watched as the two women conversed. It was best to let the people in charge hash things out. Eleora explained to Cardinal Kushmer that Lord Bolshevik had likely snuck a large number of troops into the capital disguised as pilgrims. The cardinal didn't panic when she heard the information; she just nodded slowly.

"He is quite a handful, that Lord Bolshevik. To think he would attempt an all-out rebellion right after we decided to try and deescalate tensions."

Eleora sighed despondently and replied, "He's not satisfied with the status quo. Be careful, Lady Kushmer. As far as he's concerned, you and the other cardinals are his sworn enemy."

"I will be sure to take precautions." Cardinal Kushmer replied with a smile.

Do all the cardinals have balls of steel or something? I guess they'd have to, considering they were able to drink that crazy bitter juice.

The cardinal took a sip of hot water and said quietly, "Oh yes, there's something I need to inform you of. Lord Bolshevik and Princess Dillier's wedding has been postponed."

So she's the one Eleora asked to delay the wedding.

"We decided it would be prudent to move the date back, as all the nobles are currently busy overseeing their territories. When we told as much to Lord Bolshevik, he agreed without complaint."

I'd been planning to just remain an observer, but upon hearing that I leaned forward and asked, "Hang on, without complaint?"

"Yes. We made a few other requests as well, and he consented readily to all

of them... I must admit, it was a bit of a surprise.”

It seemed Cardinal Kushmer had also thought Lord Bolshevik would want to get married as fast as possible. I’d figured he would make his move during the wedding ceremony itself, so I was pretty surprised too.

“That’s strange... The longer he keeps his troops hidden here, the more likely it is they’ll be discovered. Not only that, but there’ll be problems with supply and morale if he waits too long. His actions keep contradicting each other,” Eleora muttered, lost in thought.

I nodded and replied, “I agree. At the very least, this means the troops he’s brought in aren’t for the wedding ceremony itself.”

There were a ton of possible plans he might have had for his army, but this crossed off at least a few. Eleora turned to me and said, “The essence of strategy is deceiving your opponent. Whoever does a better job of manipulating information and gets their opponent to make a mistake wins.”

As the famous Sun Tzu once said, “All warfare is deception.”

Eleora added, “But when your opponent knows you’re a veteran of warfare and knows every move they’re making, they can use that knowledge against you. I’m talking about you here, lord of Crimson Snow Keep.”

“Me!?”

“Obviously. Not only are you the strongest general in Rolmund, but you’re the one with the most expansive intelligence network.”

“You say that, but you know everyone thinks *you’re* the one responsible for all those victories, right?”

“Perhaps so, but I am simply borrowing your strength. Regardless, the point is Lord Bolshevik knows most of his plans have been leaked to us in some form or another. At least some of his plans hinge on us knowing others.”

I pondered Eleora’s words. *Does that mean he wants to distract us by making us pay too much attention to the date of the wedding?*

“I see. So he wants us to think he won’t act until the wedding, but in truth, his plans don’t depend on the ceremony at all?”

“Exactly. After all, no matter what plots he comes up with, his soldiers’ morale will still drop the more time passes. Moreover, he can’t keep them supplied forever. If he’s already had them infiltrate the capital, that means the clock’s ticking. Logistics dictate that he act soon.”

Cardinal Kushmer chuckled as she watched me and Eleora talk. “You claimed to only be strategic allies, but the two of you are quite close, aren’t you?”

Dammit, I let my guard down. I totally forgot to call Eleora by her title. As far as everyone in Rolmund was concerned, I was Eleora’s vassal. Cardinal Kushmer had been so unassuming that I’d totally forgotten she was here, too. I awkwardly cleared my throat and tried to come up with a plausible excuse.

“Oh, I just got so engrossed in our discussion that I forgot my place.”

“Is that really what’s going on here?” Cardinal Kushmer asked with a knowing smile. *Uhh, I hope you don’t think we’re secretly lovers or something.* However, the cardinal didn’t press the issue and instead turned to Eleora.

“I’ve already heard about Lord Veight’s true identity from Traja. It seems you had quite the unique experience in Meraldia.”

Eleora looked surprised for a second, but then she smiled wryly and said, “Indeed. But it was a good experience.”

Cardinal Kushmer scrutinized her expression. After a few seconds, the cardinal nodded.

“Have you heard the saying, ‘The hottest summers produce the sweetest grapes?’ It seems your talents ripened in the scorching heat of Meraldia. Having spoken with you, I now see that you have the qualities of a true leader. Know that I, Kushmer, will do my utmost to support you in all your endeavors, Princess Eleora.” Kushmer’s smile returned and she added, “Us members of the ceremonial rites bureau are the ones responsible for negotiating with the imperial family. As the Keeper of Rites, I am privy to all of Emperor Ashley’s movements. If anything happens to him, I shall let you know. It is my duty to keep the imperial family safe.”

“Thank you. I’m in your debt. If Ashley’s ever in danger, I’ll rush to his aid.”

Prince Ashley was the last remaining male member of the imperial line, so his

safety was of utmost importance.

“Good. I shall endeavor to make sure our current crisis is resolved quietly. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

Cardinal Kushmer got to her feet, then gave me and Eleora an amused look. She chuckled and said, “The Sonnenlicht Order is primarily concerned with ensuring bountiful harvests. There’s nothing in our tenets about whom the imperial family can and cannot marry.”

No really, we’re not like that. I didn’t know how to respond though, and it was all I could do to keep a straight face. Eleora, on the other hand, replied coolly, “He already has a fiancée back in Meraldia.”

“My, is that so? What a shame. I was hoping your marriage would help strengthen ties between Rolmund and Meraldia...” Cardinal Kushmer gave Eleora one last look. “Do you have the resolve necessary to become an usurper?”

Well, that was a sudden change of topic. She’s talking about stealing the throne, right? Eleora smiled calmly.

“If I cannot keep the ring off her finger, then the only way to prevent further chaos will be to take the crown.”

Yep, they’re talking about stealing the throne.

“Very well. I do not believe the situation is yet that dire, but if that changes, know that I will provide you my full support.”

The Sonnenlicht Order probably wanted to keep Ashley alive to avoid the chaos that would result from the last male heir of the Schwerin family dying. But not if it meant allowing a heretic religion to spread its influence over the entire empire. That was why if it came down to it, they’d back Eleora. At least, that was what I got out of their conversation.

After Cardinal Kushmer and Bishop Zanawah left, I glanced out the window. The north star seemed to be shining brighter than usual in the night sky. It felt like an omen, a sign that the key players would soon make their move.

I still had a mountain-load of things I needed to do, but summer was fast

approaching, and I had a promise to Airia that I needed to keep.

—Princess Dillier's Desire—

My younger brother—the new emperor—and I were in the midst of a fruitless conversation.

“Lord Shallier even agreed to postpone the wedding date. Surely my proposal is worth considering,” I said quietly.

“No matter how much I consider it, my decision won't change.”

Ashley's expression grew grim and he rubbed his forehead wearily. He'd inherited that tic from our father. Of course, I knew he'd never approve of my request. There was no way he'd allow Shallier to become regent. My brother was already an adult, and he'd had his coronation ceremony. He didn't need a regent. But even knowing all that, I still had to at least make my case.

“Right now you've lost your retainers' trust. Lord Shallier is the most influential man in North Rolmund now. I'm sure he'd be able to help.”

As expected, Ashley shook his head.

“Things aren't that simple, sister.”

Yes, I know. I might be a novice when it came to politics, but I at least knew what everyone in the palace had to say about Shallier.

“A coward and a traitor.” “The wily fox of North Rolmund.” “An irksome buffoon.” “A shameless opportunist.”

When I'd told as much to Shallier, he'd said “They are technically all correct,” with a smile, but there'd been a cold look in his eyes. It had been exactly like the look uncle used to give his political opponents. It was a look that said “you're not even worth my time.” *Really, you have to wonder who the real shameless opportunists are here.* It had been Eleora, someone who had absolutely no stake in that civil war, who'd put down the Doneiks rebellion. Her and that mysterious foreigner general, Lord Veight. All the nobles who claimed to support Ashley hadn't even lifted a finger to help him. *Are your swords just for show, you cowards?* The men of the Doneiks family had all been wise,

principled leaders. They, like Ashley and our late father, had disliked conflict and tried to lead Rolmund to prosperity. In fact, there shouldn't ever have been a civil war in the first place, but somehow things ended up this way. And in the end, the rebellion didn't even change anything. This stagnant, dismal empire remained the same as always... No, if anything, now it was in decline.

"Hey, Ashley."

"Yes?"

"Do you think father was happy?"

Ashley heaved a small sigh.

"That's a rather abrupt change of topic. I thought we were discussing Lord Bolshevik?"

"Were we?"

Our father dedicated his life to protecting the Schwerin dynasty for me and Ashley. I was sure there were other things he'd wanted to achieve during his reign, but thanks to the plot he and our uncle had cooked up, he had to pretend to be a useless emperor. I had no way of knowing how skilled a ruler he really was, but there was no way he was happy with what he'd accomplished during his lifetime. Meanwhile, I'd been forced to remain single so I could be married off for some political alliance or the other. Even though I would have been more than happy to marry a few of my suitors, my father had turned them all down.

I'd like three...no, four kids if possible. They'd probably be lonely if there were just two of them. I wish I could start a family already. However, whenever I thought about raising children, the story of Cold Micha always came to mind. That hateful fairy tale everyone in Rolmund heard growing up.

"Father suffered throughout his whole life. Now it's your turn to suffer, Ashley."

"I know, and I'm prepared."

"For the sake of the children you might have?"

"...Yes, I suppose so."

I could never accept that reasoning.

“This empire is nothing more than chains, chains made up of endurance and sacrifice.” I took a small silver chain out of my jewelry box. “Every one of these links represents a past emperor. All of them sacrificed their lives, believing that in doing so they were making the empire a better place for their children. But all they were doing was passing their burden down to their descendants.”

“That’s the only way this empire can survive...”

No, I refuse to accept that. I returned the chain to my jewelry box and looked down at my little brother.

“So you’ve just accepted that your children are going to bear the same burdens as you?”

“That’s the fate of those born into royalty, sister.”

“I see. I suppose you’re right, Ashley.”

I knew he’d never understand my point of view. It was a shame, but I’d expected this. After all, we were both adults now. I stopped speaking to the emperor as his sister, and addressed him instead as Lord Bolshevik’s pawn.

“But Your Majesty, I believe Lord Shallier will be able to break the empire free from these chains of suffering.”

“I doubt that very much...”

“Your doubt is understandable. I don’t expect you to believe me right away, but I think after the wedding ceremony I’ll be able to change your mind.”

My job was to make sure the nation’s eyes were focused on the wedding ceremony. That was the sole request Shallier had made of me. *Which is why I’ll gladly play the role of the jester, if that’s what it takes.* I was no good at politics or war, so I had to do at least this much. *How will history judge me, I wonder? Will they remember me as a pitiful princess who was manipulated by a crafty nobleman? Or as a selfish and shortsighted fool? Or a vixen who trapped her own brother? Let historians say what they will about me. All that matters is that right now, I’m having the time of my life.*

“Lord Shallier is not the kind of man you think he is,” I said. “If you would just permit an audience, you’d be able to see that for yourself.”

“This is a very delicate situation we’re in. I cannot be seen meeting him, at least not right now. It’s best for all parties if I keep my distance for the moment.”

Oh my, when did you learn to be so cautious, little brother? Of course, I’d expected that response. All that was left now was to watch as Shallier destroyed everything, myself included, to achieve his ambitions.

“Very well. If that is your decision, Your Majesty, I shall not press the issue any further... Good day.”

Grinning, I brought the conversation to a close. It was almost a new moon. The time of the month when the north star was at its brightest. A holy night. *It wouldn’t do if I forgot to offer the night sky my prayers, now would it?*

I was in the middle of cleaning up my room when I heard that Lord Bolshevik’s serfs had risen up in rebellion. I’d been borrowing this room in Eleora’s mansion for a while now, and it had gotten quite cluttered with official reports and letters and the like. I was the kind of person who couldn’t throw away any documents, no matter how unimportant they were, which was why I still had reports on Ryunheit’s drainage system filling my drawers. At any rate, when Borsche came to give his report, I stopped fishing through my filing cabinet and gave him my full attention.

“You’re absolutely certain this revolt was started by the serfs, Borsche?”

“Actually, it’s a bit more complicated than that.”

A frown flitted across Borsche’s lined face. The lands bordering Lord Bolshevik’s belonged to Lord Peiti, one of Eleora’s new supporters. Thanks to his outstanding service during the rebellion, he’d been granted part of the land that used to belong to Lord Doneiks. Though he had received military training like all nobles, his real contributions had been in managing Eleora’s supply lines. Traditionally people doing such mundane jobs weren’t rewarded with land, but Eleora and I had both agreed that people skilled at management should become the new landed nobles from among her supporters.

The other nobles neighboring Lord Bolshevik were also supporters of Eleora. The entire area was under her sphere of influence. While it was unclear who exactly had spearheaded this revolt and why, we knew for a fact that Peiti’s

lands were under attack.

“According to the letter Lord Peiti sent us, he’s certain it’s not his own serfs who’ve risen up in revolt.”

“Then it’s not a revolt, but an invasion by an unidentified force.”

“More or less.”

Holy crap, this is serious. Considering the timing, this was probably one of Lord Bolshevik’s schemes. I held an emergency meeting with Eleora, then sent my werewolves out to scout to the north. The report I received from them two days later came as a complete shock.

“The serfs besieging Peiti’s lands are all from Lord Bolshevik’s territory, but they’re as well-trained as the regular army,” Hamaam said matter-of-factly.

“Most of the serfs in this country are untrained farmers, but this lot’s different.” Vodd, who’d gone with Hamaam, rubbed his forehead wearily and gave me a bitter smile. “They know how to use their weapons and march in formation. Most importantly, they don’t run at the first sign of trouble. These guys are no pushovers.”

Within Rolmund, the Sonnenlicht Order forbade nobles from giving their serfs military training. But since Lord Bolshevik was a heretic, he had no reason to abide by the Order’s demands. His religion and culture were different from the rest of Rolmund, so it stood to reason his outlook on war was too. I turned to Eleora, who replied immediately.

“This is just a diversion.” She unfurled a map and pointed to where Peiti’s lands were. “I’m gathering soldiers to send to Lord Peiti’s aid, but in order to reach him, they’ll have to pass through Bolshevik territory.”

Lord Bolshevik controlled all of the major highways going in and out of North Rolmund. If an army wanted to march into North Rolmund, they needed to pass through his checkpoints.

Eleora added, “Furthermore, from the outside it looks like a revolt’s broken out in one of the old Doneiks territories where I assigned one of my new supporters. This is completely different from the civil war the Doneiks family started. Technically, this is something that should be dealt with by the noble in

charge of those lands.”

Of course, the real situation was nothing like that, but we had no way of proving those serfs belonged to Lord Bolshevik. Meaning we couldn’t count on the support of the imperial army, or any of the other nobles’ personal forces.

“Lord Bolshevik knows I’m not keeping too many troops at the capital, and this is a plot to lure them all away from my side.”

The fewer soldiers Eleora kept stationed at the capital, the easier it would be for Lord Bolshevik to make his move. However, we couldn’t just sit here and let Peiti get slaughtered either. He’d been promoted to just a minor lord, with a domain of only a few villages. His personal army consisted of a few dozen men. Eleora showed me the letter she’d received from Ser—now Lord—Lekomya.

“Lekomya said he’ll ride out to Peiti’s aid, but he doesn’t have many troops either, and farming villages aren’t fortresses. He’ll have to fight on the open plains, meaning he’ll need troops.”

“So even if it is a trap, you have no choice but to do what he wants?”

“Precisely. As much as it pains me to do what our enemy wants, I have to send my troops.”

Eleora would never abandon her subordinates. Lord Bolshevik knew that, and he’d taken advantage of her kindness.

I took a few minutes to consider our options. I had with me my 56 werewolves who’d been transformed into a special Jaeger unit, as well as Parker. That was enough people to keep Eleora safe from any potential threat, but if we were all focused on protecting her, we’d be leaving the palace defenseless. *Wait, I’ve got it. If the problem is protecting Eleora, why not just get her out of here?*

“Eleora, what if you went with your troops to North Rolmund?”

“You want me to take command?” For a moment Eleora looked surprised, but then she nodded in understanding. “I see. If I’m not here, you’ll be free to move as you please. Not only that, Lord Bolshevik will think this is his chance.”

“Exactly.”

If Eleora left the capital, I'd be the only one left standing in his way. Of course, Lord Bolshevik would probably prefer if I wasn't around either. As I was thinking that, I absently stuck my hand into my pocket. I found a folded piece of paper in there and pulled it out. *Ah, this is the report on how the renovations to Ryunheit's sewage system are going.* I skimmed over the canines' loopy, cursive-esque handwriting. As I read over the report, an idea suddenly came to me. *What if I left the capital too, leaving Lord Bolshevik to do whatever he wants unopposed?*

"While we're at it. I'll take my werewolves out of the capital too."

"What, why?"

Eleora gave me a puzzled look, and I smiled.

"Oh I just thought of something, is all." I looked back down at the report, my smile growing wider.

Canines always came in handy at unexpected times. I tasked Skuje's unit with guarding Eleora during her campaign.

"Listen up, you guys have to pretend to be Eleora's attendants."

The brothers, all in their teens, looked unhappily at me.

"Huh, how come? I don't wanna!"

"I don't care if they're your orders, Veight...I'm scared of that lady..."

You hear that, Eleora? Even werewolves are scared of you. Eleora, who'd been discussing something with Borsche, walked over when she heard Skuje's reply. The four brothers shivered.

"Skuje, the scary lady's here! Do something!"

"What do you want me to do!? I'm scared too!"

Eleora smiled benignly at the children and beckoned for them to come closer.

"There's no need to be scared. Look, I'll even give you candy." Eleora grabbed a bottle full of candies from a nearby shelf and poured four out on a porcelain plate. "There, one candy for each person."

"Th-Thanks."

Skuje was still suspicious that Eleora was plotting something. Of course, I'd already figured out what she was doing here, so I just leaned back against the wall and grinned.

"But since I'm a scary lady, I'm going to take one for myself."

Eleora plopped one of the candies into her mouth.

"Ah!?"

"You really ate it!?"

Eleora made an audible swallowing noise. She then held the plate up and covered it with a handkerchief. After making a quick gesture of prayer, Eleora solemnly lifted the handkerchief off the plate.

"Whaaa!?"

"How!?"

Skuje and his brothers stared at the plate. Somehow, there were four candies on the plate again.

"There's four again! How'd you do that!?"

"Did you take it out of your stomach!?"

Of course not. None of the four candies had saliva on them.

Eleora gave the boys a small grin. "Would you like to know how I did that?"

"Yeah!"

"Teach us!"

"Was it magic!? It was magic, right!?"

Eleora's grin turned mischievous. "I could tell you, but you all say I'm a scary lady, so..."

Skuje and his brothers quickly held up their hands in denial.

"You're not scary at all!"

"Yeah, you're nice!"

"And pretty!"

“You’ll still give us candy after you tell us, right!?”

Now you guys are acting like canines. Eleora handed them each a candy and said, “That was just sleight of hand. I didn’t even need to use magic.”

“I don’t get it.”

Skuje cocked his head as he munched on his candy. His younger brothers all had similar expressions. Smiling, Eleora handed the bottle of candy to the kids.

“I’ll give you this bottle to play with on the way to Peiti’s domain. If you manage to figure out how I did it, I’ll give you another bottle.”

“Really!?”

The brothers smiled giddily at each other, then started debating over what the right way to sneak candies out of the bottle was. After making sure they weren’t looking this way, I exchanged glances with Eleora. I took my own handkerchief out of my pocket and waved it in her direction. The handkerchief was the key to this trick. Eleora had placed an extra candy in her handkerchief beforehand, then transferred it to the plate.

Seeing that I’d figured it out, Eleora silently stuck her tongue out at me. There was still a half-melted candy in her mouth. *I really didn’t need to see that.* Her mouth still open, Eleora smiled at me. It was a bit surprising how...different she was from when I’d first met her in Meraldia. I much preferred the way she was now, though. Her current personality was more fit for ruling, too.

I smiled back at her and said, “Skuje’s squad has met the werewolves working for Lord Bolshevik before. I’ve already spoken with their leader, Volka. As long as they’re with you, she won’t harm you guys. Though I’ll give you three more squads just in case.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

Right now, the most damaging thing Lord Bolshevik could do to us was have Volka’s clan assassinate Eleora. I doubted Volka would agree to a request like that since she probably wanted to keep the possibility of allying with Eleora open, but it never hurt to be cautious. All that was left now was to ask Parker and Ryucco to do a rather irksome job for me. *Oh yeah. There’s one other thing I should warn her about.*

“Please don’t give them too much candy, Eleora. Sugar’s expensive in Meraldia, and if they get hooked I don’t know how I’ll get more for them.”

“Alright, alright. What are you, their dad?”

I’m their leader, which is basically the same thing.

In response to the revolt within Lord Peiti’s lands, Eleora dispatched her own troops to suppress the conflict. She created a joint army with her uncle Lord Kastoniev, and marched north toward Creech Castle. Meanwhile, all the surrounding nobles belonging to Eleora’s faction started gathering their own troops. Together, they managed to raise a force of 1,000 to send to Lord Peiti’s aid. At least, that was what it looked like on the surface.

“We’ve just got a measly four thousand this time?”

“You sure we’re going to be okay?”

My werewolves gave me worried looks. I turned to them and said, “The only large standing army within the empire is the imperial army, but Ashley didn’t order his troops to march, so this is the best we can do.”

“That damn emperor betrayed us!”

I smiled sadly.

“Ashley can’t afford to move the imperial army for every little revolt that happens within the empire. We’ll have to resolve this using only the soldiers Eleora’s faction can mobilize at a moment’s notice. Most of the troops we used before were overseers and serfs who live in different villages, and they take time to call upon.”

As it was, Eleora sent out practically every soldier she had. None of her troops were left in the capital. Still, Lord Bolshevik’s army consisted of 20,000 trained serfs. There was at least no doubt that they were serfs though. Using them was the only way Lord Bolshevik could have gathered that many healthy young men of fighting age in such a short time. Even if he’d wanted to hire mercenaries instead, the total number of freelance mercenaries within Rolmund didn’t come close to 20,000. Besides, most mercenary companies had long-standing contracts with other nobles already.

“The fact that he’s trained his serfs is at least concrete evidence that he’s a heretic,” Eleora said with a grim smile from atop her horse. “Furthermore, there’s a fatal flaw associated with using all your serfs as soldiers. Do you know what that is, Veight?”

I’d seen what Rolmund’s serfs looked like firsthand, so I knew right away what Eleora was hinting at.

“Just like with their farmwork, they have no personal stake in the outcome.”

Serfs were treated like livestock by their feudal lords. They were given the bare minimum amount of food, shelter, and clothing, but nothing else. No matter how well they performed, there was no chance of them moving into a higher social class. Since they had no incentive to risk their lives, their morale would naturally be low. Of course, I was certain Lord Bolshevik had taken steps to mitigate those drawbacks, but he wasn’t like the other nobles who could give pretty, rousing speeches to lift morale.

“Precisely.” Eleora nodded to me. “They’re nothing more than servants who follow orders. Nobles have plenty of things they value higher than their life like honor and so on, but for serfs, there’s nothing more important than their lives and the lives of their families.”

“Nobles and career soldiers stand to lose a lot in a war so they’ll fight to the end, but serfs definitely won’t.”

Nobles especially valued their honor and their territory more than their lives. Their land was their livelihood, the basis of their wealth, and their honor was what determined their standing among their peers and business partners. Lose either, and a noble’s entire family line was doomed to fall into ruin. As I pondered that, a thought suddenly came to me.

“But if those serfs stood to lose something too, they’d fight with the same level of desperation, wouldn’t they?”

That caught Eleora’s interest.

“Hmm, elaborate.”

“Humans are greedy creatures. Even if they didn’t particularly want something, once they have it they’re loathe to part with it. If you happened to

find a silver coin on the road, then accidentally drop that coin later, the loss will sting even though it's a net change of zero."

I was reminded of how back in Japan, I'd gotten a coupon for free ramen, but then forgot to use it before the expiration date. Even though the coupon hadn't cost me anything, passing up the chance to use it had left me with a deep sense of loss. *Man, remembering that story made me hungry for ramen. Whatever, let's get back on topic.*

"For example, all you'd have to do is give your serfs a small measure of freedom and some basic rights. Then tell them that unless they fight with all their might that you'll take those privileges away."

"I see. I thought you would come up with a more humane example, but I suppose you are a villain."

"It's especially heartening to hear that from you."

"What's that supposed to mean..."

Don't worry about it. Eleora lapsed into thought for a few seconds, then nodded at me.

"I'll keep what you said about incentives in mind. It'd be dangerous to manipulate the current class system too much, but a few carefully chosen liberties might motivate serfs to take their farming more seriously at least."

"I hope it works out for you."

Class systems were delicate things, and this was as much meddling as an outsider like me should be doing. Hopefully once Eleora became empress, she'd slowly reform the empire into something less oppressive. Meraldia had no system of slavery, since the Senate had been firmly against instituting one. Despite their corruption, they'd cracked down hard on the illegal slave trade. Considering they were the descendants of escaped slaves, their zeal made sense. I'd hated the Meraldian Senate, but I'd at least respected their attitude toward slavery. Doing what I could to reform Rolmund's slave system was my way of honoring their memory. *Rest in peace, you old bastards.*

Our joint army moved northward without incident. However, I occasionally

caught sight of cloaked figures tailing us through the forest. I heard howling from time to time too, so I figured the people tailing us were Volka's clan. I didn't know if they were just here to keep an eye on us, or if they were planning on assassinating someone, but either way, they kept their distance. Honestly, I was glad for that. Fighting Volka's clan wouldn't be fun.

Even after reaching Creech Castle, we had no time to rest. Eleora spent a day reorganizing and outfitting her soldiers, then we were off again.

"Make sure you're a convincing double."

"Leave it to me."

I gave one of my werewolves my coat and armor to disguise him as myself. After that, I took the rest of my werewolves and looked for an opportunity to sneak back to the capital.

"Take care of things back at the capital for me, Veight."

"Mhm. You be careful too, Eleora. The enemy might have more troops hiding somewhere. You better not die on me."

Eleora and I exchanged one last glance, then turned away from each other. With how volatile the situation was in North Rolmund, I was worried about leaving her alone. But there was nothing I could do. Whether or not Eleora picked up on my worries, she showed no outward hesitation. She turned to her soldiers and shouted, "We go to defend our allies in North Rolmund! Don't think our enemies are mere serfs! Underestimate them at your own peril!"

With four werewolf squads as her personal guard, Eleora headed to Lord Peiti's territory. I had 10 squads left with me, a total of 40 werewolves, as well as my two fellow disciples.

Ryucco and Parker exchanged glances.

"Oi, are we seriously gonna do this!?" Ryucco moaned.

"For the record, I am still very against this plan," Parker muttered.

I gave the two mages a reassuring smile and said, "There are other ways of making this work, but this is the one that'll have the least casualties. So please do this for me."

The two of them fell silent.

“What now, Parker? He’s begging.”

“I never could turn down one of Veight’s requests...”

“You too, huh?”

“Indeed.”

Oh good, they’ll do it. I knew I could trust my fellow disciples.

Some days after Eleora’s departure to the northern front, a rather unexpected development occurred. I was lost in thought when Monza suddenly ran up to me.

“Boss, that lord whoever’s younger brother’s here.”

“You mean Lord Bolshevik’s younger brother, Jovtzia?”

“Yeah, him. Bols... bos...whoever’s brother Jo... Ji... Whatever. He’s showed up with just a few guards.”

What’s going on here? Since everyone was supposed to believe I was by Eleora’s side, I couldn’t meet him personally. So I sent a disguised Parker to see what he wanted. When he came back, Parker was smiling.

“He had a fight with his older brother. He said he’s done working for Lord Bolshevik and that he’s going to help Eleora suppress the revolt.”

Parker went on to say that Jovtzia had confirmed Lord Bolshevik was indeed behind the revolt. His plan was to make her think it was just a small-scale skirmish involving only serfs, then hit her with his main army. He was hoping to crush her with the might of his 20,000 soldiers. If he could defeat Eleora, the hero of the Doneiks rebellion, he’d be able to strike fear in the hearts of the other nobles. With the rest of the empire paralyzed, he’d have the perfect opportunity to strike at the capital, especially since Dillier was leaking all of Ashley’s movements to him. Jovtzia believed he was planning on using Dillier to seize the throne.

However, I shook my head. “No, that’s probably just another diversion. I doubt those are his real intentions.”

Lord Bolshevik was a cautious man. There was no way he thought he could take Eleora down that easily. Even if he brought 20,000 soldiers to bear against her, she'd be able to retreat to Creech Castle and prepare for a counterattack. Given enough time, she could raise tens of thousands of soldiers from East Rolmund. Twenty thousand serfs wouldn't stand a chance against her full army.

My guess was that Lord Bolshevik was thinking if he was lucky, his army would make it all the way to the capital, but he wasn't banking on it. After all, he'd already had a bunch of his troops infiltrate the capital. It'd be much faster for them to topple Schwerin from the inside.

"Suppose he fed Jovtzia incomplete information, then purposely drove him off. He knew his brother would go to Eleora, not Ashley. After all, our esteemed emperor lacks the strength to fight anyone right now."

Parker nodded along to my explanation.

"I see. So the plan Jovtzia has leaked to us is just a distraction meant to deceive us. And this way, Jovtzia will be lured away from the capital, where the real danger is. Hahaha, Lord Bolshevik really is an exemplary older brother."

"Are you serious?"

Please don't use him as a role model. But even if the plan Jovtzia had leaked wasn't Lord Bolshevik's real plan, I had no doubt he really did intend to either kill or capture Ashley. While there were still a few details missing, Lord Bolshevik was clearly aiming for a coup d'état. I couldn't afford to leave Schwerin empty.

"Parker, I need to go back to the capital. Can you come with me?"

"Sure, I can. But doesn't Eleora need assistance?"

"There's only us and my werewolves here. We don't have enough troops to make a difference even if we did ride to Eleora's aid. Besides, she's got four thousand troops. She'll be fine."

I had Parker tell Jovtzia to remain here on standby for now. I wouldn't be able to face Woroy if I let him die here. At any rate, now that we knew where Jovtzia was, I could begin my plan in earnest.

Now that Jovtzia was refusing to help his brother, Lord Bolshevik didn't have much time left, especially since Jovtzia had already changed sides and joined Eleora. Lord Bolshevik would be springing whatever plot he'd been cooking up in the next few days. Or perhaps he already had, and the capital was in more trouble than I thought. That was why I needed to hurry back as fast as possible.

Fortunately, none of Lord Bolshevik's soldiers were in the vicinity of Creech Castle. Volka's clan had followed after Eleora's army, so they weren't here either. At the very least, I didn't spot any werewolves anywhere. But I knew how cunning Lord Bolshevik could be. He'd probably left at least a few people behind to keep an eye on the castle, so I couldn't run back to the capital just like that. I'd need a disguise of some sort.

I started by having a few of my werewolves disguise themselves as Rolmund commoners. They'd play the part of off-duty soldiers heading to the capital to enjoy a weekend of leisure. Ideally, I'd prefer to disguise them as merchants or pilgrims, but it'd be suspicious if a large party of pilgrims suddenly swarmed out of the castle—especially since no one had seen a big group enter the castle. Anyone keeping watch would know they were disguised soldiers. That wasn't the only problem I faced either.

"We can disguise our appearances, but the moment we talk our Meraldian accents will give us away. Don't stop at any shops or inns on the way to the capital."

The only people here who'd perfected a Rolmundian accent were me and Parker. I knew we'd be discovered eventually, but I wanted to keep our return a secret, at least until we reached the capital. The other major problem was how to sneak my fellow disciples into the city. Parker could disguise himself as a human using illusion magic, but his disguise was far too flamboyant for a covert operation. Anyone who saw him would remember his appearance. Meanwhile Ryucco was a lagomorph, so there was no disguising him. Unfortunately, I had no choice but to stow both of them away with the luggage.

"I didn't think you'd actually stuff me in a wooden crate," Parker grumbled, referring to the joke I made when we left Meraldia. Since he was an immortal skeleton, I didn't have to worry about giving him breathing room or how comfortable he was or anything.

“If you can disguise yourself as someone less conspicuous I’ll let you out of the box.”

“The most I can do with my current level of illusion magic is recreate my face from when I was alive. It’s too difficult to mimic other people’s expressions.”

Then I guess it’s the box for you. Meanwhile Ryucco was small enough that he could fit comfortably inside one of the larger crates. He lay casually atop the stack of carrots filling the box and gave me a worried look.

“Hey, Veight? What about you? How are you gonna disguise yourself?”

Heh, I’m glad you asked.

“I thought a situation like this might come up, so I learned some new strengthening magic. Hang on, I’ll show you what this spell does.”

I double-checked the incantation in my spellbook, then started focusing my mana.

“Eety...Biu...Orde...”

This was a new spell for me, so I needed to be careful I got everything right.

“Alright, how do I look?”

Once I finished chanting the spell, everyone’s jaws dropped open.

“Hey boss, you sure aged while I wasn’t looking.”

“Man you’re a real geezer now.”

“Heh, you look just like your granddad used to when he was young, Veight!”

Judging by what my werewolves were saying, the spell was a success. I took out a mirror and examined my reflection. As expected, the face of a handsome, 50-year-old man stared back at me. *Very nice.*

“There’s aging spells associated with strengthening magic, and I applied one of them to my face.”

“Hey, uhh, boss? Can you turn yourself back to normal, or are you gonna be stuck like this forever?” Monza gave me a worried look.

“It’s fine, the disguise’ll go away the moment I transform into a werewolf. It

won't come back when I transform back into a human or anything either."

Compared to a werewolf's transformation, my metamorphosis couldn't even be considered a parlor trick.

"What a relief..."

"Do I really look that bad?"

"I think you look quite handsome, personally," Fahn said, grinning, as she looked me up and down. "Yeah, you've got that hardened veteran look to you. I bet this'd be a hit with the ladies."

"You think so?"

Personally, I thought this face looked cooler than my real one too. I was looking forward to growing older now. At any rate, now that I looked like a middle-aged dandy, no one would know who I was. Aging myself changed my body odor too, so I'd be able to deceive other werewolves as well.

"Alright, guys, don't forget we're supposed to be soldiers on leave going to the capital for a fun time. No need to rush; act casual."

"You got it, boss!"

"We'll laze about with all our might!"

They sure are getting into this. I changed into my casual wear and walked out of Creech Castle's gates. A good deal of the lake's ice had melted, and now you needed a boat to cross to the far shore. Because of how involved entering or leaving the castle was, it wasn't very suited to covert ops. It was a good reminder that what worked for sieges didn't work for subterfuge.

As expected, we passed by a lot of very suspicious-looking pilgrims and merchants on the road. Since we were in disguise ourselves, we couldn't do anything to hinder them, even though I really wanted to capture a few and interrogate them. Fortunately, the people leaving the capital were more than willing to provide me with information. The first person I talked to was a farmer on his way home. According to him, the capital had closed its gates. He'd gone there to sell his surplus vegetables only to find the guards weren't letting

anyone in. I talked to other pilgrims and merchants who were leaving the capital, and they all corroborated his story. Most of them had reached the capital yesterday afternoon, meaning this news was at least a day old. Now that Lord Bolshevik had made his move, this had become a race against time.

“Duras, you and your squad report this information to Eleora. Hamaam, Vodd, Monza, take your squads and watch over the capital. Let me know if there’s any military movement going on inside. Jerrick, your squad’s with me. Everyone else, head for the rendezvous point.”

Hamaam and the others nodded.

“Understood, Vice-Commander. What are you going to do?”

“Parker, Ryucco, and I are going to sneak into the capital.”

“You’re planning on charging in alone again!?”

Now even the Garney brothers were complaining about my tendency to tackle problems alone. Feeling a bit mischievous, I turned to the elder Garney brother and said, “If you’re that worried, you wanna come with me?”

“You bet I do!”

“Oh, I wanna come too!”

The younger Garney brother stepped forward.

“You’re gonna regret signing up for this.”

I gave the two brothers a wicked grin.

The biggest problem a densely populated fortress city faced was dealing with its waste. In a small farming village, you could just bury what little sewage there was out in the fields as compost or send it down a nearby river, but the imperial capital was far too dense for that to work. It had more than 70,000 people living in a relatively small area. The only way to handle that much waste was to build a sewage system, and so Schwerin had one.

People never went through it, so there was no security posted at its entrances and exits. It was actually a pretty big blind spot if you thought about it, but even I’d forgotten about the fact that large cities needed sewage systems until I’d read the canines’ report.

“Holy heck, this stinks!” The younger Garney brother exclaimed. Werewolf noses were extremely sensitive to the scents made by humans. Sadly, that also included their excrement. Centuries ago, our ancestors tracked people by the scent of their feces, but right now that evolutionary trait was backfiring on us hard.

“Yeah, I did warn you,” I muttered quietly.

“God it stinks...” The older Garney brother grumbled, agreeing with his younger brother. I’d brought the Garney brothers and Jerrick’s squad with me as my guards, as well as Ryucco and Parker.

We were currently walking through the sewers; the stench of foul waste filled our nostrils as we walked through the man-made cavern. Thankfully, there was a maintenance walkway so we didn’t have to wade through the filth, just smell it.

Schwerin’s sewers stretched all the way to a nearby river, and the entrance there had been completely unguarded. However, even if someone had bothered posting guards at the sewer exits, they were so far away from the city that it’d be easy for an enemy to surround and overpower the guards.

“Hey boss, isn’t this a bit reckless? We got in, but are you sure we can get out into the capital just like that?” Jerrick asked from behind me, his toolbox jangling in his hands. I turned around and nodded to him.

“Yeah, the people who built the capital realized someone might try to sneak in through the sewers. So all the exits to the surface are too small for humans to fit through.”

It made going into the sewers for maintenance more of a pain, but it was a small price to pay for safety. They’d made the right call too, since we were trying to sneak in through the sewers right now. I looked down at the map of the sewers I’d gotten from Eleora, then glanced up at the ceiling.

“We’re here. Look at that.”

There was a small hole high up in the wall where I was pointing.

“Oi, Veight, that’s way too small, isn’t it?”

The elder Garney brother cocked his head. The opening was indeed too small to fit a normal-sized adult. But it was the perfect size for a slightly large rabbit.

“You’re up, Ryucco.”

The lagomorphus artificer scratched his head. “Fine fine, I’ll do it. You’re *absolutely* sure this is a ventilation shaft, right?”

“That’s what the map says. Besides, you don’t see any crap spilling out of it, do you?”

“No, but...”

Trust me, I know how you feel. Sighing, Ryucco took out his magic sack that could hold way more than its size suggested.

“Alright Parker, hop in.”

“Yeesh. Your fellow disciple sure makes some outrageous requests from us, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, don’t get me started. He asks for way crazier shit than this.”

They’re totally referring to me, aren’t they? Parker stepped into the enchanted knapsack, then waved a bony hand at Ryucco.

“It appears I fit quite nicely. I’ll be going inside then.”

There was no guarantee humans or demons could survive inside the warped space of Ryucco’s sack. Considering it preserved vegetables long past when they should have gone bad, I assumed there was something weird going on in there. However, Parker was well and truly immortal, so he should be just fine in there. Theoretically, anyway.

“Okay, Parker. Cast that spell once you make it to the surface.”

“You can count on me, Veight. As promised, I’ll plunge the capital into a panic. Oooh, my heart’s beating faster just thinking about it. Not that I have a heart anymore!”

Parker was making those godawful jokes again, but considering I was asking him to do the impossible, I decided to let him have this one.

“If things don’t work out, don’t try anything reckless. Just come back here.

Master'll have my head if I don't bring you two back to Meraldia safe and sound."

"Fear not. Oh, but if I do perish in battle, please at least collect my bones."

"There isn't anything else left of you to collect!"

There, I played along for one joke. Now get going. Ryucco shouldered his knapsack, which now contained Parker, and clambered into the ventilation shaft.

"You know, normally I like small spaces. But I'm never ever doing crap like this again, alright?"

"Sorry, Ryucco. Back Parker up for me. And if it comes down to it, help him escape."

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry. You better have a bath waiting for me when I get back, though."

As you wish.

—Ryucco and Parker's Secret Plan—

I turn to my knapsack as I'm crawling through the sewer's ventilation shaft.

"You alive in there, Parker?"

A cheery, somewhat muffled voice responds, "I haven't been alive for a very long time!"

"So when all's said and done, are you actually alive or dead?"

"I'm not quite sure myself."

Guess it doesn't really matter. The ventilation shaft's too small for humans, but it's the perfect size for me. I'm a big fan of holes. They're calming. Though this one stinks.

"Come to think of it, why do they have ventilation shafts leading to the surface? Won't that make the city smell like sewer?" Parker asks curiously.

"Stuff that smells like shit catches fire easily. And as is, it burns especially well."

As someone who deals with fire on a regular basis, I gotta know all this for safety reasons. I explain a bit more to Parker while I climb up the ventilation shaft.

“I heard from Veight that there was some imbecile in a city somewhere who threw a lit cigar into the sewers, and the whole damn sewer burned down. People put in ventilation shafts to make sure idiots don’t blow it to smithereens.”

“A burning sewer. Now that’s something I’d want to see.”

Telling Parker that story suddenly reminds me of something. “Though Veight never did tell me what city that accident happened in. Far as I can tell, it can’t have been any of the Meraldian ones.”

“Isn’t that because he knew you would try that experiment for yourself if he told you where it was?”

Can’t deny that. I mean, just think of all the ways you could weaponize it.

I reach the ventilation shaft’s exit while we’re talking, and pop out of the tiny smokestack jutting out of the ground and into the city.

“Seriously, we’re all the way out here?”

I’m standing in the middle of a wide square near the city’s walls. This is one of the guards’ parade grounds. The sun’s long since set, so there’s no one else here. I flip my knapsack upside down and shake the contents out.

“Owww... Well, I can’t actually feel pain, I suppose.”

Parker’s bones spill across the cobbled floor. It sure is convenient how they all properly rearrange themselves no matter how much you jumble ’em up.

“Why is it that neither you nor Veight seem to show any respect for your senior disciple?”

“Please, like you actually care about crap like that.”

“Yep, I don’t,” Parker replies with a chuckle, his bony jaws clacking together. “At any rate, it seems we lucked out since there’s no one nearby,” he adds.

“Makes sense. Can’t imagine anyone’d wanna live some place that literally smells like shit.”

Parker’s expression grows serious and he says, “Well then, I suppose I can afford to go all out. Allow me to show you the secret technique I developed together with Master.”

“Alright, let’s see what you’ve got.”

I bet you’re just gonna summon a bunch of undead, right? As predicted, Parker starts summoning a bunch of skeletons.

“Arise from the dark Gates of Gevina, my sworn friends.”

Though it does feel a little different from usual.

“Hey is it just me, or are today’s skeletons fancier than usual?”

They’re wearing tattered robes and have crowns and stuff on their heads. Wait, hang on, these guys look kinda familiar.

“Holy shit, are these guys all necromancers?”

“Yep, that’s right.” Parker turns toward me while he’s counting up his new army of a few hundred skeletons. “I can summon deceased spirits immediately, but with my mana, a few hundred skeletons is the limit of what I can call forth at once.”

“That’s already a ton.”

Plus, no other necromancer can summon up undead spirits immediately.

“But if I make the undead spirits I’ve summoned call up more undead on their own, I’m no longer limited by my mana capacity,” Parker makes a few hand signs as he responds to me. “Begin the ritual, my sworn friends. Show me the skills you so fiercely polished in life.”

Parker swings his arm down and the skeletal necromancers start chanting in a low hum while making a couple of complicated hand gestures. *Are you seriously telling me these guys can use necromancy even though they’re dead?* A few seconds later, the air around us starts to warp, and even more skeleton soldiers pop up out of the ground. They’re all wearing super old armor from like a dozen eras ago.

“Hang on, these guys can summon skeletons instantly too!?”

“They are ancient masters of our craft, after all. Starting from the far left, that’s the Burial Lord, Vicrea. Then there’s the Master of Spirits, Kilgol, and next to him is the Miasma Emperor, Pededotok. Over there you’ve got the Bone King, Gusforitus, and...”

“Those are all famous necromancers we read about in Master’s books! And all crazy ones too! Are you trying to tell me all those necromancers you summoned are famous dead people!?”

“It took a lot of effort to persuade all of them to listen to me.”

Forget persuading ’em, normally you wouldn’t even be able to summon these guys! I stare at the ranks of undead dead guy summoners in absolute disbelief. They’re still summoning even more skeleton soldiers. It’s completely insane. There’s so many of them that they don’t all fit in the square, and they start spilling out into the main street. A few minutes later, I hear people screaming in panic. Hell, I’d be panicking too if I suddenly saw an army of undead skeletons show up in the middle of my city.

“You’ve already got thousands of skeletons here, and you’re still going!?”

“Well, I’d like to have around ten thousand or so.”

“You’re gonna turn the capital into a boneyard.”

Parker shrugs his shoulders and says, “Veight wanted me to plunge the capital into chaos. In order to do that, I’m going to need a lot more skeletons.”

“Oi.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve ordered them all not to attack.”

“That’s not the problem here!”

Dammit, if I don’t keep an eye on this guy he might create a disaster. I pull the custom Blast Rifle I made for myself out of my bag and flick off the safety.

“Are you *sure* those boneheads are gonna listen to you?”

“Of course. I’ve already shown them the difference in our power.”

What the hell did you show them?

“Oh, but they’re not exactly under my control. I’ve summoned them as friends, not servants. It took a lot of effort to convince everyone too, so this isn’t the sort of spell I can cast often.”

Good, cause I don’t wanna see them often either, or ever again, really. I can hear people panicking in the distance now. Looks like the giant army of skeletons got their attention. Still, Parker doesn’t look worried at all.

“Division one, cause a diversion at the north gate. Division two, surround the palace. Division three, capture the south gate. Divisions four and five, disperse among the streets and sow as much confusion as possible. Dismissed!”

When did you get so good at commanding armies? Were you a noble or a general or something back when you were alive?

“Now then, let’s head to the south gate ourselves, shall we? Opening the gates from the inside should be a piece of cake.”

“I mean, yeah, but...”

I can’t believe he pulled all those skeletons outta nowhere. And if *I’m* shocked, imagine what the residents are thinking.

“Hey, Parker. Did Veight really approve a crazy plan like this?”

“Of course. Though he made it very clear that I wasn’t to harm any civilians or soldiers, regardless of whose side they’re on.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him.”

I grin, and Parker grins back.

“Besides, I have no way of knowing which soldiers are working for Lord Bolshevik and which aren’t. If I let the skeletons attack, they might end up killing innocent city guards who are only doing their job. So it’s safer to order them not to touch anyone.”

“So they’re gonna force the gates open just by using overwhelming numbers?”

“I mean they’re strong enough to subdue humans bare-handed. I ordered them not to attack, but they’re allowed to restrain people who get in their way.”

Parker turns back to his fellow undead necromancers and shouts, "More, call up more! Empty the circles of hell! Tonight will be a festival of the departed, a banquet for spirits. Fill the capital of the living with the voices of the dead!"

"Gods blast it, you're scaring me, man!"

"Hahaha, don't worry. So long as I have you, Veight, and the others, I'll never fully become an undead."

Are you sure you wanna trust this guy, Veight!?

Eventually, I started hearing screams and stampeding footsteps above me. I wiped my forehead with a handkerchief and grinned.

"Looks like things are going well."

"Heh, you've got that evil smirk on your face again, Commander."

If I'm supposed to be the bad guy, I've gotta look the part. We'd circled around the capital and were now waiting outside the city's south gate. I shouldered my Blast Rifle and turned to the werewolf next to me.

"Did you guys see any private armies moving around the capital?"

"Not as far as we could tell."

Perfect, this means none of the nobles have made a move yet. I'd expected as much. Sure there was a crisis going on, but gathering information, analyzing that information, then rallying your troops to sortie took time. From the looks of it, I didn't need to worry about anyone stopping us just yet.

"The south gate should be opening up soon. Call Vodd's squad back here. That old geezer's gonna pout for weeks if he misses his chance to let loose."

"Hahaha, yeah."

Vodd was a mercenary through and through. He loved fighting more than anything else, and if he learned I started the operation without him, I'd be hearing him complaining for ages. As the messenger left, Jerrick walked up to me and said, "Hey, boss, do we really have to go in through the gates? We could scale walls that short no problem."

"We could, but we'd be defenseless while we're climbing. If the guards on the

walls start shooting at us, we'll take casualties. Besides, don't forget the enemy's got werewolves too."

I doubted Volka and her clan would attack us, but it didn't hurt to be careful since we didn't have a good grasp of the situation inside the capital.

"Besides, I trust Parker. He'll get the job done for sure. When it comes to necromancy, he's as skilled as Master."

Jerrick gave me a quizzical look as he checked over his squad's Blast Rifles.

"What exactly did you ask him to do?"

"I told him to summon a bunch of skeleton soldiers and cause an uproar in the city. We'll sneak in while everyone is panicking. He can see everything his skeleton soldiers see, so he'll be able to pinpoint where the enemy garrisons are too."

This was the first time Parker had used his secret technique, but theoretically, it let him summon an infinite number of skeletons. Since it involved summoning a bunch of undead necromancers to do more summoning for him. And if any of those undead necromancers happened to summon yet another undead necromancer, that one would then be able to continue the chain. It was like a pyramid scheme of undead spirits. *Actually, it might be better to compare it to a telephone chain. Kinda like...*

"Yo, Master of Spirits, Kilgol."

"Sup, Miasma Emperor Pededotok. How's it going?"

"I heard from Bone King Gusforitus that there's gonna be a party in the mortal realm. Wanna go?"

"Seriously? Hang on, I'll call my friends. Oh yeah, let the Burial Lord Vicrea know too."

"This dude called Parker's gonna give the signal. When you hear it, come."

Yeah, basically like that. Parker's ultimate technique relied on a few very simple principles, but it was extremely difficult to pull off in practice. Undead necromancers, especially undead necromancers of renown, weren't like other

spirits. They were masters of the underworld. Because of their extensive knowledge of the dead, they knew how to actually negotiate with necromancers who summoned them.

Handling one might be possible for someone at Master's level, but even she'd have a hard time controlling a dozen of them. It was just like trying to control an unruly mob of living people; which was why Parker and Master had spent weeks working together to come up with a rigid summoning order that would help Parker keep everyone in check. If he wanted to use this technique a second time, he'd have to redo that order entirely. Thanks to this summoning, the relative power difference between each necromancer and Parker would have changed completely. Honestly, pulling this off took more event planning skill than magical skill.

Soon enough, the massive capital gates started swinging outward. They were being pushed by a team of skeletons wearing ancient armor.

"Welcome to the festival of the dead, Veight."

Parker swept off his hat and gave me a regal bow. I ignored him. Next to him stood Ryucco, a miniature Blast Rifle gripped tightly in each hand.

"What's the situation?" I asked.

"What does it look like? The city's a mess. Oh, and there's a bunch of people no one recognizes near the north gate beating down Parker's skeletons," Ryucco replied.

If no one recognized them, it meant they had to be Lord Bolshevik's men. They couldn't be city guards, at least. Parker rose from his bow and donned his hat, looking slightly disappointed that I'd ignored him.

"You could have at least thanked me for my services."

"Oh yeah, thanks, Parker. I knew I could count on you. I see you in a new light now."

"It doesn't mean much when you say it in a monotone like that, you know?"

"If you want my sincere thanks, wipe that smug grin off your face."

Parker had split the skeletons into squads, with each undead necromancer leading a squad of their own summoned skeletons. But he'd also put a few of his own summoned skeletons into each squad to keep an eye on the overall situation.

"At any rate, things are going more or less as you predicted, but there's something strange going on at the palace," Parker said, his expression turning grim.

"What's happening at the palace?"

The imperial palace hadn't been designed as a military structure, and so it wasn't very defensible. If there was an army of skeletons surrounding it, the palace guards should have been out fighting with all their might to keep them at bay. Parker looked off into the distance, likely tapping into what his skeletons were seeing on-site.

"Though we have the palace completely surrounded, the only opposition my skeletons face is the city's garrison. And there doesn't appear to be too many of them."

"That's strange, considering both Dillier and the emperor are in the palace."

Unless Lord Bolshevik had taken both of them somewhere else, which now seemed quite likely. He'd probably predicted that I'd try and rescue Ashley with my werewolf squad. But there was no way he'd predicted an army of undead would suddenly materialize within the capital.

"Parker, is there anyone within the capital who seems to be up to something?"

"Hmm... Us, I suppose!"

Can't really argue with that. Even as he joked around, Parker was scanning the capital through the eyes of his skeletons.

"Ah, one of the scouting units inside the palace has been completely demolished. They were...by the east tower."

I'd visited the palace a few times, so I knew where that was. If I recalled correctly, there were two identical five-story towers built on both sides of the

palace. Originally I thought they were just there for decoration, but it seemed they were actually emergency shelters. There was only one entrance to each of them, and that entrance was a very sturdy iron door. *I see, so that's where you've got the emperor confined, huh?*

"Alright, I'll send the werewolf squad over to investigate. By the way, do you have any idea where Lord Bolshevik is?"

"I'm afraid I haven't seen him. The Bolshevik manor in the capital is deserted though."

So he's gone into hiding. He always was a wily fox, eh? No matter, rescuing Ashley takes priority anyway. Ryucco, who was still holding his twin Blast Rifles steady, said, "Hey, be careful inside the capital. A few people tried to snipe at us with crossbows and Blast Canes on the way here."

"Well I'm glad you're safe then."

"Fear not, playing dead is a specialty of mine! After all, I have more experience with death than anyone else!" Parker replied cheerfully. Ryucco patted his rifles and gave a completely different account of their encounter.

"I blew them to bits along with the buildings they were hiding on. Those fools never stood a chance against these babies."

Which one of you is telling the truth? Whatever, the point is I need to be careful, right?

"Werewolves, transform and get into your squads. No one goes anywhere alone. Travel across the rooftops and make for the palace. Don't stop, no matter what."

Not only did werewolves have the pack hunting skills of wolves and the intelligence of humans, but they also had the agility of monkeys. As long as they were in motion, no sniper would be able to draw a bead on any of them.

Fahn gave me a worried look and asked, "Are you sure we should transform?"

"It's fine even if you get spotted. Once this is over we can just pin all the blame on Lord Bolshevik."

And if we couldn't manage that, Eleora and Cardinal Kushmer probably had

enough influence combined to sweep any werewolf sightings under the rug. Besides, the capital was in chaos right now.

“Oh yeah, make sure none of you get close to any of the Sonnenlicht temples in the city. I convinced the Order to let citizens use the temples as a place of refuge in case a battle within the capital broke out.”

“I’m surprised they agreed to something like that,” Ryucco mused.

“Protecting the people is the Sonnenlicht Order’s sacred duty. Besides, saying you’ll shelter anyone who needs safety is a great way to raise your popularity. The Order gladly agreed to my request— especially since it reinforces the idea that it’s only Eleora and the Order that people can rely on.”

“Ah, I see...” Fahn said with a twisted smile.

Suddenly remembering something, Parker added, “I’ve also ordered all of my skeletons not to go near the temples.”

“Thank you. Now everyone’s going to think the holy protection of the Sonnenlicht Order is enough to keep even werewolves and the undead away.”

“Veight, you’ve got that evil smirk on your face again... I never thought you’d grow up into such a wicked man.” Fahn sighed.

Hey, at least this way no one will get hurt. Besides, it’s a win-win for us and the Order. So what’s the problem? At any rate, the stage had been set. All that remained was to play our part.

“Alright guys, let’s do this!”

“Yeah!”

We transformed and loped into the capital under the cover of night.

Everywhere I looked, I saw skeletons. The residents of the city had either holed up in their homes, or run to the Sonnenlicht temples for safety. There were a few half-crazed citizens trying to fight with torches or hammers, but the skeletons easily rebuffed them with their shields. And that was all they did. None of the skeletons fought back.

Initially, I’d been a bit worried about this plan, but it seemed like Parker really

did have everyone under control. Me and the other werewolves darted across the roofs, wary of snipers. Though if the snipers were just armed with crossbows and basic Blast Canes, they didn't have enough range to cover the whole city. That meant they were likely positioned near key locations and around the main thoroughfares, which was why I had everyone go across the rooftops. Even then, we occasionally got a few shots coming our way.

“Waaah!?”

Monza, who was running next to me, screamed as a bullet of light slammed into the rooftop next to her. Though the shot hadn't even grazed her, it was obvious the sniper was aiming for Monza. Fortunately, light bullets left streaks in the air, so I could tell at a glance where the shot had come from.

The sniper had fired from the third-floor window of the stone building at the T-junction up ahead. It was an ideal sniping location for someone using a Blast Cane. They'd have a clear view of anyone trying to cross the street below.

“Hah, I've got you now!”

Monza took cover behind the roof's slope and pulled out Evening Dew, her custom Blast Rifle, which specialized in sniping. She took aim at the shadow standing by the window and fired.

“Gah!”

Even though she'd barely spent a second aiming, her shot flew true. After that grunt, no other sounds could be heard from the window.

“Oi, don't bother engaging every enemy who shoots at you.”

“Ah, sorry... I just...” Monza scratched her head awkwardly. *Well, I guess it's fine.*

I'd ordered everyone to ignore the snipers, but when that guy had nearly hit Monza I'd gotten pissed myself. *Now that she's already killed him, we may as well do a bit of investigating.*

“Monza, take your squad and secure that room. Everyone else, keep an eye on our surroundings.”

The enemy's Blast Canes didn't have much range, so it'd be hard to deploy

multiple snipers to cover each other while also spreading them out enough to cover the whole city. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry, so I had my werewolves keep an eye out anyway.

Monza and I leaped over to the roof of the building the sniper had been shooting from. From there we jumped down and smashed our way through the third-story window. There was no movement inside the room. It seemed the sniper had been acting alone, without the aid of a spotter or any guards. A single man lay on the ground. He was wearing civilian clothes. At a glance, he seemed to be no more than an ordinary citizen, but no ordinary citizen possessed a Blast Cane.

I'd taken out my own Blast Rifle, Ryuuga, but it seemed it wouldn't be necessary. Sighing, I put the gun away. "Now that I've become a commander I don't get any chances to use my own gun..."

"Didn't you get to shoot that gatling gun or whatever you called it back in winter, boss?"

Monza had a point, but I'd been desperate back then, so I barely remembered how it felt to shoot. Man, I really wanted an opportunity to use my Ryuuga. Blast Rifles fired bullets of pure mana, so using one was a great way to practice refining your mana control too. *Well, whatever. At least I can practice absorbing the bullets these guys'll be firing at us.*

"Now then, I wonder who this guy's Blast Cane originally belonged to?"

I grabbed the Blast Cane from the sniper's corpse. Because of how expensive Blast Canes were to manufacture, all of the ones belonging to the imperial family had a crest and a serial number engraved onto them.

"This crest belongs to the imperial guard."

"Wait, does that mean Ashley's our enemy?"

Monza gave me a confused look, and I shook my head.

"It's more likely that Lord Bolshevik managed to steal this from the imperial guard's armory. They've got a lot of spares stored there."

He'd already made Princess Dillier into his pawn, and it would have been

exceedingly easy for a member of the imperial family to get into the imperial guard's vault.

"There's no way to purchase Blast Canes without leaving a paper trail somewhere. I'd thought it was strange that there hadn't been any Blast Canes in the shipment Lord Bolshevik had received from Lord Doneiks, but now I see why."

There wouldn't be any paper trail if you stole the Blast Canes a few days before your operation. It was a pretty bold plan, but also a very crafty one.

"If he's already gotten into the imperial armory, it's safe to assume Lord Bolshevik has most of the palace facilities under his control."

The original plan had been to rush the east tower with everyone, but if Lord Bolshevik's men were all armed to the teeth with Blast Canes I needed to rethink my strategy. I gathered all of my werewolves and had them hole up inside Eleora's manor. Parker's skeletons were guarding it, so Lord Bolshevik's snipers would have a hard time targeting it. Naturally, everyone protested my decision.

"I know Blast Rifles don't work on you, boss, but you can't just go in there alone!"

"All other weapons can still hurt you!"

"I know. I'm not going in there alone. I'll be taking Monza and Hamaam's squads with me. They'll be waiting near the tower to intercept any possible ambushes."

I could storm the tower alone at least. Not only did Blast Canes not work on me, but I could use arrow-deflecting spells. Besides, with how narrow the tower was more people would just get in the way. I half-persuaded, half-coerced my werewolves to agree to my plan, then headed for the palace's east tower.

The palace grounds were protected by a sturdy iron fence, but Parker's skeletons had already made it inside. The imperial guards were holding the line with spears and Blast Canes, but they didn't seem keen on actually engaging the undead horde. I had no way of knowing whether those guards were Lord

Bolshevik's agents or actually imperial guards.

Either way, I doubted they'd welcome a platoon of werewolves suddenly showing up at their doorstep. Unfortunately, I couldn't really afford to cancel my transformation. Who knew what kind of traps Lord Bolshevik had set for us? We incapacitated a few imperial guards and snuck into the palace grounds without anyone noticing. I could see the east tower rising up behind the palace's fountain.

"If I find the emperor there, our goal is to rescue him and take him safely to Eleora's manor. Hamaam, you and your squad secure an escape route."

"Roger, Vice-Commander."

"Monza, you and your squad take out any humans who try to approach me unless I say otherwise. If they're armed, you're free to kill them."

"Ahaha, finally!"

At least one of us is happy.

"Alright, I'm off."

The tower was five stories tall, and I guessed most of the space inside was taken up by the spiral staircase winding upwards. Since it climbed clockwise, anyone trying to go up it would be attacked from their right side by enemies up above. Unless they were left-handed they wouldn't be able to use their shield, and it'd be hard for them to swing their sword. Of course, none of that mattered to a werewolf, but it didn't change the fact that fighting on spiral staircases was a pain.

Instead, I opted to jump up the tower. I buffed my legs with strengthening magic and made a mad dash for it. Once I was close, I leapt with all my might, shattering the flagstones beneath me with the recoil. I'd jumped a bit early to avoid getting ambushed, so I only made it as far as the second floor before I started losing altitude. The tower was perfectly smooth, to prevent potential attackers from climbing up the outer walls. But my werewolf claws were easily able to slip in between the seams of the tower's bricks, giving me perfect handholds. *This must be what ninjas feel like.*

I scrambled up the tower face, then kicked in the bars protecting the fifth-

floor window. I made sure to use silencing magic as I did, so the bars made no noise as they shattered. Since there was no staircase going upward in the fifth floor room, it was quite wide.

“Wha—!?”

Ashley, who was sitting in the room’s sole chair seemingly deep in thought, looked up in surprise. In order to reassure him, I canceled my transformation.

“Veight!?”

Please don’t shout. I went to all that trouble to be stealthy. I knelt respectfully in front of Ashley, indicating that I bore him no ill will. Thanks to my previous transformation I was shirtless, but hopefully he didn’t mind that little bit of impoliteness. This was an emergency, after all.

“Your Majesty, I have come to rescue you.”

“I thought you went with Eleora to suppress the serf revolt in the north!? And what was with your appearance just now!?”

“I’ll explain everything later.”

The moment I said that, the door to the room opened and a man wearing pilgrim’s clothes dashed into the room.

“What seems to be the matter, Your— Ah!?”

He had his sword drawn, so I transformed back into a werewolf and kicked him before he could do anything. He slammed against the door and slumped to the ground, unconscious.

“I heard something from the upper floor!”

“Did something happen to His Majesty!?”

I could hear yelling from the floor below. *Damn, there’s a lot of them down there.* I quickly closed the door and locked it from the inside.

“Your Majesty, let me take you somewhere safe.”

I held out a furred paw to Ashley. After a moment’s trepidation, he nodded and took it.

“...I put my trust in you.”

“Thank you. Sorry, but this is gonna be bumpy.”

I scooped Ashley up into my arms and leapt out of the window.

“Waaaaaaaah!”

Ashley might have been an emperor, but even he couldn’t think about saving face when faced with the prospect of falling five stories. Roller coasters and bungee jumping didn’t exist in this world, so most people who weren’t werewolves had never experienced what it felt like to fall from such a height.

“Fear not, Your Majesty.”

I bent my legs like a spring when I landed, softening the impact for Ashley. Even though I left a decent-sized crater in the ground, he barely felt a thing.

“Jumping a height like this is child’s play for a werewolf. More importantly, there are enemies coming, Your Majesty.”

A number of soldiers wearing imperial guard uniforms dashed into the courtyard. They were all carrying Blast Canes. Ashley tried to call out to them but they ignored him and got into formation. Even though their job was to protect the emperor, they seemed more than willing to kill him.

“Fire!”

A volley of magical bullets shot toward me. I could have just jumped out of the way, but those bullets couldn’t hurt me, and if I moved too quickly I’d hurt Ashley. So instead I visualized a whirlpool in my mind and sucked the bullets toward me. Mana in its purest form was quite volatile, so I needed to suck them in gently, else the bullets would explode. Fortunately, I’d gotten quite proficient at manipulating mana recently, and I was able to suck all the bullets into me without incident. When they saw what happened, the enemy soldiers faltered.

“What the!?”

“He’s totally unhurt!?”

Seeing their most cutting-edge weapon rendered completely ineffectual was probably a huge shock. I transferred Ashley into my left hand and drew Ryuuga with my right. *Taste the might of the demon army.* I pulled the trigger on my fully automatic rifle. A barrage of light bullets shot out at high speed.

“Gah!”

“Bwah!”

“Aaaah!”

The soldiers were mowed down in seconds. A few exceptionally brave ones struggled to reload for a second shot, but even if they were able to fire, they'd just be giving me more ammunition. Though I didn't want to massacre all of them, now that the alarm had been raised I had no other choice.

Incidentally, the reason I was able to kill all the soldiers so quickly was because Ryucco had done an amazing job designing Ryuuga, not because my aiming skills were particularly noteworthy. Once my volley was over, the dozen-odd soldiers had been reduced to a scant few. Unfortunately, Ryuuga was out of bullets. Because it was fully automatic, it expended a lot of mana. *Guess I've gotta do it the old-fashioned way.*

I curled my right hand into a fist. A second later, streaks of light pierced the remaining soldiers, sending them to the afterlife. *That must've been Monza's squad.* Everyone in her squad was a skilled hunter, and their Blast Rifles were all modified for sniping. *Well, so much for those guys.* The difference in firepower between our side and the enemy was so staggering that it wasn't even a contest. Ashley looked down at the corpses, pale-faced.

“Lord Veight, those men aren't part of my imperial guard. They may have been wearing the guard's uniform, but...”

“Yes, they were most likely Lord Bolshevik's men.”

A second later I heard a howl from Hamaam stating that he'd secured a path of retreat.

“Come, Your Majesty. It's too dangerous to remain in the palace.”

“Very well. As this is an emergency, I leave everything up to your judgment.”

I grabbed Ashley a bit more securely, then dashed off into the night.

After leaving the palace, making it back to Eleora's manor was surprisingly easy. Hamaam's squad was able to clean up any enemies on our escape route,

and Parker's skeletons blocked off the streets leading into the one I was using, so no new foes appeared. Once we were safely inside the mansion, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"We should be safe here, Your Majesty. My apologies for spiriting you away like this."

"No, thank you. Had you not come, things would have been much worse... Though I suppose the situation is quite bad as it is."

I did feel bad about summoning an army of skeletons in his city, but some sacrifices had to be made for safety's sake. Eleora's mansion was protected both by Parker's undead soldiers and my werewolves. With the level of security we had, we should be able to catch anyone attempting to sneak in.

The two of us settled down into nearby chairs and began catching each other up to speed. For my part, I told Ashley everything. Who I was, what had really happened in Meraldia, and that I'd teamed up with Eleora to put her on the throne. Surprisingly, Ashley didn't seem too shocked by my revelations. He just nodded and said, "Now I finally understand the reasons for your actions. Interesting though you were, I always suspected a man as capable as you was up to something nefarious."

"You have a discerning eye, Your Majesty."

So he'd sort of caught on, huh?

For his part, Ashley explained what had occurred in the capital during my absence. Unfortunately, he didn't know much himself, so he wasn't able to offer too much information.

"After Eleora left with her army, my sister tricked me and locked me up in that tower, using her imposters within the imperial guard."

As expected, Princess Dillier had allowed Lord Bolshevik's troops to infiltrate the castle. From that point on, Ashley was stuck within the east tower, so he'd had no way of knowing what the situation within the city was like. While we were talking, Parker slipped into the room and said, "We've spotted multiple large groups moving around the capital. A few of them are headed for us."

Parker had spread his skeletons far and wide, so he knew roughly everything

going on within the capital. It appeared Lord Bolshevik had caught on to the fact that we'd rescued the emperor.

"Do we have any evidence that they're not just part of the city's militia, or groups of refugees?" I asked.

"They're ignoring the skeletons entirely, so I doubt they're citizens or part of the city watch. If they were refugees, they would be afraid of the skeletons, wouldn't they? Besides, they're all heavily armed."

That clinches it. Still, it would be better to wait until the very last minute to engage, just in case.

"Wait until they try to enter the manor. If they do, take them out. I'd prefer to take a few of them alive for questioning but...I guess that's not happening with undead soldiers."

Besides, if these guys were planning a coup d'état within a feudal empire like this one, they were probably prepared to die anyway.

"Werewolves, get ready for battle. Skeleton soldiers aren't very fast, so there might be a few men who get past them. Shoot down anyone who does."

A few minutes later, the unit who'd tried to infiltrate Eleora's manor lay dead within the courtyard. *You reap what you sow.* Parker walked up to me as I finished inspecting the soldiers' corpses.

"Someone's approaching the manor again..." he said hesitantly.

"Then get rid of them."

"I was planning on doing just that, but he seems more terrified of my skeletons than the last group. Furthermore, he's alone. Though he is armed."

Well, that complicates things. Monza caressed the barrel of her gun and said lightly, "Should I get rid of him for you, boss?"

"That's probably smartest but...if he's alone, he can't be much of a threat. Let's see what he's up to. I'll keep an eye on him once he's entered the manor grounds."

I took my telescope out of my pocket and went up to the third floor. Looking down at the street below, I spotted the person Parker was talking about. A

young, well-dressed man was approaching Eleora's manor. Though he wore a saber on his belt, he seemed unaccustomed to using it. *Yeah, not killing him was the right choice.* Upon reaching the front gate, the man took his hat off and tried asking the skeleton doorman to let him inside. *Who is this guy?* I instructed Parker to let him in, and the man introduced himself as Jivanki.

"I am a member of the Miner's Guild and Mr. Mao's business associate. I was sent here to inform you that our organization sheltered him once this disturbance in the capital started."

"Ahh, so you're his benefactor. Thanks for keeping him safe."

That was close. I nearly ended up killing the guy protecting Mao. It was because of things like this that I hated dealing with chaotic battlefields like coup d'états. Telling friend from foe was nearly impossible.

According to the mansion's servants, Lord Bolshevik had sent some of his soldiers here as well when he launched his coup d'état. While the servants had remained unharmed, Mao had fled since he was worried Lord Bolshevik might try to do something to him. No one in the manor knew where he'd gone, but thanks to Jivanki's report, I could rest easy knowing he was safe at the Miner's Guild headquarters. In truth, though, I hadn't been too worried to begin with. A guy like him was too slippery to get caught easily.

"When he heard the city had been flooded with skeletons, Mr. Mao said 'I imagine everything's alright now. Could you please check up on Eleora's manor for me?' Which is why I'm here."

You could have just come yourself, you know. I sighed wearily to myself.

"Oh, and there is one other thing. I was told to inform only you of this. A short while before the disturbance in the capital began, Princess Dillier came to our guild to sell a number of jewelry pieces to us."

"Seriously?"

Jewelry related to the imperial family would have sold for a high price. Meaning Dillier had needed a lot of cash, and she'd needed it fast. Of course, everyone in the imperial family was rich, but most of their assets weren't liquid. If Dillier had been looking for quick cash, she was probably planning on fleeing

the capital.

“Do you know where Princess Dillier is right now?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Lord Bolshevik hadn’t been spotted within the capital either. If Dillier was running around getting as much money as she could, he’d clearly planned for the possibility that his coup d’état might fail and prepared an escape route. In fact, it was starting to look like he’d *expected* it to fail. I thanked Jivanki, then told him to remain within the manor for his own safety. I’d have my werewolves bring Mao back here.

“Parker, how long can you keep these skeletons around?”

“They’ll remain until I tell them to leave.”

“Perfect, we might need them for a while longer. I want them spread out throughout the city so Lord Bolshevik’s troops can’t move freely.”

If Lord Bolshevik himself wasn’t here, chances were he’d snuck back to his own territory. There wasn’t much he could do without his loyal pawns. We needed to search for Dillier as well, but seeing how devoted she was to Lord Bolshevik, finding her wouldn’t be too hard.

I sent one of my werewolves off to deliver a message explaining the situation to Eleora. The only person who could quell the chaos in the capital now was her. Both the citizens and her fellow nobles recognized her authority, whereas I was still technically an outsider. *If the situation on the battlefield permits, it’ll be better to have her back here.* My message said as much too. Once that was done, I gathered my remaining werewolves and assigned them all their tasks. The sun would rise in a few hours, and when it did, we’d have a harder time moving around.

“We’ve secured the emperor. All that’s left is to flush the fox out of hiding. This is a race against time, so hurry.”

“Gotcha!”

I didn’t know what Lord Bolshevik was scheming but I was determined to crush all of his plots one by one.

Ashley and I waited for the sunrise from the comfort of Eleora's lavishly furnished guest room. Right now, all of Parker's skeletons and my werewolves were combing the city for intel while also suppressing any suspicious armed groups. My job was to remain here and guard the emperor while I waited for everyone to bring me information. But though I knew it was important that I stayed back, I still wanted to be out in the field with my fellow werewolves. *I hope none of them got hurt...* Trying to hide my worry, I took a few bites out of the light meal the servants had brought for me and Ashley.

"Incidentally Your Majesty, what would you do if you were in charge of handling this situation?"

Ashley looked up at me, his face haggard. "My first priority would be to ensure that my supporters and the citizens were safe. The people shouldn't get dragged into squabbles between nobility. Our job is to protect them, not make their lives worse."

"You have a point..."

The imperial family were guardians of the nobility, and the nobility were guardians of the common people. And since the imperial family were at the center of this power struggle, it wouldn't be surprising if the people and nobility lost faith in them because of this.

"But, Your Majesty, you're a victim of this incident yourself."

"I'm glad you think so, but this all could have been avoided if I had been firmer with my sister. I need to accept responsibility for my failure." After a short pause, he added, "My sister...Dillier, has converted to the Sternenfeuer cult. This is a scandal that could rock the empire to its very core."

I had no idea why Lord Bolshevik had asked Dillier to convert, but it was clear her conversion had been a huge blow to Ashley regardless. The emperor was meant to be a symbol of the Sonnenlicht Order, so the fact that one of his relatives had converted to Sternenfeuer was definitely crippling.

"That...isn't good."

I wanted to say something more eloquent, but I couldn't find the words.

Ashley got to his feet and looked out the window. There was the faintest tinge of pink in the sky; dawn would be arriving soon.

“First the Doneiks Rebellion, then Lord Bolshevik’s scheming and my sister’s conversion. And now the capital is filled with undead. The imperial family’s prestige is in tatters.”

Sorry about that. Unfortunately, summoning a bunch of skeletons was the fastest way to gain control of the city.

In peacetime, Ashley was a perfectly competent emperor. But his weakness was that he didn’t know how to handle military situations. He also happened to have one other huge weakness. And this one, he brought up himself.

“Lord Veight, what do you think of an emperor who keeps failing to prevent his relatives from rebelling against him?”

There was no majesty in his tired voice. This wasn’t a query from an emperor; it was a simple question from one human to another. So I decided to give him an honest response.

“You’re a kind man, Your Majesty, but that kindness has come back to bite you. As a ruler, you need to be able to force others to submit to you. Unpleasant though it may be, you cannot allow others to defy you, no matter how much you sympathize with their situation.”

“I suppose so...”

Ashley’s face fell. Feeling guilty for putting him down, I decided to change the subject, “The truth is, I was told something similar by the Demon Lord. He said that I wasn’t fit to be a ruler because I lacked the decisiveness needed.”

The previous Demon Lord had indeed written something to that effect in his will. I still read it over from time to time.

“Rulers sometimes have to make cruel decisions for the greater good,” I continued. “I’m not capable of that, which is why I’ll never be more than a Vice-Commander.”

Before his death the old Demon Lord had asked me what I thought of becoming the next Demon Lord, so he must have at least believed I possessed

the qualities of one. Of course, I'd refused him, but... When I saw how Ashley was struggling with his choices, I realized making Master the next Demon Lord really had been the right choice. She was a kind person, but she was also a scientist to the bone. If she believed something was the rational thing to do, she'd do it without hesitation no matter how cruel it might seem.

"There are a few people I care for like family. If any of them suddenly became my enemy, I'm not confident I'd be able to kill them if it came down to it."

What if Parker or Master finally fold under the pressures of being immortal and snap? What if Airia's loyalty to her city leads her to one day betray the demon army? Would I be able to do my duty as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander and kill them? They weren't questions I wanted to think too hard about.

"Which is why I'm always doing everything I can to make sure I don't have to make a choice like that. Sometimes that requires using underhanded methods, but I don't mind."

I'd experienced enough suffering in my past life. This time around I wanted my life to be a good one. In order to make that possible, I was doing everything in my power to nip problematic elements in the bud, before they could harm me or the people I cared about. And of course, I'd continue doing so in the future. The whole time he'd been listening to my story, Ashley had been looking down at the floor. But after I finished, he sighed and finally looked back up.

"You're absolutely right. I should have followed your example." Ashley stared into my eyes for a few seconds, then said with determination, "Once this incident is resolved, I will take responsibility by abdicating the throne."

"Your Majesty, please don't get carried away by a momentary surge of emotion and make a decision you might later regret."

"This is no 'momentary surge of emotion' as you put it. I've been considering abdicating ever since the Doneiks family rebelled." Ashley's voice rang with determination. "I'll leave everything in Eleora's capable hands. I'm not sure if she'll accept the position of empress, but I know the people won't object."

This was what I'd spent the last few months working tirelessly to achieve, but honestly, success didn't bring me any happiness. Right now, I just felt sorry for

Ashley. Had this been a peaceful generation, he would have gone down in history as an exemplary ruler. After a few seconds, Ashley straightened his back, looking more like the regal emperor he was supposed to be.

“But for the moment, I am still emperor, and resolving this current crisis is my responsibility.”

“As you say, Your Majesty.”

“The longer this drags on, the more ambitious nobles will pop out of the woodwork looking to take advantage of the chaos. We need to put an end to this coup within a few days.”

Yeah, pretty much. It was the emperor’s job to maintain order within the empire, and right now that wasn’t happening. Though it was partially my fault, since I’d brought the skeletons into the capital. Ashley’s expression grew grim and he added, “The only way to restore order is to remove the root cause of this attempted coup.”

“Correct.”

“While Lord Bolshevik’s involvement has yet to be proven, it is a fact that my sister, Princess Dillier, imprisoned me in the east tower. She must be caught immediately and tried for the crime of treason.”

I knelt in front of the emperor and said, “Please leave her capture to me, Your Majesty.”

“It’s not as if I have any other vassals to rely on anyway. Lord Veight, I charge you with locating and capturing Princess Dillier. If she resists...”

Ashley bit his lip, hesitating. But then his stern expression returned and he said, “I, the emperor of the Holy Rolmund Empire, Ashley Voltof Schwerin Rolmund, give you permission to kill her.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

Naturally, I had no intention of killing her, but I understood how much resolve it must have taken Ashley to say that. He asked for a piece of paper, which I gave him, and wrote down what he’d just said. He then signed the imperial decree and pressed his ring into the space on either side of his signature. The

seal he'd pressed into the parchment didn't seem to be the imperial seal. He handed me the decree and gave me a sad smile.

"That seal is a secret that has been passed down among the Schwerin line for generations. There are no forgeries of it in the world. Only my sister will recognize this seal, but this will prove to her that it is a genuine imperial edict."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

I carefully rolled the parchment up and put it in my pocket. I looked out at the dawn and saw a few of my werewolves had returned to the manor. From the looks of it, they had new information.

"Your Majesty, I will now begin pursuing Princess Dillier. Worry not, I have left the manor's security in capable hands."

Alright, it's time to put an end to this.

It turned out to be surprisingly easy to track down where Dillier had gone. Apparently plenty of common citizens had seen her personal carriage head out the west gate a short while before Parker's skeletons had flooded the capital. To the west of the capital lay the lands of the Schwerin family. There were plenty of places where she'd be able to hide herself. However, no one had actually confirmed whether or not Dillier had been riding in the carriage.

"What kind of entourage did the carriage have?"

"From what I heard, there were just two knights guarding it. And at best there couldn't have been more than two to three people inside the carriage," Mao replied. I'd met up with him and the two of us were now walking together.

"That's a pretty small entourage for a princess," I mused.

"Is that not proof she's been backed into a corner?" Mao asked. I wasn't convinced.

"Did anyone actually see the princess riding in the carriage?"

"The curtains were drawn around the windows, and it didn't stop for even a moment, so I'm afraid not."

Yeah, that's definitely suspicious. The whole affair reeked of one of Lord

Bolshevik's plots. As long as there was a possibility he was involved, it was better not to take anything I saw at face value. After weighing my options, I came to a conclusion.

"Alright, I'll send one squad after the carriage."

"Do you think four people will be enough?"

"Yeah. The rest of us will go north."

"By 'north,' you mean toward Lord Bolshevik's lands?"

"Yep."

"Why would Princess Dillier try to flee to Lord Bolshevik's territory?" Mao asked with a puzzled look. "There's no guarantee her fiance is even there right now."

"You have a point. But Princess Dillier has to know fleeing west would be the end of her."

Ashley was still the head of the Schwerin family, and Dillier didn't have much influence among her relatives. At best, one of the people closer to her might shelter her in their villa or something, but they wouldn't be able to raise an army to defend her. After all, the people wouldn't follow Dillier. In other words, going west would be the equivalent of announcing her retirement from the political stage. And if she did that, we could just take our time searching through Schwerin's castles and mansions without worrying that she might try anything.

"She'll only be a threat if she went north. Lord Bolshevik still has a lot of soldiers within his territory. If he *is* back there, we absolutely cannot let Dillier meet up with him."

"I see what you mean, but...you don't have much evidence to back up your theory that she's gone north. Why are you so confident she has?"

"Because North Rolmund contains the Sternenfeuer holy land," I said to Mao with a reassuring grin. "And Princess Dillier is a Sternenfeuer believer."

Mao gave me an incredulous look and replied, "Do you honestly think she's going to beg her god for help?"

“You and I both don’t believe in god so we tend to forget this, but... Religion can be a strong pillar of support for some people. Besides, the fact that she’s Sternenfeuer means she’ll be able to solicit the support of fellow believers. Especially since she’s betrothed to their leader.”

Though I suspected most Sternenfeuer believers wouldn’t want to deal with the burden of protecting Dillier.

I let my subordinates take care of tailing the carriage heading west while I took the rest of my werewolves north to Lord Bolshevik’s territory. As we arrived at Creech Castle, the messengers I’d sent to Eleora returned with a reply.

“Boss, Eleora won!”

“She beat back that giant rebel army! That princess is one hell of a general!”

According to the report my panting werewolves delivered, Eleora had discovered where the enemy’s camp was and taken a small force of 1,000 elites to launch a surprise attack on them. Apparently, it was the werewolves I’d sent to guard Eleora who’d sniffed the enemy out. She hadn’t kept them around as guards but rather had utilized them as scouts. One of Skuje’s brothers had a keen eye, so I wasn’t surprised he’d found the enemy’s camp. There had been over 10,000 rebels, but they were mostly serfs who’d received only basic military training, and they’d split up into multiple camps. It had been easy enough for Eleora to take a smaller force of highly trained veterans and launch a night raid against their command center.

The enemy had been taken completely by surprise, and Eleora had managed to annihilate all of the professional soldiers and knights Lord Bolshevik had assigned to the army. Without anyone to lead them, the remaining serfs had fled. They hadn’t had any desire to fight to begin with, so it was only natural they’d leave if their commanding officers were killed.

As a result, Eleora had managed to stop the rebellion with minimal losses. The few serfs that didn’t throw down their weapons and return to their villages surrendered to her army instead. *Sure, werewolves are good at scouting, but that’s not why I sent those guys with you, you know...*

“It seems Lord Bolshevik’s ambitions have been well and truly crushed now,” Mao said thoughtfully.

I nodded and replied, “Probably. According to the reports, the rebel army was comprised almost entirely of serfs. He probably sent all his regular troops to the capital.”

However, now the capital was under the control of Parker’s undead army, and Lord Bolshevik’s troops had been forced into hiding. As far as I could tell, we’d managed to counter all of Lord Bolshevik’s plots. Now our highest priority was catching the mastermind. Fortunately, sniffing a human out was a piece of cake for us werewolves.

“Boss, we found a suspicious-looking group of pilgrims. They’re going through the mountains instead of taking the highway,” one of my werewolf scouts reported. *I doubt that group’s a decoy.*

“How many are there?”

“Sixteen. Five women and eleven men. The men are all built like soldiers, and we could hear metal clanking under their clothes. Some of them have horses too.”

That’s gotta be the princess and her entourage. I ordered my werewolves to surround the group, then joined one of the squads. As soon as I spotted the group of “pilgrims” I could tell the men were trained soldiers. They were marching in formation, with the women in the center. The point man was riding a horse, as were the men on either flank. That was a common marching formation used by armies.

We leapt from tree to tree, silently tracking the group. Once the encirclement was complete, I took a few of my men and strolled into view of the pilgrims.

“Halt. I am Eleora’s Vice-Commander, Veight. My apologies, but I need to verify your identities.”

The men suddenly dropped into combat stances. All they had on them were staves, but they held those staves like spears, and their coordination was impeccable. There was no doubt about it, these men had military training.

Extensive amounts of it, too. I decided to point that out.

“Your formation and your stances are obviously those of soldiers. It was suspicious enough that a group of pilgrims were taking the mountains rather than the road, but now there’s no denying who you are.”

Though my words unnerved them, the soldiers nevertheless closed in on me. If I wasn’t careful, we’d have a fight on our hands. Of course my werewolves could easily shoot the soldiers down, but I wanted to avoid bloodshed. Just then, the only mounted woman in the party raised her hand imperiously.

“Cease. This man is not someone you can defeat.”

“But...”

“I said, cease. Look around you.”

The soldiers gasped as they examined their surroundings. Blast Rifle muzzles were poking out of the bushes in every direction. With a single word from me, my werewolves could slaughter the entire group. The mounted woman handed her bridle to one of the men and he urged her horse forward a few steps. Though her features were hidden by a deep hood, I could tell it was Dillier.

“It has been a long time since we last met, Lord Veight. I believe this is our first time exchanging words.”

“It is, Princess Dillier.”

I couldn’t tell if she had nerves of steel or if she’d just resolved herself to her fate. Either way, Dillier didn’t seem shaken at all.

“Your Highness, I have come to deliver an imperial decree from His Majesty the emperor.”

I strode forward and showed Dillier the edict Ashley had given me. Her guards crowded around me, carefully watching my every move. After reading the decree, Dillier scrutinized the seal next to Ashley’s signature.

“I see you’ve finally gotten serious, Ashley.”

For some reason, Dillier smiled as she said that. She turned to me and nodded. “At this point, resistance would be futile. I am already a wanted criminal.”

“Princess, surely you won’t surrender!?” one of the men exclaimed, but Dillier waved him away.

“I will indeed do as Lord Veight asks. Thank you for your loyal service until now, my brave attendants.”

Dillier’s retinue dropped to their knees in shock. Clearly, both the soldiers and the maids were staunchly loyal to her.

She refocused her attention on me and asked, “Lord Veight, will these men also be tried?”

“I shall advise both Princess Eleora and His Majesty not to harm them.”

Had Dillier’s knights only been interested in self-preservation, they wouldn’t have stuck with her. Their loyalty to her was admirable. It would be a waste for them to be executed. Besides, I doubted either Eleora or Ashley would want them to be punished anyway. Relieved, Dillier dismounted from her horse.

“What will happen to me?”

“That, I do not know.”

Normally traitors were executed, but Dillier was a princess. I didn’t know what her punishment would be. Eleora would be returning to the capital soon enough, so she and Ashley could figure that out. I was a foreigner anyway, so this wasn’t my business.

Dillier took a small bottle out of her pocket and offered it to me. “In order to avoid any undue suspicion, I will leave this with you. It is a poison meant for suicide, but my religion forbids such things.”

Sonnenlicht had nothing to say on the issue of suicide, so this was likely some *Sternenfeuer* tenet. *If you weren’t ever gonna use it, why even carry it around? Is it just customary for princesses to keep a bottle of poison on them?*

“Very well.”

“It is made of the guts of a certain poisonous fish. Though it is both tasteless and odorless, a single mouthful is enough to be fatal.”

Ah, so kinda like pufferfish poison. Chances were, whatever fish this was made from also had tetrodotoxin in it. Alkaloids like these could be metabolized given

time, so I just had to use strengthening magic on someone's liver to protect them from it.

Dillier wouldn't have been able to kill herself even if she'd wanted to. It would have been kind of funny to see her try, but her bravery had prevented her the ignominy of failing to commit suicide.

The thought almost brought a smile to my face but I managed to keep my expression stern and said, "We'll be escorting you to Creech Castle."

"Very well. My only regret is that I won't be able to see Shallier one last time." Dillier smiled. "But my actions, I stand by."

I see...well I guess that's fine. But you know your brother's gonna be stuck cleaning up after your mess, right? Sighing, I handed Dillier the reins of her horse.

"Please follow me."

And thus, I took Dillier captive.

After imprisoning Dillier in Creech Castle, I hurried back to the capital ahead of Eleora. For the past few days, Parker's skeletons had been in control of the city. They'd been wandering the streets in clumps, keeping an eye on everything that was going on. No doubt the citizens were sick of them. Plus some of them were probably starting to overcome their fear since the skeletons weren't attacking.

"I think it's time for this ridiculous festival of the dead to come to an end." I stood atop the north wall with Parker and Mao, waiting for the dawn. Eleora's army had reached Creech Castle yesterday, and was heading to the capital with Dillier in tow. I'd asked her to arrive by dawn, if possible.

Mao, who'd been relaying my messages for me, asked, "Princess Eleora's asking 'Are you sure you don't want us to make this look like a fight?'"

"I could have my skeletons make a big show of it if you want, you know," Parker said casually.

I'd considered that option, but even if it was just a mock fight, civilians could

end up getting hurt. Though it would boost Eleora's image a great deal if she valiantly triumphed over an undead army, I didn't want anyone dying. I ignored Parker's suggestion and asked Mao, "Are all the flags ready?"

"It was difficult to procure so many in such a short time, but I managed to get the amount you wanted. Eleora's army will return bearing the triumphant flags of the Sonnenlicht Order and the Originia family."

Perfect. Just then, I spotted Eleora's army crest the horizon.

"Parker, it's time."

Parker gave me a forlorn smile, then nodded.

"I suppose all parties must eventually end." The skeleton mage threw back his cape with a flourish. With the predawn light at his back he turned to his skeletons and shouted, "Undead brethren, our banquet has come to an end! Return to the darkness from whence you came!"

The north gates were flung open, and Eleora's army swarmed into the capital bearing Sonnenlicht and Originia flags. At the same time, the first rays of dawn shone upon the city. To those of the Sonnenlicht Order, the first light of the day was holy. So when Parker's skeletons started to flicker and disappear, many of the watching citizens probably believed that it was the light that had banished them.

Eleora then marched into the vacated city like a triumphant vanquisher. Her soldiers' uniforms were splattered with mud and grime, their armor dented. Many of them wore bandages as well. However, silhouetted by the dawn as they were, they looked like radiant saints.

"A splendid performance," Mao said with a sardonic smile.

I grinned back and replied, "I know, right?"

Since it was early morning, Eleora was doing her best to have her army march quietly. But even so, the citizens were taking notice. Seeing that the skeletons were gone, some of them even ventured out into the street.

"Princess Eleora..."

"Princess Eleora has returned to us!"

“Wait, the skeletons are gone!?”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, but we’re safe now! Princess Eleora will surely protect us!”

A crowd started forming around Eleora’s army. For her part, Eleora was just smiling quietly from atop her horse.

“Princess Eleora!”

“Welcome home, Your Highness!”

“Dear citizens, now that I am here there is nothing to fear,” Eleora called out as she waved cordially to the crowd of people. “I shall ensure this city’s safety.”

Our princess has gotten pretty good at putting on an act too now. Relieved, I leaned back against the wall’s railing.

“Now Eleora’s army is here to keep Lord Bolshevik’s troops in check. Even if the skeletons are gone, he shouldn’t be able to do anything.”

Parker nodded in agreement.

“This gives Eleora an excuse to have her soldiers guard the emperor too, doesn’t it?” he said with a playful smile. “Though depending on how you look at it, you could say she’s the one who’s kidnapped the emperor now.”

“Now, now, it’s rude to say things like that, my fellow disciple,” I replied, smiling as well.

By the time Eleora reached the palace, every last skeleton soldier had vanished. Their task complete, the ancient undead necromancers Parker had summoned to aid him started vanishing as well. As their forms began to blur, I raised a hand to one of the nearby necromancers that I recognized.

“Thanks for your help. We’ll do this again sometime.”

I’d addressed the Bone King, Gusforitus. The undead tyrant who I’d helped exorcise back in Zaria raised his helmeted head to look at me. For a moment I thought he might say something, but then he silently vanished like the others. *Now then, it wouldn’t do for Eleora’s Meraldian guest to be away from her side at this critical moment.* I needed to make it look like neighboring Meraldia had

aided Rolmund in their time of need.

“Alright, that’s all the undead taken care of. Let’s go meet up with Eleora.”

“Hang on, Veight, you missed one,” Ryucco said, pointing to Parker.

“You want me exorcised!?” Parker exclaimed.

I ignored the pair’s bantering and headed toward the palace with Mao and my werewolves. Now that the skeletons were gone, citizens started pouring out of the Sonnenlicht temples they’d evacuated to. Ranks of Holy Templar Knights guarded them as they made their way back to their homes. Once everyone had been safely escorted, they started heading to the palace to meet up with Eleora as well. There were quite a few of them too. Cardinal Kushmer, who was leading the knights, stepped forward and said, “Princess Eleora, we have been awaiting your return.”

In front of a crowd of watching citizens, the cardinal bowed down before Eleora.

“It appears the impure creatures who threatened our holy city fled before your might.” She sure was laying it on thick. I hadn’t planned to take the act quite that far, but it seemed the cardinal had no such reservations. Eleora nodded and replied, “No, this is all thanks to the protection of the Sonnenlicht Order. I hear the undead spirits were unable to approach your temples.”

Dang it, Eleora, not you too. Cardinal Kushmer smiled and said, “Now that you have returned, Your Highness, this capital is free from the specter of the dead. Our current safety is all thanks to you.”

“For the sake of all Sonnenlicht believers in Rolmund, I shall do my best to live up to your expectations for me.” Eleora smiled back at the cardinal.

Wow, these guys are more evil than me.

“All hail Princess Eleora!”

“May the blessings of Sonnenlicht be upon you!”

The citizens started cheering for Eleora. The immense relief they felt at being free from Parker’s skeletons had probably made them more energetic than usual. Before long, the entire city was shouting Eleora’s name. She waved to the

people with a smile, as did Cardinal Kushmer. As someone who knew the truth, I felt guilty about manipulating the people like this. *Still, if they're happy I guess there's no harm done.* After a while, Eleora said loudly enough to be heard over the cheers, "My soldiers have secured the palace!"

A second later Ashley strode up to the palace gates, flanked by a pair of werewolf guards. *Finally, this mess is over.* Unfortunately, my job still wasn't. I gathered up my werewolves and told them to arm themselves.

"Alright, guys, follow me! We still have to take care of Lord Bolshevik's soldiers! Search every nook and cranny of the capital. If anyone tries to keep you out tell them you're acting under the authority of Princess Eleora! Oh, but whatever you do, don't transform."

"Gotcha, boss."

"If anyone resists, we've got permission to kill them, right?"

Yeah, you do. The few suspicious places Parker's skeletons had discovered all ended up being hiding spots for Lord Bolshevik's troops. However, his men were out of supplies and low on morale, so most of them surrendered without a fight. Furthermore, upon questioning them, they immediately admitted that Lord Bolshevik had ordered them to be here.

Naturally, both the crown and the Sonnenlicht Order made that information public. We now had the proof we needed to make Lord Bolshevik a wanted man. His coup d'état had ended in failure, and the situation was more or less settled. Except for the fact that no one knew where Lord Bolshevik was. No matter how much we questioned his men, it seemed none of them had any idea where he'd gone.

Now then, where are you hiding?

When we marched north, Lord Bolshevik's two younger brothers surrendered to Eleora without a fight. Since they didn't resist, Eleora was able to take them prisoner instead of being forced to execute them. In truth, tradition dictated that she should have executed them anyway, but no one objected to her decision. Mostly because at this point no noble had the level of authority and influence she did. Unfortunately, Dillier was a different matter.

After retaking the palace, Ashley called for an imperial council with his closest advisors and the top cardinals of the Sonnenlicht Order.

“My sister is a traitor who disturbed the peace of the empire. I’m afraid she needs to be beheaded,” he said once all the members had gathered. Surprised by his rather harsh declaration, the gathered nobles and clergymen exchanged worried glances. One of the nobles turned back to Ashley and said hesitantly, “Your Majesty, isn’t decapitation a bit too cruel? She is a princess after all... Would suicide not be a more merciful punishment?”

Everyone gathered agreed she couldn’t be allowed to live, but most of them at least wanted to let her die with dignity. No matter what she might have done, she was sister to the emperor. If she was given an ignoble death, it would hurt the prestige of the imperial family. However, Ashley shook his head resolutely.

“This is the last matter I must settle while I am still emperor. Once this affair is over I shall hand the crown over to Eleora, so what happens to the Schwerin name matters not.”

“Perhaps so, but still...”

“Your Majesty, don’t you think it’s wrong to treat her like a common criminal!?”

Ashley remained silent, but his face was pale. He was obviously forcing himself to appear resolute. Of course, the hard part was ordering the execution of his sister. No one particular method of execution would be that much more painful to him than any other. However, the attending nobles were only interested in the method. Or at the very least, no one was saying she should be spared.

I turned toward Eleora, who was sitting next to me. She just so happened to look my way at the same time. We silently exchanged glances. After a few seconds she sighed, then whispered softly enough that only I could hear, “Fine, fine. I’ll do what you want.”

Eleora raised her hand into the air, indicating that she had something to say.

“Your Majesty, please wait. If you come off too forcefully here, the fact that

your sister is a Sternenfeuer believer might get leaked.”

The fact that Dillier was a heretic was a far bigger deal than the fact that she’d staged a coup. Past rebellions had all been orchestrated by Sonnenlicht believers, meaning they’d followed the rules laid out by the order. Even Ivan had sent out a formal declaration of war before invading Ashley’s strongholds. Since Dillier and Lord Bolshevik were both Sternenfeuer adherents, however, they hadn’t bothered following any of those rules. They’d used trained serfs in war and hadn’t sent out any declarations of war before trying to take over the capital from the inside. Furthermore, everyone believed they’d broken the ultimate taboo and dabbled in necromancy. *Though that one was all Parker.*

Regardless, no other rebel had ever flaunted the guidelines laid out by the Sonnenlicht Order so openly. Lord Bolshevik and Dillier had taken all of Rolmund’s traditions and dumped them into the trash. Worse, Dillier was sister to the emperor. The severity of what she’d done couldn’t become public or the empire would fall into chaos. Ashley had no choice but to hide the fact that she’d become a heretic and make it seem like her rebellion hadn’t been as serious as it was. While Ashley looked for some way to refute Eleora’s argument, she pressed onward.

“Besides, with Lord Bolshevik missing, the situation is still volatile. Who knows what he might try to do if he learns we’re executing his fiancée.”

We’d searched everywhere around both the capital and Lord Bolshevik’s territory, but we still hadn’t caught any trace of him. He wasn’t even hiding in any of the manors that Dillier’s family owned. But if he’d done this good a job at disappearing, it meant he couldn’t have many troops with him. After all, hiding an army was a lot harder than hiding a single person.

That being said, it didn’t hurt to be cautious. The last thing we wanted to do was agitate any rebel forces still in hiding. And since Eleora had once again been the one to resolve this incident, her words carried weight. I could tell the other nobles were taking her suggestion into consideration.

“Princess Eleora is absolutely correct. Still, we cannot just allow a heretic princess to roam free...” one of the nobles muttered, and everyone else nodded reluctantly.

Cardinal Kushmer gave the noble a troubled smile and said, “Had Princess Dillier remained a Sonnenlicht believer, we could have sent her to one of our monasteries as punishment, but...”

By becoming a nun, Dillier would lose her title, making her unable to ever participate in politics again. Sending problematic nobles to monasteries was a common practice in Rolmund. However, a Sternenfeuer believer like Dillier would never be accepted at a Sonnenlicht monastery. Fortunately, Eleora had another plan in mind.

“Let us keep Dillier confined in Creech Castle for now,” she said. “As the castle is protected by the lake, it will make for the perfect prison.”

The nobles and clergymen nodded thoughtfully.

“Hmm...postponing her final punishment until things settle down certainly seems like a good idea.”

“Plus, that castle is nigh impregnable. It won’t fall to any surprise attacks.”

“Still, we can’t be *certain* Lord Bolshevik won’t attempt to rescue her...”

Eleora’s idea was appealing, but they weren’t fully on board yet. *This is probably where I should step in.*

“Your Majesty, Princess Dillier was tricked by Lord Bolshevik. She’s not truly at fault,” I said. “Besides, no one was hurt. Can’t you find it in your heart to be merciful?”

My plan was to make Dillier look like just another victim, and push all the blame onto Lord Bolshevik. That would also help prevent the imperial family’s image from being tarnished. Since everyone thought Lord Bolshevik was also responsible for the skeletons, I figured it’d work. The nobles exchanged glances.

“If even you, the man who captured Princess Dillier, believe that is best, then...”

“However, someone has to be held responsible for this attempted coup.”

I grinned. “If you ask me, Lord Bolshevik is the one who should answer for that, not Princess Dillier. And since he’s currently missing, he can’t defend his honor either.”

“You do have a point...”

A few of the nobles kept raising objections, but in the end everyone got too tired to argue, and Eleora’s proposal was adopted. The way the nobles saw it, they could kill Dillier any time, so leaving her locked up in Creech Castle for now wasn’t a big loss. Naturally, “any time” meant they could just quietly assassinate her once the situation had settled down somewhat. No one said that outright, but I had no doubt that was what most of the nobles were thinking of doing. Even if they didn’t have any concrete plans yet, I knew that was what they’d attempt eventually.

And thus it was decided to officially pin all the blame for the coup on Lord Bolshevik, claiming that Dillier had just been manipulated by him. Fortunately, none of Lord Bolshevik’s soldiers had publicly stated their affiliation with the Sternenfeuer cult so we’d be able to sweep that under the rug too. Were it to become public that the Sternenfeuer cult had been involved in the coup, it would mean Dillier had been manipulated by a heretic, which would be bad for the Schwerin family’s name. As the meeting came to a close, the various noblemen and priests got to their feet with weary sighs.

“Princess Dillier sure has made a mess of things...”

“I no longer know what the right way to deal with her is. If Princess Eleora will be succeeding the throne, we should just let her handle this affair.”

It turned out capturing Dillier hadn’t made her any less of a threat to the empire. *So this is your final parting gift to us, huh, Lord Bolshevik?* That damn fox had probably planned this far ahead when he’d started his rebellion. He knew Dillier’s conversion couldn’t be made public and that the imperial family would have to hide the truth. Future historians would probably be scratching their heads, wondering what might have prompted Dillier to do what she did. I could imagine their questions now.

“Why would Dillier suddenly betray her brother, when the two of them were seemingly so close?”

“Why didn’t the new empress execute Dillier when she took power?”

Of course, the truth would be buried deep within the imperial family’s secret records. But that was for the best. Besides, someone might stumble across the

empire's confidential documents centuries later and unveil the truth. But at least for now, only the people in this room, Dillier, and Lord Bolshevik knew the truth. It was kind of funny to think about, actually.

Afterward, Eleora was granted all of Lord Bolshevik's former territory, expanding her influence even further. None of the other nobles objected since no one wanted to rule over a bunch of Sternenfeuer adherents. But someone who knew all the details of the rebellion needed to be in charge of that territory, so Eleora was chosen. Once that was settled, Eleora once again sent her army all across the empire to search for Lord Bolshevik, but as expected he was nowhere to be found.

Furthermore, though the Bolshevik family had lost their status as nobility, Eleora appointed Lord Bolshevik's younger brother, Korzhov to manage his old territory. Despite his new status as a commoner, he was still highly popular with the common folk, so it made sense to let him act as Eleora's representative in the region. She also returned the Bolshevik mansion to him to use as his official residence while he was governor.

Since Lord Bolshevik was gone, there was no one to oppose the spread of Sonnenlicht influence in the area, and Sonnenlicht temples started popping up left and right. I was relieved to hear that the Sonnenlicht newcomers weren't oppressing the old Sternenfeuer residents. It seemed the tenet I'd added to the scriptures was working. So long as the Sternenfeuer believers didn't band together to attack the Sonnenlicht Order, there'd be peace between the two religions for now.

As for Jovtzia, it seemed he was sick of Rolmund. He looked up at the mansion he'd grown up in, which had now officially become the governor's office, and asked me, "Lord Veight, is Woroy doing well?"

"Oh yeah. According to the last letter I got he's already exterminated a famous bandit group while touring the northern cities, as well as discovered some ancient ruins. It sounds like he's having fun."

I didn't envy Kite and Lacy though. He was probably running them ragged, going around doing whatever he pleased. A small smile appeared on Jovtzia's

face.

“Would it be alright if I joined him?”

“Of course. I’m sure Woroy’d like that too.”

All of Rolmund’s nobles received stellar educations, so they were well-suited to serving as governors, generals or advisors. Bringing more of them over to Meraldia would help us prosper in the long term. However, it was a shame that not even Jovtzia knew where Lord Bolshevik had gone.

“My brother’s always been like this. Bearing all the burdens alone and refusing anyone’s help, claiming no one would want to follow him anyway.”

Well, considering he did betray the Doneiks family, I can’t imagine he’s very popular among his own people...

“You don’t even have any clues about where he might have gone?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Sorry I can’t be of more help...”

I didn’t smell any lies coming off him. I wanted to just get Eleora crowned already so I could go back to Meraldia, but if I left without doing something about Lord Bolshevik, there was a good chance he’d mess with her reign later. I managed to convince Ashley, who was desperate to give up the throne, to delay transferring power for a bit longer while I continued searching for Lord Bolshevik. If I didn’t hurry, I’d miss the midsummer festival. Spring had already come to Rolmund. The last thing I wanted to do was break my promise to Airia. She was terrifying when she was angry.

My impatience continued to grow as the groundwork was laid out to transfer power to Eleora. The Sonnenlicht Order ordained her as an honorary bishop, and construction on a statue of her started within the capital’s largest cathedral. It was obvious the order was trying to raise her popularity with believers. This was probably their way of thanking Eleora for letting them take credit for banishing the skeletons. Most of the nobles in Ashley’s camp switched sides as well and started supporting Eleora. It was kind of amazing how brazen they were, considering they’d been insulting her just a few months ago, but they did have families to protect and citizens to look after. I couldn’t really

blame them for being opportunistic. The job practically required it sometimes.

For my part, I still needed to wrap things up and get out of here as fast as possible, so I started reaching out to everyone I knew and asked them to look for Lord Bolshevik. After a few days of frantic searching, I finally got my hands on a promising lead.

“Lord Veight, I found something strange in one of Lord Doneiks’ confidential documents...”

Mao walked into my office as I was staring at the new greenery sprouting up outside my window.

“Really? Show me.”

I put down the calendar in my hands and skimmed over the documents he handed me. According to Mao, there was something strange about the word “villa” that appeared from time to time within these documents.

“The Doneiks family owned multiple villas, so usually when talking about one it would be specified as the Yukrade Mountain Villa or the Varanika Lakeside Manor or so on.”

I forgot those guys were the richest family in the country...

“But in all the memos sent to Lord Bolshevik, he just writes ‘villa’ without any qualifiers.”

An unscrupulous merchant like Mao dealt with encoded letters and forged documents all the time, so he had a keen eye for picking them out.

“The only reason not to specify the name would be because he didn’t want anyone else discovering what he was talking about. But the villa would have to be one Lord Bolshevik knew about, or they wouldn’t be able to communicate like this.”

“Now that’s intriguing.”

“Isn’t it?” Mao smiled proudly.

Don’t forget, if you teach me your tricks, I’ll use them to flush out your shady deals too.

“So do you have any idea which villa that might be?” I asked.

“I gathered all the information I could on the real estate owned by the Doneiks family and went through it thoroughly. There’s a few villas whose names don’t ever show up within any other documents. If we cross-reference that with the dates of Lord Doneiks’ letters to Lord Bolshevik...”

Mao leaned closer to me and said in a whisper, “I’m thinking it’s the Karankov Villa. That mansion’s hidden deep within Doneiks territory and isn’t often used. It’s also supposedly where Viscount Schmevinsky was sent to ‘recuperate.’”

My old dueling opponent’s face flashed across my mind. I nodded and replied, “So it’s the villa where they send people to kill them or say they’ve sent people they’ve already killed?”

“Correct. Not a very friendly place.”

It was effectively the Doneiks family’s concentration camp.

“So what do the memos Lord Doneiks sent Lord Bolshevik have to say about this villa?”

“Mostly that Lord Bolshevik has the right to use a certain number of the villa’s rooms whenever he wants, for as long as he likes.”

Come to think of it, I didn’t search Doneiks territory that thoroughly yet. I looked over my reports and saw that only a single search party had done a cursory examination of that villa.

“It looks like someone technically did investigate the villa, but it was just the local village overseer, and they didn’t do a very thorough job.”

If Lord Bolshevik was actually hiding there, a sloppy search like that wouldn’t have found him. I grabbed my coat and said, “I’m going to go investigate. You hold the fort while I’m gone.”

“You’re going by yourself!? What about your guards!?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take two squads with me. The rest have to stay here to keep Eleora safe, though.”

“That’s not nearly enough! Do you have any idea how many days a trip to— Ah, Lord Veight’s trying to escape! Someone stop him!”

I ran out of Eleora's manor, ignoring Mao's shouts. This would take too long if I left the job to anyone else. And I didn't have much time left. The fastest way to get this over with was to go myself.

As I ran through the hallway Jerrick and Monza suddenly appeared by my side.

"Yo, boss. Up to something again?"

"You're going out, aren't you?"

I nodded to my two longtime friends.

"Yep. Wanna come with me? Oh, but don't tell Fahn."

"My lips are sealed, boss."

"Ahaha, this is gonna be great!"

With that, I slipped out of the capital without telling even Eleora and headed to Doneiks territory. We sped north as fast as possible, changing mounts at every town. Four days later, the eight members of Jerrick and Monza's squads and I arrived at Karankov Villa.

Officially, Karankov Villa was just a hunting villa. The mansion was surrounded by thick forests, which were supposedly managed by a huntsman. Right now, one of the young nobles who'd switched to Eleora's camp early ruled over this area. I doubted he was helping shelter Lord Bolshevik, since doing so was a massive risk that offered little reward. If Lord Bolshevik was here, he was here in hiding. How he'd managed that, though, I didn't know.

"The servants working in this villa are the same ones who worked here when Lord Doneiks owned the place. Be careful; we don't know where their loyalties lie."

Jerrick nodded to me. "Gotcha. But no matter what happens, we'll protect you."

Just then, all of us noticed something strange.

"Hey, boss?"

“Yeah, Jerrick?”

“Catching poachers is part of the forester’s job, right?”

“Yeah. They’re supposed to make sure the forest has plenty of game so the lords can enjoy their hunt.”

As I said that, I slowly drew my Blast Rifle. We’d been surrounded.

“Whoever these guys are, they’re not human. They’re moving faster than horses in the middle of a dense forest,” Jerrick muttered.

Monza smiled and replied, “Yeah. Maybe they’re werewolves?”

Werewolves certainly were capable of moving through forests at that speed. We were actually as agile as manga seemed to think ninjas were.

“If this place is being guarded by werewolves, then Lord Bolshevik’s definitely inside.” I brought Ryuuga up to my shoulder. “Jerrick, Monza. If the enemy shows themselves, you and your squads have permission to transform.”

“Roger.”

Transforming would spook the horses, so I wanted to avoid it if possible. But this situation was dangerous. Once I confirmed that the werewolves had finished their encirclement, I shouted into the forest, “I’m Veight, from Meraldia! Is Volka there!?”

“You don’t need to shout, kid. I’m right here.”

Volka slowly strode out of the trees. She was already transformed, and she looked ready to fight. From what I could tell, she had around 20 werewolves with her. I kept my Blast Rifle up, but I didn’t point its muzzle at her.

“Is Lord Bolshevik hiding in this villa?”

“Yeah. Gotta say, I’m impressed you figured it out.” Sighing, Volka added, “No one ever comes into this forest. Even the overseers of the local villages can’t enter without permission. That’s why no one investigated this place.”

I see.

“I take it that means you...”

“Mhmm. We’re the ‘foresters’ who manage this hunting ground. Officially, we

work for the Bolshevik family.”

That explained how they’d managed to survive without getting discovered. It also meant no one imprisoned in that villa could ever escape. Even if they made it out of the mansion, no human would be able to give werewolves the slip. Volka scratched her head and gave me a troubled look.

“This is Lord Bolshevik’s last haven. It’s our last haven too.”

“Then I’m sure you don’t want the imperial army getting involved, right?”

“Is that a threat?”

“If I need to threaten you to get what I want, yes.”

I’d wondered why Volka and her clan served Lord Bolshevik, but now I understood. He was the one keeping their home safe. There was only one proposal I could think of that would avoid a fight.

“If you guys hand over Lord Bolshevik, I’ll make sure this place remains yours. We’ll let you guys stay the managers of this forest.”

“That certainly is a tempting offer, but...” Volka shook her head. “Us Rolmund werewolves believe in loyalty. Even if it dooms us, we won’t abandon the debt we owe the Bolshevik family. Sorry.”

Volka’s hands curled into fists. “I may have lost to you once before, but I’m afraid I can’t let you through here.”

Her declaration went against the usual demon creed of submitting to those stronger than you. In the eyes of demon society, I had every right to kill her. But that just showed how determined Volka was. Her loyalty was the real deal. Jerrick and Monza looked quite eager to fight too. They were licking their lips and bringing up their Blast Rifles.

Though we were on Volka’s home turf and outnumbered two to one, all of us were armed with state-of-the-art weapons. Plus I could support my men with magic. Still, if this became an all-out brawl with Volka’s 20 werewolves, both sides would suffer severe losses. Even if I won in the end, who knew how many of my werewolves would die securing victory. Every member of my 50-odd strong werewolf unit was a dear friend I’d grown up with. I didn’t want to lose a

single one of them.

Besides, Volka's loyalty was something I could respect. In fact, I quite liked her. I didn't want to kill her. Unfortunately, it was starting to look like we had no choice but to fight. The werewolves on both sides were dying to start this bloodbath. *What do I do? ...Wait, I've got it. I can't believe I forgot about something so simple.*

"Alright, I can see that you're resolved. The fact that you're willing to oppose me, someone you admitted is stronger than you, means you're prepared to die for your beliefs. I can respect resolve like that." I nodded reverently to Volka. "But we can't afford to back down here either. So..."

I put my Blast Rifle back in the saddle and dismounted from my horse. Smiling, I continued, "How about we settle this with a brawl?"

Volka, who'd been baring her fangs at me, blinked in surprise.

"What do you mean, brawl?"

"Exactly that. A brawl, instead of a deathmatch."

I cast strengthening magic on my werewolves as surreptitiously as I could.

"No holds barred, anything's allowed. Just, we don't kill each other. Once someone surrenders, that's it, it's over. That way there won't be any grudges on either side, but we'll still be able to settle things. What do you say?"

"Hey, hang on a second..." Jerrick muttered, but I looked over my shoulder and winked at him.

"You guys are fine with it, right?"

"Well...if that's what you want, boss..."

"Man, you're hopeless," Monza said with a wry smile.

"Yeah, let's do this!" another one of my werewolves said.

Everyone put away with their Blast Rifles and jumped off their horses. Volka stared at us in shock, but after a few seconds she let out a hearty laugh.

"Hahaha! You're a soft one, you know that kid! But do you really think you can beat us without those fancy weapons of yours!?"

“Of course I do.” I provoked her, knowing that no werewolf could resist a challenge like that. “Us Meraldian werewolves are a cut above you Rolmund werewolves. Nine people’s more than enough to beat you down.”

Upon hearing that, Volka bristled. All thoughts about being loyal to her duty or whether this was some kind of trick or not flew out of her head.

“I hope your bite matches your bark, boy!”

“Oh, it does. Are you ready to taste dirt?”

I bared my fangs at Volka. She did the same and shouted, “Get ‘em, boys!”

“Let’s do this, guys!” I roared at almost the same time.

The howling of werewolves drowned out all other noise in the forest.

“Raaah! Take this!”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Dammit, that *hurts!*”

Since my werewolves were up against a little over 20 enemies, there was no way they’d win fighting fairly. But both Monza and Jerrick’s squads had perfected working as a team, and they always made sure to take on groups of werewolves that were four or less. They kept moving too, making sure the remaining werewolves couldn’t catch up and outnumber them.

“Dammit, get back here!”

“This is our forest!”

“Bahahaha, catch me if you can!”

Monza in particular was doing a wonderful job of stringing people along. She and her squad were light on their feet, and before long they’d vanished deep into the forest. Ten or so werewolves followed behind her, goaded by her taunts. Jerrick and his squad darted off in another direction while fighting through a smaller group of werewolves. Right now Monza’s squad was the one that had the most werewolves chasing after them. I wanted to go support her, but before I could move I found myself surrounded by four werewolves, one of whom was Volka.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she growled. As she kept my movements in check, she shouted, “You guys, be careful around him!”

“We know, granny!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll beat the shit out of him!”

Oh, you don’t know anything. Though I wanted to taunt them out loud, the truth was that I wasn’t much stronger than the average werewolf, at least physically. Even with strengthening magic, I couldn’t take on four werewolves at once. I needed to be creative with my magic and fight defensively if I wanted to win. Injecting some confidence into my voice, I grinned wickedly and said in my best supervillain voice, “Bring it on.”

Everyone but Volka rushed at me simultaneously.

“You’re mine!”

“Take this!”

Their punches and kicks came from all directions, so I was forced to guard instead of dodge. *Man, werewolves really are fast.*

“Wow, this guy’s a pushover!”

“We can take him, granny!”

Though it looked like I was getting beaten down, I was grinning to myself. These guys used only simple attacks and had no follow-up combos. Their plan was to surround me and chip me down with hit-and-run tactics.

Volka had mentioned that her ancestors had grown up hunting giant monsters. Their style must have revolved around darting in for a blow or two, then retreating to safety before they could get hit with a counterattack, just like how normal wolves hunted big game like moose. I was relieved to learn that ancient fighting style of theirs was the same even now.

Volka’s werewolves were definitely coordinated, and they knew how to target my blind spots. Guarding against all their attacks was certainly difficult. However, because their style was hit-and-run, they’d always back off after a single blow. Meanwhile, I’d enhanced myself with pain-numbing magic and regeneration magic. The time in between attacks was more than enough to

recover from all the damage I'd received in the previous assault.

"You're going down!"

"Uryaaaaaaah!"

The three people attacking me were likely Volka's grandchildren. Or if not hers, at least from that generation. They were awfully young, and their inexperience was beginning to show. Because I wasn't fighting back, their attacks slowly got sloppier, and they started dropping their guard.

"U-Ugh..." I groaned in pain and staggered two steps backward. The moment I did, the young werewolves rushed in, confident of their victory. In their haste to finish me off, their coordination broke down.

"We've got you now!"

Volka hurriedly shouted, "Stop, get back!"

Too late. I watched the werewolves' footwork, then took a calculated step backwards. A punch came flying at my face, but because I'd moved back it'd hit me without much force behind it. In fact, it didn't hurt at all even though it landed squarely on my nose. *Now then, I think I'll take that arm.* I grabbed the young werewolf's arm and yanked him forward. At the same time, I swept his feet out from under him. This was a trick I'd used quite often in duels. Back then, I'd had to make it work without the help of my werewolf strength to aid me, so now pulling it off was a piece of cake. As the werewolf pitched forward I circled around behind him. I placed a palm against his defenseless back and cast the opposite of the pain-numbing spell on him. Instead of deadening his nerves, it heightened their sensitivity, multiplying all pain he felt. Once that was done, I kicked him in the ass.

"Uyaaaaaaa!"

As he screamed, another werewolf tried to charge me from behind.

"Damn you!"

This one was more skilled than the last. With exquisite footwork, he got past my guard and launched a roundhouse kick at my head. I'd be concussed at the very least if that hit, so I ducked underneath the werewolf's leg a split-second

before it connected. He was good, but nowhere near as good as Volka. Still hunched low to the ground, I tackled the leg he was using as a pivot, and threw him off-balance. Before I could capitalize on my advantage though, the third werewolf charged at me.

“Don’t you daaaare!”

The third werewolf came at me with his claws, but he picked a bad direction to charge from. The second werewolf’s body was blocking him from reaching me. Before the third werewolf could circle around, I shoved the second werewolf as hard as I could, sending him barreling into the third. I was expecting him to dodge easily enough, but the third werewolf just stood there, seemingly losing the will to fight.

“SSister!”

Sister? The second werewolf’s a girl? Well, I guess it doesn’t matter either way. The second werewolf slammed into the third, sending both of them sprawling onto the ground in a tangle of limbs. Weight manipulation magic was one of my specialties, and I was especially good at making myself heavier. I straddled the two collapsed werewolves and increased my weight as much as possible.

“Gaaaaaah!”

“Ngh. S-So heavy...”

The two werewolves struggled underneath me, but they were unable to extricate themselves from my hold. Against humans, brute force would be enough to throw someone off you, but against a fellow werewolf, you actually needed technique. Wild flailing would get you nowhere. Glancing back, I saw that the first werewolf was still rolling around the ground, their hands covering their butt. Pain amplifying magic wasn’t very consistent, but it seemed to have worked out this time. From the looks of it, the first werewolf was hurting quite a bit. He’d be out of commission for at least half a minute or so. Meanwhile, the two werewolves underneath me were reaching their limits.

“I-I can’t take it anymore...I surrender...”

“I’m sorry...p-please forgive me...”

I canceled my weight-increasing magic, and the two werewolves stopped struggling. The whole time I was worried Volka might make a move, but she'd just stood there, watching. Even though she might have been able to beat me while I was occupied, or at the very least rescued her comrades, she kept her distance. Noticing my gaze, Volka sighed, "Marsha, Narsha, Misha, you three still have a lot to learn."

The three werewolves canceled their transformations. To my surprise, all of them were girls. They looked to be in their mid to late teens.

"Owwwwww..."

"My butt... My poor butt..."

"Sis, you're really heavy..."

I looked down at them, taken aback. *I can't believe I was that rough with them.* A sudden wave of guilt washed over me. Granted, I was the one who'd said this was a no-holds-barred brawl, but still. Honestly, I should have been able to tell from their scent and their voices that they were girls, but I'd been too focused on fighting.

"Are these your grandkids, Volka?"

"They're my niece's kids. But it looks like they're still far from useful in a fight."

True, their movements had been pretty dull. They wouldn't last five minutes on a real battlefield. I put the three girls out of my thoughts and focused my attention on Volka.

"Now then, you're the only one left."

Volka took her stance but kept a safe distance between us. She was being uncharacteristically cautious. Sensing my confusion, Volka grinned.

"The other battles should be over by now. The rest of my clan'll be here soon. I'm not stupid enough to think me and the three girls would be enough to take you out."

Ah, so you were just buying time. Volka had picked three novices to throw at me on purpose. They were just disposable pawns meant to slow me down.

Though she was sorely overestimating me, that had tactically been the right move. But now that I knew what she was up to, there was nothing to worry about. I smiled confidently at Volka and said, “Are you sure it’s your werewolves who’ll be coming back victorious?”

Just then, the first werewolf appeared from the darkness. He was one of Volka’s. *Hang on, did my guys lose?* Noticing my hostile gaze, the Rolmund werewolf hurriedly waved his hand.

“H-Hold on, I’ve already surrendered. That bitch dislocated my shoulder.”

Thank god, I was worried there for a second. After that more Rolmund werewolves started filing back, but they’d all surrendered. A few minutes later, Jerrick and Monza returned with their squads.

“Yo boss, we’re back. It was tough, but we won.”

“Heh, you too, Jerrick? That was a fun fight.”

Monza’s squad had gone down to three, while Jerrick’s squad only had two people left. And those who were still in fighting shape were covered in wounds. *So there’s just three guys who’re out of commission.* As expected, Monza’s squad had excelled in a forest fight. Meanwhile, Jerrick’s squad was made up entirely of craftsmen and engineers, so they’d had it tough.

Still, they’d succeeded, which meant I wouldn’t have to burn all my mana on a full-power Soul Shaker. I was confident that would have been enough to win, but I wanted to preserve some strength for our confrontation with Lord Bolshevik. My wounded werewolves spread out around Volka, surrounding her.

“We’ve taken out the rest of Rolmund’s werewolves. You’re the only one left now,” Jerrick said with a confident grin. Volka shrugged her shoulders and replied, “Hmm, I thought my boys would win, too... Well, there’s no point in resisting any further. I admit defeat.”

Volka canceled her transformation and smiled bitterly at me. And thus, my werewolves’ record of consecutive victories grew by one.

After the battle, I realized what the biggest factor in our victory had been. Though she’d come with twenty or so of her werewolves, they hadn’t all been

seasoned fighters, and there were a few children in the group. The reason for that was because they hadn't been expecting us. But when they'd noticed intruders in their forest, Volka had rounded up everyone who was free and hurried over to see who it was. On the other hand, all of my werewolves had been seasoned soldiers who'd survived numerous battles. We may have been outnumbered, but we'd had the upper hand in quality. I felt kind of bad for trouncing werewolves who weren't even fighters, so by way of apology, I healed everyone with my magic.

"Oof, that's one nasty bruise. That's gonna leave a scar on your neck. Who did that to you?"

"Th-That woman over there. The one who's smiling..." I turned to see Monza smiling and waving at us. The werewolf I was healing started tearing up. "She grabbed me by the throat and threw me headfirst to the ground... I thought I was gonna die..."

Yeah, Monza's brutal alright.

"You really need to learn how to hold back, Monza."

"I did hold back."

Of course, Rolmund's werewolves had been plenty strong themselves, and Monza and the others were covered in their fair share of cuts and bruises. They actually took a bit of time for me to heal. Honestly, if I hadn't used strengthening magic on everyone, we probably would have lost. That was a really close call. Once I finished with everyone else, I finally moved on to the three werewolf girls I'd taken down.

"Hmmm, yep, looks like you guys'll be fine."

"But my ass still hurts..." The youngest girl, Misha, was still massaging her butt.

"It's just a little swollen. Sorry about that, though."

The pain magnifying spell should have worn off by now...

"You were so heavy, sis..."

"That wasn't me, that was him!"

Marsha and Narsha on the other hand were completely unhurt. Volka grinned at them and said, "You three lucked out, you know? You got paired up with the nicest enemy you could get."

"Yeah, but it still hurt, Granny!"

Their complaints might have been petty, but I still felt bad for taking them down like that. Ignoring the girls' griping, Volka turned to me as the rest of her pack gathered around her.

"So whaddya think? Any one of them catch your fancy?"

"What do you take me for?" I shrugged.

The three of them were still teenagers.

"If you were willing to marry into my pack I could rest easy knowing Rolmund's werewolves would be safe but... I guess that's not happening, huh?"

Don't tell me that's why you made me fight them.

"Sorry, but I've got other responsibilities. Anyway, can you take me to Lord Bolshevik now?"

The whole reason I was in such a rush was because I wanted to keep my promise to Airia. I couldn't afford to let anything delay me. Sighing, Volka got to her feet.

"Alright, alright. I'll stop getting in your way. Come on, follow me."

Finally. Finding that bastard took forever... Since I'd healed everyone, we headed to the Karankov Villa with a full complement of two squads.

"Watching over this forest is our job, so all of our villages are scattered throughout here. There's ten or so of them with twenty to thirty people each. I think there are about two hundred Rolmund werewolves in total," Volka explained as we walked.

"I see." I nodded casually, but there was cold sweat pouring down my back. *I can't believe there's that many...*

Volka and the others didn't know this, but our Blast Rifles couldn't fire that many shots in quick succession. Two was the limit. If you lowered the range and

firepower of each shot a bit you could increase the amount of bullets in a single “magazine” but even then you’d get half a dozen at most. We didn’t have enough shots to take out 200 werewolves, and once our bullets were depleted we’d be overwhelmed with numbers.

Thank god I proposed a brawl instead. We would have been torn apart in a war. According to Volka, about half of them were kids or old people who weren’t really in fighting shape, but even then, 100 werewolves was still a lot. Fortunately, she’d told her clan not to attack us, and we were able to reach the Karankov Villa in one piece.

“Everything past here’s outside our territory. If you want directions, ask one of their butlers or something,” Volka said dismissively.

“Gotcha. Thanks.”

“If you can, try not to be too hard on the kid. We owe his father a lot.”

It seemed Volka was rather fond of Lord Bolshevik. I nodded and replied, “That depends on how our conversation goes. I want to solve this as peacefully as possible too, but I’m not the one with authority here.”

Lord Bolshevik was the ringleader of a rebellion, after all. Volka nodded and waved to me. “I know. He’s gotta answer for what he’s done, one way or another...”

“Yeah... Anyway, I’ll see you later.”

I waved back to Volka and her three nieces, then walked up to the mansion’s gates.

For a supposed hunting manor, the Karankov Villa was far too big and had far too many guest rooms. *I guess it really was the Doneiks family’s concentration camp.* All of the mansion’s first-floor windows had stylized iron bars set into them, and the front door was much heavier than it had any right to be. It looked pleasant enough at first glance, but it was obvious this was a horror house meant to prevent anyone within from escaping. It probably looked even scarier at night. Inside, the atmosphere really solidified it as a place of dread. Cobweb-encrusted chandeliers hung from the dark ceiling, and butlers dressed in all

black came out to greet us. There were three in total, one old, two young. The old butler gave me a quick look over, then said politely, “Welcome to Karankov Villa. Are you here to see someone?”

My werewolves stared warily at the old butler, while I glanced from him to the two younger butlers on either side. After a moment’s consideration I sighed and said, “I’m Veight, from the Meraldian Commonwealth Council. Incidentally, sir, who are those two men to either side of you?”

The old butler remained silent, but the two younger ones lowered their centers of gravity. I *really* didn’t want to go through another fight.

“Rolmundian servants pride themselves on being inconspicuous. I’ve never heard of three butlers all coming out to greet guests. Especially considering those two men behind you seem to be gathering an awful lot of mana.”

I’d learned a thing or two about Rolmund etiquette in my time here, and as a mage, I could easily sense their mana. Seeing as no one replied, I decided to make my threats a little more overt.

“Those two mages behind you certainly have a lot of mana, but they’re complete amateurs when it comes to controlling it. The only people I can think of who might have that much mana without any training are demons.”

Though I couldn’t be positive, my guess was they were vampires. If nothing else, they had a similar scent to Melaine’s subordinates. The two younger butlers got ready to strike, but the older one held out a hand to restrain them.

“Don’t, you two.”

“But...”

“If he made it through our guard dogs, we won’t be able to stop him. Stand down.”

As far as I could tell, the older butler was just a human, but the two demons still listened to him. Bowing, the two of them retreated to a corner of the room. The older butler nodded to me and said, “My apologies for the rude greeting. Please, forgive them.”

“It’s fine. More importantly, Lord Bolshevik’s here, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is currently resting at this villa. Allow me to guide you to him.”

The butler walked down the hall, indicating for us to follow. As we strode deeper into the mansion I asked him, “Who were those two?”

To my surprise, he gave up their identities pretty easily.

“Vampires, my lord.”

“And they’re employed as this manor’s servants?”

“Oh no, they’re Lord Bolshevik’s personal guards. He has a few more vampires serving directly under him.”

So he’s a rebel duke who leads a cabal of vampires. That’s actually kinda cool.
We crossed a narrow walkway and entered a detached building within the manor.

“Lord Bolshevik is currently making use of this entire building. I have been ordered to bring any guests to the parlor, where Lord Bolshevik shall receive you.”

“Thank you.”

The butler left us at the entrance to the parlor, and I knocked on the door.

“Come in. I’ve been expecting you,” a familiar voice answered.

I ordered my werewolves to remain on standby, then went in alone. There was a fire burning in the hearth, and numerous candles lit up the room. It really did seem like Lord Bolshevik had been expecting me. He was reclining alone on the sofa in the back of the room.

“It’s been a while, Lord Veight. I had to rush preparations a little, so please forgive me if the hospitality is not to your liking.”

I couldn’t sense any hostility from him, but he did look awfully haggard. I’d been expecting a few traps or a surprise attack at the very last, so I was kind of amazed he didn’t try anything. Still a little wary, I walked over and sat down on the sofa across from him.

“I’m glad you seem to be in good health, Lord Bolshevik.”

“I’ve been stripped of my title, so I’m no lord anymore. From what I understand, my brother inherited my position, so you can just call me Shallier.”

“Shallier it is, then. I assume you know why I’m here?”

“But of course,” Shallier replied with a smile. That smile unnerved me a little, but I kept my tone professional.

“Procedure dictates that I should take you in for questioning, but...”

I didn’t want to piss off the demons working for Shallier, so I decided to change my plans a little.

“I’ve decided I’d like to hear your story first before deciding what to do with you. Would you be willing to share?”

Shallier gave me a surprised look. “Are you sure about this?”

“I am.”

Had he wanted to run, he could have escaped while I was duking it out with Volka and her clan. Part of the reason I wanted to hear him out was because he hadn’t, but it wasn’t the main reason.

“Your hideout is protected by werewolves, vampires, and humans,” I said with an exaggerated sigh. “The primary goal of the demon army that I serve is to create a world where humans and demons can live in harmony. You may be a threat to Rolmund, and perhaps even to Meraldia, but as a member of the demon army, what I see is potential.”

For a moment Shallier looked taken aback, but then he chuckled. “I may have enlisted the help of demons, but I’m afraid I only did so to protect my own skin. I wasn’t chasing after any lofty ideals like you.”

“But the fact remains that you are living together with werewolves and vampires.”

It was obvious they weren’t his slaves either. They were trying to protect him of their own free will.

“You’ve managed to earn the trust of demons, and that in turn has earned my respect,” I said. “I need to at least show you some courtesy, or the Demon Lord will be quite cross with me.”

“Will he really?”

“Oh yes, the Demon Lord is quite adamant about things like this.”

To be honest, I wasn't sure what Master would say if I let Shallier get executed, but I was at least certain she wouldn't be mad if I decided to help him. Realizing that I was serious, Shallier smiled sadly and leaned back into the sofa.

“Very well. Thank you for your mercy. So...where should I begin?”

I already knew what I wanted to ask Shallier first.

“Shallier, did you lose on purpose in order to manipulate me?”

Because of my connection to the Sonnenlicht Church, the Sternenfeuer believers in Shallier's old lands wouldn't be hunted down. Plus the entire territory would be under Eleora's management. There was no need to worry that they might get persecuted. If Shallier's goal had just been to secure the safety of his religious followers, then he'd succeeded splendidly. Shallier scrutinized my expression for a few minutes, then shook his head with the same sad smile.

“No, I wouldn't say that I lost on purpose. It's a bit of a long story, though. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“That's fine. The night's still young.”

I leaned back into the sofa as well, making myself comfortable.

Shallier grabbed a bottle of alcohol off a nearby shelf and poured us both a glass. It looked like one of the strong red whiskeys that North Rolmund was famous for.

“My family, the Bolshevik family, initially started expanding its influence because my ancestors believed they needed wealth and status to protect the Sternenfeuer believers of this region,” he muttered as he swirled the contents of his glass.

According to him, the Bolshevik family became big right around the time the war between the Sonnenlicht and Sternenfeuer was coming to a close. The

Sonnenlicht Order was much more organized, and they'd been able to convert far more people than the Sternenfeuer adherents, so Sternenfeuer was at a disadvantage.

"The priests of the Sternenfeuer religion were all too busy pursuing the path of enlightenment to go out and proselytize."

But as a result, the Sternenfeuer religion began to decline. Shallier didn't know whether the first Lord Bolshevik had been Sternenfeuer to begin with or if he'd been converted from Sonnenlicht. But either way, he pretended to be a Sonnenlicht believer in public. Eventually the Sonnenlicht Order won the war, and the old Rolmund Republic became the Rolmund Empire. During the transition, the first Lord Bolshevik sheltered the remaining followers of Sternenfeuer.

"Then finally, things reached my generation," Shallier's smile went from sad to bitter as he talked. "But to be honest, I lacked confidence. I didn't think I was capable of protecting the Sternenfeuer believers in my lands until the next generation took over."

"You, of all people, weren't confident?"

I couldn't believe a master schemer like him had struggled with self-doubt. Shallier's smile grew even more bitter.

"No one was willing to follow me. I suppose I couldn't blame them. I did betray the Doneiks family which had aided us for so long."

"If you knew your betrayal would lose the trust of your closest allies, why did you do it?"

"It was the only option left to me..." Shallier shrugged his shoulders. It seemed that while he was smart, he wasn't very good at planning ahead. He gulped down the contents of his glass and said, "My, or rather the Bolshevik family's mission is to make sure the teachings of Sternenfeuer don't die out. After wracking my brain for days, I was able to come up with only one possible way to ensure they endured."

"And that method was usurping the throne?"

"Yes."

I can't tell if you're super cautious or super reckless. I picked up my own glass of whiskey and shook it a little.

“Why did you have to go so far? Wouldn't staying under Eleora's protection have been enough?”

“Princess Eleora may have a lot of influence with the Sonnenlicht Order now, but when I first made these plans it was Dillier and the Schwerin family who had the most power over the church.”

Come to think of it, I only tried to make connections with the Sonnenlicht Order because he put all this in motion. Shallier poured himself another glass of whiskey and smirked at me.

“I knew that if a Sternenfeuer believer like me started acting suspicious, you would be certain to make contact with the Sonnenlicht Order. Your diplomatic prowess was my greatest weapon. I knew you were capable of turning anyone into an ally by offering the right terms.”

Just like how I did with Woroy and Ryuunie, huh?

“So you figured the terms I'd bring to the Sonnenlicht Order would help Sternenfeuer out too?” I asked.

“Yes. I knew you'd want to bring the remaining Sternenfeuer believers on my lands over to Eleora's side, and I was confident you'd find a way to make that happen.”

Damn, he saw right through me.

“Of course, it was possible you might fail too,” Shallier said, the bitterness leaving his smile. “Which was why my backup plan was taking over the empire. I was serious about that coup.”

“I take it your plan was to remove Ashley and have Dillier become empress?”

“Indeed. Making her empress was my greatest and my only chance to expand Sternenfeuer's influence beyond what the Sonnenlicht Order could control. Though...” Shallier gave me a troubled look. “I don't think I'd be able to make Sternenfeuer the official religion of the empire, even with a Sternenfeuer empress. Had my coup succeeded, we'd have a religious war on our hands.”

“Indeed.”

I’d been a bit of a history buff back in my old life, so I could easily imagine what kind of result Shallier’s coup would have brought about. Unless someone with exceptional leadership skills stepped up, Rolmund would have been stuck in a long, painful civil war. However, the Sternenfeuer believers working for Shallier probably hadn’t known that. For better or worse, Shallier and I were the only people who knew what would have happened if his coup had succeeded.

“Naturally, if I took into account the fact that you might fail to convince the church, I had to take into account the possibility that my coup might fail too. I had to make sure that no matter what happened, the Sternenfeuer religion would live on.”

“So you used me?”

Well, not that I mind all that much. Shallier just smiled quietly at me so I smiled back and lifted my glass in a toast. He mimicked the gesture and said, “I knew from the start that the Sternenfeuer sect doesn’t have the numbers to eliminate the Sonnenlicht Order in a war. But now, the other Sternenfeuer believers have been forced to accept that as well. I needed them to see that, or they would never allow themselves to be ruled by a Sonnenlicht noble.”

“Still, that was one risky gamble you took.”

“Oh, I know. Though I’d like to think I managed the odds pretty well. Of course, not well enough to win against you.”

Shallier seemed oddly at ease, as if admitting defeat had taken a weight off his shoulders.

“Now the remaining Sternenfeuer believers won’t attempt any more revolts, and Eleora and the Sonnenlicht Order will guarantee their safety.” He looked me in the eyes, his smile growing wider. “Since the official story is that I deceived Dillier and am solely to blame for the coup, I’ll be the only one to be executed. And with that, everything will be settled.”

“So that’s why you didn’t run?”

My meeting with Dillier had taught me that Sternenfeuer believers weren’t allowed to commit suicide. So Shallier had manipulated events in such a way

that I'd be the architect of his demise. He replied, "I never once wanted to inherit the title of Lord Bolshevik, protector of the heretics. That responsibility was too great for me. But I couldn't afford to just abandon it either."

Shallier sighed in relief.

"Once the coup ended, I went into hiding so I could keep an eye on the situation and make sure things didn't take a turn for the worse. Now I know there's no need to worry. Sternenfeuer will fare just fine without me. I've done my duty; now I can rest."

I thought about everything he'd told me for a few seconds, then replied, "I realize it's a bit late to be asking this, and maybe it doesn't matter anymore, but was there really no other way?"

"True, there might have been other solutions. But I wanted to see if the light of the stars could eclipse the sun, even if only for a moment."

Shallier's smile was triumphant. He didn't look like the failed ringleader of a coup, but rather a victor who'd achieved everything he set out to do. *This guy really is something.*

Suddenly Shallier's smile vanished and he asked, "By the way, where is Dillier now? I no longer have the means to investigate her whereabouts."

"Why do you care? She isn't of any use to you anymore, right?"

I purposely phrased my question as callously as possible, and Shallier frowned.

"Don't tell me you thought I approached her solely because I wanted to use her?"

"Am I wrong?"

Shallier idly swirled his glass around, his expression sorrowful.

"Had she succeeded in usurping the throne, I would have been spending the rest of my life with her. I may be a schemer, but even I wouldn't ask a woman I didn't like to marry me."

"So you truly loved her?"

“Yes. I was quite enamored by her determination to fight her fate, no matter how perilous a road that might be. Besides, she is quite beautiful.”

You’ve got some weird tastes, man. Sighing, I got to my feet.

“Princess Dillier is currently being confined in Creech Castle. She’s being held on the top floor of the castle’s northwest tower. I doubt her life is in danger, but I also doubt she will ever be released.”

“I see...thank you very much. Wait, are you leaving, Lord Veight?”

I turned my back to Shallier and said, “I have just now carried out the execution of Duke Shallier Bolshevik. As my business here is done, I shall be taking my leave.”

Shallier got to his feet in surprise. “You’re letting me go!? Wouldn’t that be betraying Princess Eleora?”

“I serve not Eleora, but the Demon Lord. And as the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, I will *not* kill a man who has earned the trust of demons.”

If the werewolves and the vampires living here liked Shallier, that made him an ally of demons. No way I could kill someone like that. Though I would need some concessions from him.

“Eleora will definitely protect the demons living in Rolmund. So I would like you to convince them to swear fealty to her. That’s my condition for letting you live.”

“Honestly, I’d prefer it if they did that too...”

If Eleora could get the support of Rolmund’s werewolves and vampires, her power would grow exponentially. Demons made for perfect spies, as well as perfect bodyguards. As far as official records were concerned, Shallier died here. So if sparing him would bring the demons over to Eleora’s side, that was a small price to pay.

“Are you certain you want to do this?” Shallier stared intently at me.

“Positive. Even if by some chance I misjudged you and you’re planning another coup, it doesn’t matter. If I didn’t think Eleora was capable of handling anything you throw at her, she wouldn’t deserve the throne anyway.”

I had absolute faith in Eleora. As she was now, I had no doubt she could handle an attempted coup by a disgraced former Duke no problem. Shallier gave me an exasperated smile.

“You truly are a strange man. Who are you, really?”

“Just an ordinary vice-commander.”

With this, Duke Shallier Bolshevik had disappeared from the world. Never again would he appear on the political stage. My work in Rolmund was finally done. *I hope I can make it back in time.*

As I strode out of the parlor, I suddenly noticed the door across from it had a nameplate that read “Viscount Schmevinsky.” *That’s the same Count of Slaughter I beat in a duel all those months back, isn’t it?* I knocked on the door, then opened it when I got no reply. As expected, the room was empty. In fact, it looked like it had never been used.

“What’s up, boss?”

“Is there something special about this room?”

Monza and Jerrick peered over my shoulders to see what I was looking at. Without turning back, I explained, “This is where one of the guys I beat in a duel is supposedly staying. Though in reality he’s been dead for months.”

“Aha, I see. Man, that’s funny.”

It is? Lord Doneiks, the man responsible for killing Schmevinsky, was dead too. That meant that no one alive knew that Viscount Schmevinsky was really dead. History books would probably say that he died much later due to natural causes or maybe disease. As I stared at the empty room, it suddenly struck me how strange the whole situation was. Just then, I heard someone else approaching. With Jerrick’s chin still resting on my shoulder, I muttered, “Don’t try to sneak up on me like that. You’ll put my guards on edge.”

Two figures stepped out of the shadows of a nearby pillar. They were the young vampires who’d been dressed as butlers. Like werewolves, vampires were demons that fed on humans, so they were skilled at sneaking up on people. Of course, they couldn’t deceive a werewolf’s nose. One of the

vampires bowed slightly to me.

“Thank you for showing Shallier mercy.”

“We’re part of Meraldia’s demon army. Our goal is to create a country for demons to live in. In that sense, Shallier is our ally. There’s no need to thank me.”

Besides, I was partly doing this to bring Rolmund’s demons over onto Eleora’s side. Though of course I wasn’t gonna say that. The other vampire glared provocatively at me and said, “Just so you know, if Lord Bolshevik had ordered us to, we would have sucked the blood of every noble we could get our hands on and turned them all into vampires before starting another revolt. So if you ever go back on your word...”

“Stop it, Thuka.”

“But Thura...”

The vampire known as Thura shook his head and the one called Thuka reluctantly backed off. Thura turned back to me and bowed once more.

“Please forgive my brother. He’s just devoted to Lord Bolshevik.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.” I smiled and waved my hand dismissively. “I can tell Rolmund’s demons owe the Bolshevik family a great deal. As someone whose home was saved by the demon army, I can understand your feelings.”

Unlike in Meraldia, the human presence in Rolmund was overwhelming. The Bolshevik family must have gone to great lengths to protect these vampires and their families. I could see why they were so loyal to Shallier. The question was, how could I use that loyalty to turn them into allies?

I tried to come up with some good ideas as I walked through the villa. The moment I strode out the front door, I saw there were 200 men and women of all ages gathered outside. Volka was standing at their head. It seemed this was all of the werewolves and vampires living in the forest. My werewolves filed out behind me and I declared, “This villa and the surrounding hunting grounds now belong to Princess Eleora. You will all henceforth be under her jurisdiction. But fear not, she will protect you just as the Bolshevik family has done.”

The demons of Rolmund remained silent, but I could tell they were unhappy. So I smiled reassuringly and said, “I understand that you all owe the Bolshevik family a great debt. However, Shallier Bolshevik is now a wanted man. In order to protect him, I will make it so that officially, he was executed by me.”

The demons started exchanging dubious glances. *Perfect, now’s my chance.*

“Shallier has spent his tenure as Lord Bolshevik doing his best to protect the demons and Sternenfeuer believers in his care. As a demon myself, I’m grateful for what he’s done, even if he was a political rival. Which is why, as a token of gratitude, I would like to free him from his burdens.”

The demons started muttering to each other upon hearing that.

“I see... Lord Shallier must be exhausted after everything he’s been through.”

“But we can’t just abandon him...”

After a few seconds I held out a hand for silence and said, “So long as you continue to serve him, Shallier will never be free of his duties. And if he’s forced to act in order to protect all of you, my position will require me to capture and execute him for real.”

Though there weren’t that many Rolmund demons, they were a serious threat.

“Fortunately, Princess Eleora is an understanding woman. So long as you are willing to lend your aid in preserving the peace of Rolmund, she will ensure the safety of the Bolshevik family.”

One of the vampires I’d spoken to earlier—Thura—muttered, “So these are your conditions...”

“I would prefer it if you didn’t think of them as conditions, but it is an invariable fact that Eleora cannot afford to let Shallier roam free if he has the support of so many demons.”

The only way I could let Shallier live was by making sure he was powerless to interfere in politics from now on. Volka stepped forward and asked solemnly, “Will you really spare that kid if we do as you ask? And can you promise us we’ll get to keep our home?”

“Of course. I swear it on my name as the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.”

Things might get problematic if Eleora opposed my decision, but I was pretty sure she wouldn’t. The gathered werewolves and vampires all exchanged glances, then nodded unanimously. Giving voice to their thoughts, Volka said, “Then it’s decided. We’ll put our faith in you.”

“Thank you.”

Relieved, I declared, “In that case, we’ll head back to the capital for now. When we next return it’ll be together with Princess Eleora’s army. Make sure you get Shallier as far away from here as possible by then!”

I threw my cape back and began my journey back to the capital.

Afterward, Eleora’s army seized the Karankov Villa and the surrounding forest. The demons living there swore fealty to Eleora, and they were now working as her spies. She also proclaimed that she’d discovered Shallier Bolshevik hiding within the villa and executed him, which brought this entire incident to a close.

As for where Shallier had actually gone, I had no clue. He covered his tracks perfectly. And since he had no retainers or territory, there was no way to tell what he was up to. Though I was fairly certain he wouldn’t try to stir up any more rebellions. However, he did cause one little scene before vanishing completely.

The room on the top floor of Creech Castle’s northwest tower was somewhat cramped, but it was well-furnished and had an excellent view of the lake.

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well, Princess Dillier,” I said. There was no reply. “Is there anything troubling you?”

As expected, there was still no reply. Shrugging, I walked out of the room on the top floor of Creech Castle’s northwest tower. The royal guardsman who was tasked with keeping watch over Dillier’s room was waiting for me outside. I gave him a knowing smile and said, “I see Princess Dillier is the same as always.”

“Indeed...”

I glanced over at the table the guard was sitting at and saw a tray of cold food resting atop it. The meal wasn't extravagant, but it was still pretty fancy.

"Is this her lunch?"

"It is."

"She really should eat. She needs to keep her strength up," I said with an exaggerated sigh. Then I smiled conspiratorially to the guard and asked, "I take it her health has been declining because she's refusing her meals?"

"Y-Yes, it has... At this rate, she might die in another two years."

"I see."

That seemed like a good amount of time. In two years this whole incident would be forgotten. I nodded to the guard and walked up to the viewport built into the door of Dillier's room.

"I'll be taking my leave now, Princess Dillier," I said to an empty room.

"She was definitely here last night..." The guardsman said, cold sweat pouring down his forehead. "But when the guard on the dawn shift came, her cell was completely empty. We believe she probably escaped through the window."

"I imagine Princess Dillier couldn't have managed all this alone."

"Of course, sir. There was someone on guard duty at all times, and her cell was locked. She couldn't have left alone without someone noticing."

Meaning there was someone who'd helped her escape. After her attempted coup, Dillier's popularity with the citizenry had tanked. Her close guards and attendants were all stuck in the capital, where they'd been since Dillier surrendered, so they couldn't have been involved either. Whoever had gone through the trouble of staging a Hollywood movie-style escape for Dillier must have been quite the eccentric. *Well, I can think of someone who fits the bill.*

"I imagine she's probably exchanging her vows right around now..."

"What was that, sir?"

"Oh, nothing. Don't worry about it." I gave the guard a friendly smile.

"Princess Eleora has decided not to pursue this matter. Continue guarding

Princess Dillier's cell as before."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

This way, no one would be affected by Dillier's escape. And since the royal guards were trained to keep secrets, no one would even know she *had* escaped.

Lord Bolshevik's attempt to usurp Ashley's reign and put his fiancée, Dillier, on the throne had failed. After that Eleora had led her army to Karankov Villa, where she'd taken care of Lord Bolshevik, who'd gone into hiding. Feeling responsible for the string of rebellions that had happened during his reign, Ashley would soon abdicate and appoint Eleora the new empress. Naturally, Eleora would accept the appointment. Princess Dillier, who was confined in Creech Castle, would die two years later after battling a long illness. With that, everything regarding this rebellion would be settled.

It was possible that years down the line people looking exactly like Lord Bolshevik and Princess Dillier would suddenly show up in the capital one day. But since the real Lord Bolshevik and Princess Dillier were dead, no one would believe them if they claimed to be nobility. After all, imposters were commonplace in Rolmund. If they showed up in the capital, they'd just be captured, tried, and executed. However, I had a feeling they probably wouldn't ever show up in public again.

At any rate, after Dillier's escape, both Dillier and Shallier vanished without a trace. I sent a werewolf squad to track them out of curiosity, and even they couldn't figure out where the two of them had gone. They'd probably left the empire. *I dunno where you guys are or what you're doing, but I hope you've found happiness. More importantly, the summer solstice is almost here. I can already see the early signs of summer in Rolmund. I don't have much time left if I want to keep my promise with Airia.* Returning home on schedule would be my biggest challenge yet.

While I'd managed to put a stop to Shallier's rebellion, I still needed to finish solidifying Eleora's support base. Though plenty of opportunistic nobles had jumped ship to her camp, there were a few who absolutely refused to follow her. The stubborn ones were the actually competent and loyal nobles, so they

were the ones I needed to actually win over. Furthermore, an anti-Eleora faction was beginning to form, which I wanted to nip in the bud before it became a problem. The Schwerin family had ruled Rolmund for generations, and a lot of the more conservative nobles didn't want to see a non-Schwerin on the throne.

"We've got the mansion surrounded, boss."

"Alright, let's go, then. But remember, be polite. This is a noble we're dealing with."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry, we'll make sure not to kill him."

Monza's squad was one of my most reliable, but I really wish she'd tone down her violent nature a little... All of my squads and a good chunk of Eleora's 209th Mage Corps spent the days leading up to the coronation ceremony running around the capital "persuading" nobles opposed to Eleora's reign to change their mind. As a result, the ceremony itself went without a hitch.

"Two rebellions occurred in the span of a single winter, leading to the deaths of many valued subjects. As both of these rebellions were related either directly or indirectly to the imperial family, I take full responsibility for my failures."

Ashley said this to a crowd of gathered nobles, his voice echoing across the throne room. He stepped forward and took off his crown.

"Thus, I, Ashley Voltof Schwerin Rolmund hereby announce my abdication."

A few people applauded. *I know Ashley didn't do the greatest of jobs, but you could at least give him a better send-off.* Eleora strode in through the large double doors at the end of the room and knelt in front of Ashley.

Smiling sadly, the former emperor declared, "Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund. I pass the crown onto you, marking the beginning of the Originia dynasty."

Ashley gently placed the crown on Eleora's head. She then rose to her feet, basking in the early morning sun. Nodding to Ashley, she turned to the gathered crowd and said, "I, Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund, hereby accept my duty as the Holy Rolmund Empire's new empress. Those who object to my appointment, speak now or forever hold your peace."



Naturally, no one objected. After a moment's silence, all the nobles started clapping. It was almost funny how easily those cowards changed sides. That being said, Eleora was the hero who'd stopped two rebellions. Not only that, but she had connections with Meraldia, and she was a genius inventor. Though I did feel sorry that all of Ashley's achievements were being overshadowed by the grand entrance she'd made on the political stage, her military acumen would make her a better leader than Ashley, unfortunately for him. Even if there were no further wars, the fact that she didn't have to fear rebellion at every turn meant she'd be able to focus on actually ruling.

As the applause started to die down, Cardinal Kushmer appeared with the customary goblet of bitter draught.

"Here you are, Your Majesty."

Cardinal Kushmer offered Eleora the goblet with a smile, and Eleora smiled back as she accepted it. She didn't even hesitate as she downed its contents in a single gulp. Eleora then held the empty goblet up high and said, "This bitterness is nothing compared to the bitter trials Ashley and his predecessors faced as emperor. Everyone, please lend me your strength, so that we can transform this nation into a truly glorious empire."

The nobles cheered their new beautiful empress.

"All hail Empress Eleora!"

"Glory to the empire!"

"Long live the Empress!"

Oh yeah, these guys are a pack of opportunistic jackals alright.

After the coronation ceremony, Eleora invited Ashley into her office. Since I was ostensibly still Eleora's vice-commander, I was also present for the meeting. Ashley looked surprisingly jovial as he walked into Eleora's room.

"I'll leave the rest in your hands, Eleora. Or rather, Your Majesty."

"Don't worry. Now that I'm here, I'll do my best to ensure the empire prospers." Smiling, Eleora tilted her head to one side and asked, "What will you

do now, Ashley?”

Emperors had abdicated in the past, but usually only because they’d been forced to by other nobles. In those cases, they’d been granted some remote border territories and sent into quasi-exile. However, Eleora had no intention of exiling Ashley, nor was she planning on stripping him of his title.

Ashley looked from Eleora to me, then smiled. “I suspect this empire no longer has any need of me. Since I’ve finally gained my freedom I was thinking of going to Meraldia.”

Ashley’s announcement took me by surprise.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Of course. If Rolmund wants to maintain a friendly relationship with Meraldia, it’s going to need a dedicated diplomat, won’t it?”

You’re not wrong, but don’t you have any lingering attachments to this place? Ashley’s smile widened and he added, “Besides, now that he’ll be leaving, you’ll need someone else keeping an eye on this man for you, right, Eleora?”

“What’s that supposed to mean...” I grumbled, and Eleora smiled wryly.

“You’re a famous schemer after all.”

Now that’s just rude.

“By the way, Veight, Ryunheit is Meraldia’s capital, correct?” Ashley asked.

“Yes, the Demon Lord Gomoviroa resides in Ryunheit. As does the Demon Ambassador, Airia, who’s actually in charge of managing the city.”

And if I didn’t get home soon, said Demon Ambassador would be very pissed at me. *I can’t think of a bigger political crisis than that.* Either way, it seemed Ashley was serious about becoming Rolmund’s ambassador to Meraldia.

“Oh, and Your Majesty, I heard about the experiment you were attempting with Knight Lilies,” Ashley said conversationally. He was probably referring to our attempts at solving North Rolmund’s agricultural issues. “Knight Lilies are usually blue, but when we want to make them bloom red, we add ash into the soil. If you want, I can ask the imperial gardener to explain the process in more detail.”

Eleora and I exchanged glances. If they used ash, that meant Knight Lilies needed alkaline soil to bloom red. *I knew it, they really are just like hydrangeas.* We could finally move forward in our plans to revitalize North Rolmund's agriculture.

Eleora turned to Ashley with a confused look and asked, "Why are you telling me that?"

"This knowledge was originally a secret passed down from imperial gardener to imperial gardener, but as you are now empress, I felt like you should know. I actually wanted to tell you sooner, but I didn't get the chance to. Consider this my last gift to you as the late emperor."

Ashley and Eleora both had been pretty busy these past few weeks. The former emperor rose to his feet and gave Eleora a gentle smile.

"This empire may have no need of me anymore, but I still care deeply for its subjects. Please do for them what I could not, Empress Eleora."

Eleora gave Ashley a resolute nod. "I will carry on your life's work, Ashley."

After Ashley left, it was just me and Eleora in the room.

"Veight."

"Yeah?"

"I'm leaving Ashley in your care. I know he said he just wants to be an ambassador, but I'd like it if you could give him something more to do. It'd be a waste of his talents to let him stay a mere diplomat."

For sure.

"I'm glad that's what you want, too. I was hoping to make him head of Meraldia's agricultural department. Of course, I'll give him some sort of noble title befitting of his abilities too."

Fortunately, there was a large swathe of Meraldian land that I'd just set aside for development. *I wonder what kind of face Woroy's gonna make when he realizes he'll be working with Ashley?* Eleora grabbed one of the reports sitting on her desk.

“In the end, we weren’t able to find out where Lord Bolshevik and Princess Dillier ended up. You’re sure they didn’t go to Meraldia, right?”

“I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to cross the mountains on their own, and the tunnel leading to Krauhen is guarded 24/7. There’s no way they’re in Meraldia.”

To be honest, I didn’t want them to show up there either. It’d be a diplomatic issue.

“Fair enough. I suppose that means they either fled to the northern fringes, or crossed the frozen sea.”

The lands north of North Rolmund were so cold that farming was impossible. Since it was summer right now, the temperatures would be mild, but come winter, staying there would be impossible. Regardless, no matter where they’d gone, they didn’t have any political or military power left. So honestly, I couldn’t care less about what they were doing.

Eleora grinned mischievously and said, “You’re a cruel man, you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nobles need land and retainers to survive. Oh, and I guess honor and prestige too.”

“And?”

I kind of understood what Eleora was getting at, but as a commoner, I wasn’t truly familiar with the plights of nobles.

Eleora’s smile grew sympathetic and she explained, “Not only did you strip Lord Bolshevik of all his lands and titles, but you even took his few demon retainers away from him. If that’s not cruel, I don’t know what is.”

“You forget, I’m not a human. For a merciless demon like me, this is a pretty light punishment. Besides, this was the best way to win Rolmund’s demons over to your side.” I grinned wickedly at Eleora.

There might not have been too many of them, but getting the werewolves and vampires serving Shallier to work for Eleora had been huge. She took a sip of her tea, her expression softening.

“Forcing people to live when they should have been executed isn’t always a kindness. Though I suppose the only reason I’m empress is because you don’t let people die.”

“See, there you go. As long as you’re alive, things will improve eventually.”

I died once, but my new life has been pretty fulfilling so far. Life as a werewolf wasn’t perfect, but I was having a lot of fun, and nothing tragic had happened yet. Seeing my expression, Eleora smirked.

“You’ve got that look on your face again. What unfathomable things are you contemplating now?”

“Nothing, really.”

A short while later, the people in charge of guarding the coronation ceremony returned to Eleora’s room.

“We’re back, Lady Eleora!”

The three werewolf sisters saluted the new empress. They were all wearing the uniform of Rolmund’s imperial guard. As promised, Volka’s clan had sworn their services to Eleora. However, the older werewolves still had lingering attachments to the Bolshevik family, so it was only the younger generation that was here. All the young women were working as Eleora’s guards, while most of the young men answered to Borsche.

“Lady Eleora, the palace is secure!” The eldest of the three sisters, Marsha, gave Eleora an affable smile.

“Good work. Natalia, get some tea for these girls as well.”

“Yaaay! Lady Eleora, can I open this box of cookies too?”

“Hold on, Borsche baked a pie to celebrate my coronation. Let’s eat that instead.”

These girls sure settled in quickly. Eleora seemed to have figured out the trick to getting along with kids after winning over Skuje’s squad.

“Hurry up and cut me a piece, Lady Eleora!”

“Misha, it’s rude to demand things from the empress!”

“But we’re not allowed to take our own knives out around her, right?”

“Cooking knives are fine.”

Smiling, Eleora held out a hand to calm the girls down, and said, “It’s traditional in Rolmund for the host to serve their dishes. I’ll cut the pie. By the way, Misha...”

“What is it, Lady Eleora?”

“Do you like me?”

Eleora moved her knife slightly to the side and glanced up at Misha. Instantly realizing what was going on, Misha shouted, “I do! I love you, Your Majesty!”

“Good.”

Eleora cut out a conspicuously large slice of pie. *Come on, you can’t play favorites like that.* Naturally, the other girls weren’t going to let that slide either.

“Hey, no fair! I love you too, Lady Eleora!”

“So do I! Ah, I want that piece with the strawberry on it!”

Considering they’d been living in the middle of the forest until now, I doubted these girls had had many opportunities to eat sweets. So their obsession with them was understandable. It probably helped that they all did like Eleora. Over the past few months, she had gotten pretty good at handling werewolves. As Eleora cut out more slices of pie, she cocked her head in mock confusion.

“Thank you. But now I don’t know what to do. If I give you all large pieces, they won’t feel special anymore.”

Then Eleora smiled playfully and said, “Borsche!”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

The door behind Eleora flew open and Borsche rushed into the room. He was wearing an apron over his military uniform and carrying a tray with a massive pie on it. Like, a seriously massive pie. *How the hell did you even fit that in the oven?* At any rate, it seemed Borsche had been a baker before becoming a

soldier. Eleora's smile grew wider and she said, "I know werewolves are big eaters. So this entire pie is for you three. Make sure you thank Borsche before eating though."

"Okaaaay! Thank you, Borsche!" The three girls said in unison.

It's like Eleora's made them into her pets... At any rate, Borsche seemed to be happy at how well-received his pies were. I'd been a little worried Rolmund's werewolves wouldn't be able to fit in here at first, but fortunately Eleora had become a master of making friends. She'd returned to Rolmund practically alone, but now she was surrounded by capable friends. *Looks like my job here's done. I can finally go back to Meraldia.*

—Shallier and Dillier's Fate—

A vast tundra covered the northernmost tip of Rolmund. The land there was too cold for agriculture. Even in summer, the soil remained frozen, making it impossible to plow. It was across that frigid wasteland that Shallier and Dillier now walked.

"Are you tired, Princess Dillier?"

"I am no longer a princess, Lord Shallier."

"And I'm no lord," Shallier replied with a smile, pushing back his hood.

Dillier smiled back and said, "I used to enjoy long trips, but this is the first time I've had to make one by foot. Would it be alright if we rest for a while?"

"Of course. Even if we hurried, we'd still be stuck camping outside. The wilderness might be dangerous, but it's still safer than the capital."

Shallier hefted his crossbow and short spear, checking the nearby surroundings for beasts. Dillier nodded to him, gripping her small hunting dagger tight.

"No matter how dangerous the road ahead may be, this is the path that I chose. I have no regrets."

Shallier nodded to Dillier and said, "You have a point... Even if what we're doing is the height of folly, it's a fate we chose for ourselves."

“Precisely, Shallier.”

The two of them smiled at each other. Shallier then took a wineskin out of his pack and offered it to Dillier. As she drank, he said, “Neither you nor I wished to be bound by the chains of Cold Micha. That’s why I escaped from my duty to protect Rolmund’s demons and the Sternenfeuer believers, and you escaped from your duty to protect the empire and the imperial line.”

“I always thought it was only death that could free me from my fate, but in the end, I managed to escape with my life intact.”

“We have Eleora...or rather Lord Veight to thank for that.” Shallier’s smile turned a little forlorn. “If not for him, neither of us would be alive right now.”

“Hehehe, I suppose so.”

Dillier wiped her lips with the back of her hand and got to her feet. Back when she’d been living in the palace she’d never imagined the day would come where she’d be wearing a smelly bear fur coat in the middle of nowhere.

“We owe him a great deal... Oh, that reminds me, Shallier.”

“Yes?”

“Why don’t we name our first child after him? We could call him Veich...actually, I suppose the North Rolmund style would be to name him Veike.”

“Isn’t it a bit early to be thinking about that?” Shallier asked in mild exasperation. But despite his words, he was smiling at his new bride.

“We’ll need at least three names, by the way.”

“Huh?”

“I told you before, remember? I want at least three kids,” Dillier said with a playful smile.

“Alright, let’s call them Veike, Vaive, and Veiru.”

“At least pretend to think about it a little.”

The pair continued north, their boots leaving tracks in the freshly fallen snow. Surprisingly, I was pretty busy even after the coronation ceremony. For once, I

actually had work to do as Meraldia's diplomat instead of Eleora's advisor. Fortunately, my status within Rolmund had risen quite a bit thanks to all the help I'd given Eleora. As a result, I was granted an audience with the Sonnenlicht Pope, Mikuli the Third. The pope, who resided in the West Rolmund city of Ioro Lange, wielded almost as much power as the emperor. Just being granted an audience with him was an honor. Chances were I was probably the first Meraldian—and the first demon—to ever lay eyes on the Sonnenlicht Pope. As I strode into the audience chamber of Ioro Lange's grand cathedral, Mikuli the Third smiled at me. He was an old man and had a long, white beard that reminded me of Santa Claus.

"I have heard much of your exploits, Lord Veight. It is thanks to you that our church's position is stable. I am pleased your alliance with the Sonnenlicht Order transcended national borders."

"I am unworthy of such praise, Your Eminence. After all, I aided the Sonnenlicht Order for my own selfish reasons."

The pope's smile grew wider.

"Regardless, the fact remains that you eased tensions between our order and other religions. I've heard that you also contributed to our holy scriptures."

The pope raised a hand and one of the bishops in the room hurried over and handed him an ostentatiously bound tome.

"Just the other day, we discovered a continuation of the chronicles of the Holy Zahakt Crusade. It appears the hero who spent his youth fighting heretics and demons regretted his actions during his later years."

The pope opened the tome to the page I'd helped Traja write. It was a bit embarrassing to think that my writing would become a holy scripture that people would still be reading generations later.

"'Cooperating with those whose values differ from us will call forth the dawn faster than fighting with them.' In the past, the Sonnenlicht Order could never have allowed such a tenet, but times have changed."

It was obvious from the pope's smile that he knew all about my discussion with Traja. He might have looked like a kindly Santa Claus, but he was a shrewd

old man.

“I imagine your contributions will save the lives of many heretics. Perhaps it is arrogant of me to speak for them, but I imagine they are grateful to you.”

I bowed my head, more out of fear than respect. This guy was scary. Still smiling, the pope said, “Incidentally, Lord Veight.”

“Yes, Your Eminence?”

“I would like to reward you for your services to the order. Is there anything you desire?”

The one thing I’d wanted from the church I’d already obtained by writing down new scriptures in that book he was holding.

“No, there’s nothing, Your Eminence.”

The pope’s smile grew wider and he said, “Your lack of desire is a far greater weapon than any werewolf’s fangs.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those who selflessly serve others are powerful, regardless of how low their social standing might be. But those who rise to positions of leadership while retaining that lack of desire possess strength beyond measure.”

I wouldn’t say I don’t have any desires. There’s actually a ton of stuff that I want. I just know I won’t be able to get it in this world so I’ve given up. The internet, air conditioning, and chocolate ice cream were still things I craved.

As I peered into the pope’s face, I suddenly realized his smile didn’t reach his eyes. In fact, he was looking me over like he was evaluating me. His gaze had the caution and wisdom that came with being the leader of a bloody empire. *Man, this guy really is scary.* However his piercing gaze soon vanished, and his smile became genuine.

“We are truly blessed that a man of your caliber allied himself with us. I pray we can stand side by side in the future as well.”

“Of course, Your Eminence.”

Even the things he says sound scary... Still, now that the Sonnenlicht Order

had allied itself with demons and heretics, there'd hopefully be fewer religious wars in the future. This would be good for the order too, since now they had opportunities to bring in new converts. I knew firsthand how pushy their missionaries can be, and I'd learned from my time in Rolmund that Sonnenlicht was more than willing to adopt foreign practices if it brought in new believers. I did feel bad about the religions that would suddenly have to deal with an influx of Sonnenlicht proselytizers, but that wasn't my problem. For a foreigner, I'd already meddled more than enough.

After that, the pope granted me the title of "He Who Parted the Mountains" and ordained me as a Sonnenlicht saint. Now I was a saint in both Rolmund and Meraldia. Chances were he'd just ordained me because he thought it'd make me feel good, but in truth, it really did do that, so clearly he had my number. I was the kind of person who easily let praise get to my head. At any rate, it seemed my title was a reference to the fact that I'd brought two separate cultures, Rolmund and Meraldia, together. It was also a subtle reference to how I'd bridged the gap between the Sonnenlicht Order and other religions. Though, I had a feeling people unaware of the context would misunderstand what my title meant.

Finally, the time had come for me and the other werewolves to return to Meraldia. The past few weeks we'd been stuck attending various official events as diplomats. Most of the empire trusted us now, thanks to the support we'd given Eleora. As a result, my departure kept on getting delayed, and every time I looked at the calendar I started feeling depressed. Partially because once I finally did leave, it'd mean saying farewell to Eleora.

In fact, though Eleora had tons of pressing duties as the new empress, she'd taken time out of her busy schedule to accompany me as far as East Rolmund. We'd just crossed into the border of Lord Kastoniev's territory, and it was just half a day's ride from here to the tunnel.

As we rode, Eleora gave me a sad smile. "Thank you so much for everything, Veight. I'll never forget this debt."

"Don't worry about it. Though...I'm sorry I couldn't put an end to the tale of Cold Micha before I left."

Rolmundians were methodical, logical, and prone to self-sacrifice. In that sense, they were like dragonkin, but the dragonkin I knew weren't nearly so willing to die. Regardless, it was that disposition of theirs that had led to so many tragedies in the past. Part of the reason why I'd come here was to put an end to that history of tragedy, but unfortunately, I couldn't really say I'd succeeded. Even Shallier, the most scheming, power-hungry guy I knew had turned out to be a good guy willing to sacrifice his life for what he thought was the greater good.

The only person I'd met who questioned the Rolmund ideal of self-sacrifice was Dillier. But before I could even seek compromise with her, we ended up as enemies and I was forced to capture her. Rolmund was still filled with people who were just like the characters in Cold Micha.

I guess it's not that easy to change the perspective of an entire society. Come to think of it, when I convinced Kite to work for me, I told him, "I'll crush the Senate for you," but I never managed that either. It was Eleora who got rid of those guys. I always make these grand promises, but I can never follow through on them...

But to my surprise, Eleora smiled and replied, "What are you saying? You put an end to the unbroken chain of tragedies, just like you promised you would. From here on out, it's my job to make it sure it stays that way." Eleora put a hand on my shoulder. "As long as I'm empress, I'll make sure no one has to sacrifice themselves. Everyone within Rolmund will live in peace and prosperity."

You sure turned into a reliable leader. However, that was easier said than done. I opened my mouth to tell Eleora as much, but then thought better of it. She understood that full well already; she didn't need me reminding her.

"Oh yeah, this is for you."

I pulled out a thick notebook and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"A collection of all the information the demon army has gathered."

Friedensrichter had left behind a record of all the knowledge he'd possessed.

He'd written his notes down in Japanese, but I'd translated them into Rolmundian for Eleora. I'd kept out the military notes like the stuff on ballistics and gunpowder, but I'd translated everything related to agriculture, engineering, and other sciences. Some of the concepts I'd translated even I didn't understand fully, but I was sure a genius like Eleora would be able to make sense of it.

Eleora gingerly took the notebook and asked, "Are you sure you want to give this to me?"

"Of course. I know you'll use it well."

"Sheesh. Now I owe you an even greater debt." Eleora smiled wanly and added, "In return, I swear I'll take good care of Rolmund's demons. If there are any other demons hiding within the empire's borders, I'll shelter them too."

"Thanks, I'll be counting on you. Demons have a pretty different way of thinking than most humans, so you might have a hard time winning them over, but they'll be loyal allies if you do."

"Don't worry. I'll turn Rolmund into the kind of nation where heretics and demons of all kinds can live in peace." Eleora smiled mischievously and added, "Though I guess if I manage to do that, I'll end up stealing your job, huh?"

"By all means, take it. While you're working on making Rolmund a good place for demons, I'll be doing my best to make the same thing happen in Meraldia."

"I guess it's a competition then. A competition to see who makes an ideal nation the fastest." Eleora chuckled, and for a moment she looked like the imposing commander who'd first come to Meraldia. But then her expression softened again and she said, "I'll make Rolmund into such a great nation that you'll regret not staying here."

"Now that, I'm looking forward to."

While I had grown a little attached to Rolmund, I was a Rynheit werewolf through and through. Meraldia was my home. Still, the thought of leaving Rolmund made me a little lonely.

"Considering how demanding our respective jobs are, this might be the last time we ever see each other," I said sadly.

“Indeed. The political situation within Rolmund is still unstable, and I doubt I’ll be able to leave the country even after I get everything under control. Your job likely won’t bring you back here, either.”

When I’d first met Eleora I thought she was a terrifying woman, but now I didn’t want to say goodbye. So instead of a farewell, I said, “If...this is just a hypothetical, but...”

“Mhmm?”

“If the time ever comes that you’re forced to flee Rolmund, come to Meraldia. Don’t just die a dog’s death in the capital, you hear?”

Eleora gave me a blank look for a few seconds, then burst out in laughter.



“Hahahaha! If that happens, Rolmund really won’t have any royalty left to turn to. Still...I appreciate the offer.” Eleora gave me a dismissive nod. “Now get out of here. I’ll be waiting to hear what reckless antics you get up to next from my throne in Rolmund.”

“Hey, I’ve never once done anything reckless...”

Well, I’m sure I’ll get the opportunity to set the record straight someday. I won’t let this be our final farewell. I reluctantly jumped onto my horse and waved to Eleora.

“Goodbye, Eleora! We’ll meet again!”

“One day, for sure!”

And so, I left Rolmund and its new, benevolent empress behind. *Be well, Eleora.* After all she’d been through, I had no doubt that Eleora would be a good empress.

“Alright guys, we’re running back to Ryunheit at full speed!”

“Why at full speed!?”

“Because I’m in a hurry! Parker, you hurry up too! No one’s forgotten anything, right!?”

Man, there’s only a few days until the summer solstice...

—Eleora’s War Records: Conclusion—

I continued staring at the road long after he vanished beyond the horizon. This country still faced numerous issues. Our agricultural situation hadn’t stabilized yet, the rifts between the various areas of Rolmund hadn’t healed, and there were still tons of issues with our class system and religious institutions. While I had ideas for how to resolve all of these problems, if I wasn’t careful I’d invite another rebellion.

Up until now, even that hadn’t been a concern, because Veight had been with me. Having him around had given me a sense of security, allowing me to be confident in my decisions. But now he was gone. Still, he’d gone through all this effort to set things up for me. I couldn’t afford to let his hard work go to waste.

Well, I'm sure things will work out somehow.

Turning around I saw Borsche, Natalia, and Marsha and her sisters waiting for me. And while they weren't here right now, Cardinal Kushmer and Bishop Zanawah were also on my side, as were Lekomya and the other nobles who'd joined my coalition early. There was also my uncle Lord Kastoniev supporting me from East Rolmund. With how many allies I had, it'd be weird if I couldn't finish what Veight started.

"Your Highness...I mean, Your Majesty, is something wrong?"

"Is there a problem, Lady Eleora?"

Natalia and Marsha both tried to peer into my face at the same time. Their foreheads bumped together, and the two of them glared at each other.

"Don't just lean forward like that!"

"I could say the same to you."

I guess now isn't the time for reminiscing.

"It's alright, you were both just worried about me. I'm fine, but I appreciate your concern."

The two girls turned to me with a smile.

"I was just doing my duty as your retainer, Your Majesty."

"The future of Rolmund's werewolves is resting on your shoulders, so we have to keep you safe."

Oh yeah. There's a lot I need to do. I don't have time to be worrying about whether or not I can manage without Veight.

A few seconds later, Volka silently appeared in front of me. I'd met her once before, when the werewolves had first sworn fealty to me.

"Oh, did that kid leave already?"

She had a giant chunk of meat slung over her shoulder.

"And here I smoked a bunch of deer meat to give him for the road. Guess I was too late."

“Well, he just left. If you run, you might still be able to catch him.”

As I said that I flipped through the notebook he’d given me. Even at a glance, I could tell all the entries were highly technical. Theories and concepts I’d never heard about filled the pages, complete with highly detailed diagrams.

“Hmm...”

I’d been wondering how to cultivate grains like rice in a cold climate like Rolmund, but the knowledge contained within this notebook seemed to have answers to that as well. I had no doubt the technology Veight had left me would lead the empire to prosperity.

Volka gave me a strange look and asked, “Don’t tell me you didn’t even try to stop him?”

“I didn’t. He has a home to return to. I couldn’t bring myself to keep him here. Besides...” I closed the notebook and awkwardly scratched my head. “I didn’t want to do anything that would make him hate me.”

Volka grinned at that.

“Bahahahahaha! I see, I see.”

Once she was done laughing she threw the hunk of meat to the three werewolf sisters.

“Wawawah!”

“What’re you doing, granny!?”

“Take that with you. It’s my gift to the new empress now.” Volka turned back to me. “So who’s going to inherit the Originia Dynasty that you’ve started?”

“I’m not sure. If my sister gets married, I suppose her children will be my heirs. But if not, I can always adopt a successor.”

“Wouldn’t that be the end of the imperial family’s bloodline?” Volka asked, surprised. I just smiled and replied, “As long as you swear to protect the citizens from war and starvation, I wouldn’t mind even if one of your werewolves became the next emperor.”

After all, were it not for his excessive kindness, Veight would probably make

for a fine emperor too. *Maybe I shouldn't have let him go...* Volka just stared at me, her jaw slack. Eventually, she managed to process my words and her lips curled back up into their usual grin.

“Heh, I wouldn’t mind being empress, but right now I wanna see what kinda nation you’re gonna make! Feel free to work my brats as hard as you want!”

“Thank you. I promise to make good use of them.”

There was a mountain-load of tasks waiting for me when I got back. First, I needed to take care of the empire’s agricultural issues. Our overreliance on serfs who’d been beaten into submission was harming our productivity. Moreover, there were technical problems that needed to be tackled to increase the amount of arable land. We needed to build more irrigation ditches and properly manage our soil. Still, if I was able to revolutionize our agriculture system, revolts stemming from starvation would cease to occur.

For better or worse, we’d lost a lot of nobles over the course of the past two rebellions, which made managing territory a lot easier. The empire was in the perfect position for a reformation. Just then, Lenkov, one of the captains of my mage corps, ran over to me.

“Your Majesty, I bring urgent news from the capital!”

“What happened?”

“Prince Ashley has discovered that Marquis Toskin is planning a rebellion! It seems he wishes to take advantage of your absence to seat Prince Ashley on the throne once more!”

“I see making a fool of himself at Nodgrad wasn’t enough. Now he wants to publicly shame himself in the capital too.”

He probably thought that he stood a decent chance at succeeding now that Meraldia’s forces had left Rolmund and I wasn’t in the capital. *I can’t believe you’d risk losing your title and territory on such a risky gamble.* Sure, I might have been giving him the cold shoulder recently, but considering how badly he’d messed up at Nodgrad, treatment like that was to be expected. *What an idiot.*

I wasn’t as merciful as Veight. Sighing, I put away the notebook he’d given me

and took out a ledger listing all of my allies. Most of the nobles who'd recently come over to my side were opportunistic buffoons. They couldn't be relied upon, but I doubted they'd join the enemy either. Not so long as I firmly held the reins of the empire anyway. Meaning I needed to show them what exactly happened to those who opposed me.

"Perfect. I was running out of territory to grant Lord Lekomya. I'm sure he'll be glad to have the opportunity to raise his rank once more. I need a trusted retainer in West Rolmund anyway."

I turned to my gathered retainers and drew my saber.

"We'll capture Marquis Toskin before he has a chance to launch his rebellion! We need to issue a proclamation that Ashley has nothing to do with this, as well! It wouldn't do for this foolish rebellion to harm his prestige."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Volka gave me a questioning glance and asked, "Should I get my pack?"

"Please do. I'll need your werewolves' strength to stop this rebellion."

"You got it. See you in the capital."

Volka vanished before I could even say farewell. Having her werewolves on my side was quite reassuring. I'd feel even more at ease if Veight was here, but I knew I couldn't keep relying on him forever. Besides, I had plenty of other trustworthy comrades I could rely on. Asking for more was just being greedy. I swept my cape back and jumped onto my horse.

"If we stop him from raising an army, we'll be able to prevent a bloodbath. Let's go!"

Just you watch, Veight. I'll handle things just fine without you.

—Airia at the Solstice Festival—

I stared absently out at the night sky through my manor's window. The evening breeze ruffled the sleeves of the uncomfortable dress I was wearing. I'd finished giving my speeches, and my official duties as viceroy were done for the night. From here on out, I could enjoy the festival as a participant. *I wonder how*

close he is to Ryunheit now?

Outside, the Sonnenlicht believers were singing their praises of the sun. This was the day when the sun stayed out the longest, so it was a very holy day for them. It also provided a much-needed break for the farmers who'd been working nonstop since spring. Stalls lined the streets, and the smell of exotic fruits and sizzling meat filled the air. Mondstrahl believers were out celebrating as well. Though this wasn't a holy day for them, they didn't mind joining in the festivals of other religions. Besides, even on the summer solstice, the moon still rose.

Last year, Veight had said he enjoyed seeing people of all religions come out and celebrate together. I still remembered the gentle smile he had back then. Bonfires had filled the city, driving back the darkness of the night.

I closed the window and turned back to my table. It was set for two, but no food had been served yet.

"Haah..." I sighed. According to the letter he'd sent to the council, Veight's party had already crossed into Meraldia. Lady Gomoviroa had also sent a letter saying she'd gone to Krauhen to meet him. However it seemed the two had somehow passed by each other, and right now no one knew where Veight was. Knowing him, he was probably running back to Ryunheit as fast as he could.

"Hehehe..." A chuckle escaped my lips.

Honestly, I was surprised that I didn't feel more disappointed. It was almost scary how high my spirits were. But it wasn't hard to figure out why. Veight may not have been here, but I knew he was desperately doing his best to keep his promise with me. Right now, I was the only person in his thoughts. When I thought of it that way, I couldn't help but smile.

I never knew I was such a selfish woman. It wasn't right of me to want to monopolize Veight. He was one of the most important people in the demon army and a Meraldian councilor. I shouldn't be tying him down with my feelings like this. *I know. I know that when he comes back, I have to apologize to him.* I shouldn't have held him to such an unreasonable promise. There was no way he could have made sure to come back on time when there was still so much left for him to do, especially since unexpected roadblocks like rebellions were

happening seemingly all the time.

I should have told him from the beginning that he didn't have to make an impossible promise like that. But I'd taken advantage of his kindness. I'd done something disgraceful as both a viceroy and a person. And yet I was smiling at the result it had brought about. Not only that, if it meant I could monopolize him, I was thinking of doing even more wicked things. I stared at my reflection in the window, surprised by the kind of woman I'd become.

I reached the gates of Ryunheit the morning after the solstice festival.

"I couldn't make it..."

I could see the city's residents running around taking down stalls and putting away bonfire cages. Airia, the Demon Ambassador, was waiting for me in front of the main gates with a retinue of soldiers behind her. I didn't think she'd come out to greet me. *I wish you'd at least given me time to mentally prepare myself for this.*

"Welcome home, Lord Veight."

Airia walked over to me, beaming. I couldn't sense any anger hiding behind that smile, but I was still a little worried. She gently shook my hand and said, "I'm glad you returned safe and sound. It was a dangerous mission we sent you on."

Since we were in public, I couldn't exactly bring up the promise here. I did my best to look calm and nodded.

"Thank you for coming out to greet me, Lady Airia. How did Ryunheit fare in my absence?"

"The city has been peaceful. The solstice festival yesterday went off without a hitch..." Airia trailed off, then suddenly changed the topic. "Umm, you must be tired after your long journey. Let's continue this conversation in my manor. I'm sure your werewolves want to rest as well. I have food and beds prepared for everyone."

News of my return spread through the city like wildfire, and by the time we'd reached the old district crowds had formed in the streets.

“Welcome home, Veight!”

“How many new legends did you create this time?”

“Ryunheit missed you!”

I waved to the citizens from atop my horse. The lingering excitement from last night’s festival was probably making them more boisterous than usual. Once we reached the manor I headed to Airia’s office and gave her my report.

“...And that’s everything. Rolmund’s political situation should be stable for now. Eleora’s going to need some time to sort out domestic affairs, but I’m sure Rolmund won’t try invading Meraldia again.”

At least, not as long as Eleora is its empress. If she came back to Meraldia, it wouldn’t be as an invader, but as a diplomat looking to build trade relations. Alright now that all that’s out of the way, it’s time to apologize.

“By the way, Airia.”

“Yes?”

Airia cocked her head at me as she poured herself a new cup of tea. I bowed my head and said, “I’m terribly sorry I wasn’t able to return by the summer solstice like I promised.”

Airia hurriedly replied, “I-It’s fine, you don’t have to apologize! If anything, I should be the one apologizing.”

“I’m the one who broke my promise, why would you be apologizing?”

“Well, the thing is...” Airia hung her head, her face reddening. For a few seconds she hesitated to reply, but then she said, “I shouldn’t have held you to a promise like that. I took advantage of your kindness, even though I knew you couldn’t control when your job would end...”

“Still, a promise is a promise. As an apology for breaking my word, I’ll do any one thing you ask.”

Those were the conditions I’d set way back when I’d made that promise. However, Airia shook her head and said, “No, I’m the one at fault here. It wouldn’t be right to ask anything more of you.”

“I don’t mind. In fact, I’d prefer it if you made some kind of request.”

I really wanted to make it up to Airia. Unfortunately, she seemed determined not to accept my goodwill.

“It’s fine. Having you back safe and sound is already more than enough. Don’t worry about the promise and just rest.”

“But...”

You can ask for anything, you know? Of course, I couldn’t fulfill any requests that would cause trouble for the demon army or the Commonwealth Council but anything else in my power I’d do. She could ask for pretty much whatever. But Airia just changed the topic.

“By the way, I didn’t see Parker or Mao with you. Have they not returned yet?”

“Oh, they’re on their way. Once we reached Thuvan, me and the other werewolves transformed and ran here at top speed.”

I’d actually wanted to jump over Ryunheit’s walls when I’d arrived at dawn, but considering my position, that would have been unseemly. Besides, I’d still come too late for the festival.

Airia seemed to have guessed my thoughts, since she nodded and said, “Those in positions of power must always appear calm. Otherwise, those they lead will panic as well.”

“Yeah, I know...”

Honestly, I’d wanted to transform the moment I’d reached Krauhen. If I had, I probably would have made it on time, but people would start thinking something had happened. I hadn’t wanted the residents of Meraldia assuming there was an emergency or anything, though in the end that had resulted in me failing to keep my promise. While going slowly had been necessary considering I was a public official, I still felt guilty.

“The fact remains that I broke my promise, so won’t you at least give me an opportunity to make it up to you?”

“No really, it’s fine. Fufufu.”

Why do you look so happy?

Parker and Mao arrived around mid-afternoon.

“Please don’t leave your attendants behind like that, Lord Veight.”

“Sorry. But I really wanted to keep my promise to Airia.”

“I believe I told you to give up on that since there was no way you’d make it in time.”

I’d known that too. Some simple math had made that much clear. But still, I’d wanted to apologize as soon as possible at least.

Mao, Parker, and Ryucco had returned with a contingent of kentauros guards, including Thuvan’s current viceroy, Firnir.

“Hey, Vaito! So you couldn’t make it in time after all, huh?”

“Why do you sound so happy about that?”

“Maybe you could have made it if you’d ridden me.”

“No way. It was practically midnight by the time we reached Thuvan.”

I worked so hard to finish up my business in Rolmund ahead of time too...

“If only everyone in Rolmund wasn’t so eager to start a rebellion maybe I could have finished faster...”

“Do humans really like rebelling that much?”

“I don’t think they’re doing it because they like it.”

It was just hard for so many people to live together in a barren land like Rolmund. *Thank god we live in Meraldia.* Some time later Master teleported into the room with a twirl of her staff.

“Good grief. I never imagined we would end up going right past each other. Were spatial magic my specialty, I could have located you and teleported to Ryunheit in time, but as it is, preparing a teleport takes up so much time...”

“I’m pretty sure no one in Meraldia’s more skilled at teleporting than you, Master. I’m sorry I missed you, though.”

It was only after I'd left Krauhen that I learned Master had headed there to pick me up.

"Oh yes, I met Woroy while searching for you. He was staying in Vongang."

"So he's still touring Meraldia's cities, huh?"

I guess he's having fun sightseeing. Master nodded with a smile and said, "He participated in Vongang's famous tourney and won the cavalry championship."

"That guy likes playing around way too much."

"When I met him he was hosting a feast for the entire city using the prize money he had won. The townspeople seemed quite enamored with him."

That guy makes a splash wherever he goes.

Airia watched our reunion with a smile, but I felt like she was still secretly mad at me inside. As I glanced over at her our eyes met, and her smile turned to a troubled one. *What's she thinking about? Either way, I really should do something to earn her forgiveness.*

"Airia."

"Ah, yes? What is it?" Airia asked in a flustered tone.

"I know you said you didn't need anything, but I really do want to make up for breaking my promise."

"It's fine, I'm the one who—"

"Please, just ask for something. Think of it as giving me peace of mind."

Airia mulled over my words for a few seconds, then smiled "In that case, could you give me some time to think about it? You're always so kind that I can't come up with something right away."

"Alright...if you say so."

At least she's willing to humor me with a request. What a relief. Airia gave me a suggestive look and asked, "By the way, can I really ask for *anything*?"

"Yeah. As long as it's something that won't jeopardize my position as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander."

I wasn't about to embezzle public funds for Airia's request, but anything I could personally accomplish I'd do. If she wanted a fancy new dress from Veira, I'd order one for her. And if she wanted some of the jewels Mao had brought back from Rolmund, I could buy them off him. Or maybe she wanted to experience a high-class dinner at one of the seafront restaurants in Lotz.

At any rate, Airia smiled happily and said, "Then I'll let you know what selfish request I have once I think of something."

"Looking forward to it."

I was actually pretty curious what kind of wish she'd come up with. Especially since she was the most modest person I knew. For some reason, though, I could smell a lie from her words. I couldn't tell what exactly she was lying about, which made it all the more concerning. Unfortunately, I had a mountain-load of paperwork waiting for me, so I didn't really have the time to ruminate on her intentions. Most of the documents I needed to go through were top-secret reports or proposals that needed my direct approval. While I was dying to know what Airia would come up with, right now I had more pressing concerns.

At the port of Beluza, there was a shrine on one of the docks dedicated to the Island Kraken that had once ravaged the Sea of Solitude. Though it was technically a shrine, it was really more of a small box with an engraving on it that vaguely resembled an octopus. It was the shrine Veight had made for the Island Kraken after slaying it. Its existence had already passed out of most people's memory, as the kraken subjugation had occurred some months before Eleora even set foot in Meraldia.

However, there was one woman who seemed quite interested in this ramshackle shrine. After staring at it for a few minutes, she turned to a nearby dockhand and asked, "It was a demon who created this, correct?"

Her unfamiliar shaman's outfit made it obvious she was a foreigner. The dockhand, who happened to be one of the viceroy's aides, nodded.

"Yeah. The Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, the Black Werewolf King Veight made it. He's the strongest werewolf in Meraldia. He's been in Rolmund on a mission since last autumn, but he should be coming back soon from what I heard."

“A werewolf, you say...”

Had Veight seen this woman, he would have been quite surprised, since her shaman’s outfit was one he would have recognized.

“I would very much like to meet him.”

The woman wearing a shrine maiden’s outfit put a hand to her black hair to keep it from blowing in the wind and returned her gaze to the kanji written on the shrine. It was almost as if she could read the words “Island Kraken Shrine.”

The Gladiator Hero

Long before the nation of Meraldia was founded, Rolmund was a republic, not an empire. At the time the nation's capital was Ioro Lange, and within that capital's coliseum lived an enslaved gladiator. His name was Draulight.

"I'm no slave. Hell, no human deserves to be a slave!"

That was something he often repeated, like a mantra. His sword style—which was self-taught—involved throwing away his shield at the beginning of every fight and wielding his blade with two hands. He subscribed to the belief that the best defense was a good offense. Fortunately, the strength of his blows was powerful enough that his opponents were always forced on the defensive, and never had a chance to fight back.

"KIYAAAAAAH!"

Draulight's battle cry sounded like the cawing of a bird. To those who didn't know him, it sounded funny; but to those who did, it struck terror into their hearts. For they knew it to be the war cry of the ruler of the coliseum. If they tried to block Draulight's blows with their shield, their shield would shatter. If they tried to parry them with their swords, their swords would snap. If they tried to dodge, they wouldn't make it in time. As far as his opponents were concerned, Draulight's battle cry was the exultant crowing of a raven, ready to devour another corpse.

Today, like every other day, Draulight's foe fell to the coliseum ruler's onslaught. Blood spilled from the slain combatant's head, dyeing the freshly fallen snow red.

"The battle is over! Draulight is the victor!" The referee shouted, and the audience started cheering. Today's fighter had tried to block Draulight's sword with his shield, and Draulight had cleaved right through it. Not only that, but he'd destroyed his opponent's helmet in the same swing as well. Draulight's strength was clearly superhuman.

He looked down at the corpse of his foe and silently bowed his head.

“There it is, Draulight’s famous Death Glare!” The ignorant spectators shouted, their breath fogging in the cold. All of them mistakenly believed Draulight looked down at his fallen foes to make sure they were dead, and to kill them with his stare if they weren’t. After a few seconds, Draulight raised his head and stalked out of the arena. He didn’t grace the spectators with a wave or even a glance. But the spectators weren’t put off by his cold treatment of them. If anything, it made them more excited.

“Don’t you love how brusque he is!?”

“Yeah, it’s like the only thing he cares about is slaughtering his enemies!”

“I heard he used to be a serf but then volunteered to be a gladiator. I can’t believe he’s that good even though he never had a martial arts teacher!”

“He must be a natural with the sword or something...it’s insane, the way he swings that thing.”

The crowd stuffed themselves full of mutton and mead and discussed the legends of Draulight while they waited for the next match to begin.

“Welcome back. I see you survived today as well.”

“Yeah.”

Draulight slipped out of his helmet as he replied to the gladiator who welcomed him back. Guards had confiscated his sword before they let him into the changing room, so he was unarmed right now. Once his helmet was off, the numerous scars that covered his cheeks became visible. In fact, his entire body was riddled with them, the consequences of a purely offensive fighting style.

Nursing the new wound he’d received today, Draulight muttered, “But my opponent wasn’t so lucky.”

His comrades in the changing room all exchanged glances, then smiled sadly.

“That’s just what happens when someone gets paired up against you. They all lose their nerve and start begging for mercy. If they’d just fight like men and surrender once they’re beat, the audience would be willing to spare them too.”

“Assuming they can survive long enough to surrender, that is...” Draulight shook his head unhappily. “Even if I lose, the audience always calls for my enemy to spare me. That’s why I’m still here even though I’ve lost before.”

“Well, no duh they’d want you alive. The crowds love seeing you fight.”

The only thing the audience was interested in was seeing an entertaining match. Nothing more. It wasn’t mercy that drove them to spare some gladiators over others, but rather how entertaining that gladiator happened to be.

Draulight lay down on the hard-packed earth. The cold dirt was the only bed the gladiators were given.

“How long am I going to have to keep up this moronic fighting style?” he muttered.

Though he’d mostly been talking to himself, his friends answered, “Forever, probably? I mean we’re slaves, after all.”

“But hey, in return for fighting here all our lives, they give us meat for every meal and make sure we don’t freeze to death in the winters. Plus if we win we get booze.”

“The rest of your life isn’t very long when you’re a gladiator though.”

“So what? What’s the point of living a long life when you’re a slave?”

“You said it, man.”

The other gladiators joked around as they lay down. They were already resigned to their fate. Strong and skilled as they were, they were still trapped in the cage that was this coliseum. But Draulight hadn’t given up yet. Quietly, he murmured, “But what if we weren’t slaves?”

Everyone jumped to their feet. A few of the gladiators ran over to the door to make sure no one was listening. It was only after they were absolutely certain guards weren’t about to come in and beat them that they let themselves relax.

“Dumbass, you can’t say shit like that! If they even suspect you’re gonna rebel, they’ll execute you!”

“Hell, they might execute all of us just for being in the same room as you! I don’t wanna hang!”

“I’m a gladiator, at least let me die fighting...”

But Draulight wasn’t dissuaded. “Exactly! We have the power to fight. If we’re doomed to die anyway, we may as well go down fighting. But we should at least go down fighting for our freedom, instead of for the crowd.”

“Seriously, stop saying things like that!”

“Someone go get the booze he won for this fight! The Senate probably gave him a ton again, right? Get him drunk so he stops talking about this shit!”

The other slaves started panicking, but Draulight remained calm.

“I’m no slave,” he said resolutely. “I’ve always chosen my path in life.”

“Whaddaya mean?” One of the gladiators asked, puzzled.

Slaves had no right to choose anything. Even the weapons and armor they used were picked for them by the coliseum managers. In fact, the gladiators were given subpar equipment precisely so the fights would be bloodier and more entertaining. The people who ran the coliseum were sick and twisted. But then, so were the people who came to watch. If someone’s weapon broke, the crowd cheered, because it meant the fight would get gorier.

Still lying on the ground, Draulight spat, “I’m sick of this. This country disgusts me.”

“Yeah, but what can you do about it? There’s nowhere to run. Even if we tried to escape, the army would just chase after us. Escaped slaves have an even shorter lifespan than gladiators.”

“They wouldn’t keep chasing us if we left the country entirely.”

“You serious?”

Given how cold Rolmund was, leaving the republic was basically a death sentence. Especially now, in the dead of winter.

“We’d just freeze to death!”

“Not if we ran south.”

One of the veteran gladiators snickered at that. He was a former soldier who’d been demoted to a slave for breaking the rules.

“There’s a huge mountain range to the south. I used to serve near those mountains back when I was a soldier. There’s no way you’re getting past them. They’re so tall they’re covered in snow year-round. The snow doesn’t melt even in summer.”

The other gladiators shrunk back when they heard that.

“Damn, that sounds scary...”

“I’d rather die here where I can get meat and booze rather than freeze at the top of a mountain.”

“Bah, a little snow won’t make a mountain impossible to scale,” Draulight harrumphed. “Besides, mountains exist to be climbed.”

“You say some really weird stuff from time to time, you know that, Draulight?”

The gladiators shot him curious looks, and Draulight got to his feet. “I’m escaping from this shithole. You guys coming?”

“Hey don’t just go on deciding that on your own!”

“Holy shit, he’s totally lost it!”

“Didn’t you hear me, moron!? If you escape, everyone living with you’s gonna get executed!”

Draulight smirked mischievously at them and said, “Then are you gonna report me to the guards?”

“No, I...”

The gladiators fell silent.

“You’ve always been nice to us, sharing your meat and alcohol whenever you won...”

“Plus you taught us a lot about sword fighting. Like how to use footwork and stuff.”

“People think we’re elite fighters just ’cause we share a room with you...and honestly, that’s saved our asses more times than I can count.”

Everyone here owed Draulight a debt. He swept his gaze over his comrades,

his expression softening.

“Then come with me. I’ll take you guys south, to freedom. Where there’s no coliseum, no shackles to bind us.”

“Can you really do it? It sounds insane.”

“Of course I can. I’ve been planning this for ages. Ever since I was born, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said,” Draulight said confidently, lying back down. “Like you said, slaves don’t live long anyway. So if you’ve only got a short time to live either way, why not bet on me?”

The gladiators exchanged glances.

That night, long after all the coliseum’s torches had been extinguished. Draulight gathered his comrades. He explained his plan to them under the pale moonlight.

“We have to do this fast. If we take too long, people’ll get cold feet. And if anyone reports us, it’s over.”

“Yeah...fair,” one of the gladiators said with a nod, looking worried.

Draulight then added, “Which is why we’re escaping tonight.”

“H-Hang on a second!” another gladiator shouted, then hurriedly clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Are you serious?” he muttered, more quietly.

“You bet. I haven’t told anyone my plan, so there’s no way it could have been leaked. This is the only time I can be sure the guards haven’t been tipped off.”

“I guess, but...”

As the gladiators gave each other nervous looks Draulight said, “As long as we can sneak out of the coliseum, we’ll be fine. Come on, we don’t have much time.”

“Fine.”

The gladiators resolutely got to their feet.

A few minutes later—

“That was surprisingly easy,” one of the gladiators muttered as he took the keyring off the belt of a guard he’d incapacitated. Draulight took the armory key from him and nodded.

“I figured they’d send a guard to mediate if they thought a fight had broken out between slaves. They only have a skeleton crew during the night, so as long as they open the door for us, the rest is easy.”

Draulight turned to the other guards—who were cowering in a corner of the room—and held up the armory key.

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill you guys. It’s not you that I have a grudge against.”

As he said that, Draulight glanced over at a wooden plank lying in a corner of the room.

“Alright, let’s do this. Start by freeing all the gladiators in the other rooms. We’re all escaping tonight.”

“Aye aye!”

The next morning, Rolmund’s senate in Ioro Lange received a huge shock.

“The gladiators all escaped!? Were they armed!?”

“Y-Yes, Your Excellency.” The messenger bowed his head apologetically. “The seventy or so gladiators being held at the coliseum raided the armory and treasury, then escaped.”

“What insolence! Send soldiers after them at once. I want them all captured, dead or alive!”

“Unfortunately, we’re not sure which direction they’re headed...” As he trailed off, the messenger showed the senators a small plank of wood.

“According to the guards’ testimony, a popular gladiator known as Draulight is the ringleader of this escape. Moreover, he carved these words into this plank before he left.”

The senators looked over letters, but they couldn't make heads or tails of them. Confused, one of them mused, "Perhaps this is the craftsmen's script that we've heard rumors about?"

"Ah, I've heard about that. Supposedly craftsmen and merchants have their own secret language they use to communicate with."

"Arrogant little upstarts..."

Literacy was the privilege of the ruling class. Mere slaves were not allowed to learn how to read and write. However, that system had led the lower classes to create their own unique writing styles. Of course, the Senate had decreed that using any such writing system was an act of treason. The senators all simmered silently at Draulight's insolence, but then one of the younger senators said, "It should be possible to decrypt a passage this long. Because he left us such a long message, there should be clues within the symbols themselves."

"Are you certain, Senator Schwerin?"

"Yes." The young senator known as Schwerin nodded. "For example, this message uses the same six-letter word quite frequently. Moreover, the second and fourth letter are identical. If we assume each of these letters represents a single sound, then this six-letter word is probably..."

The other senators all realized it at the same time.

"Draulight!?"

"Correct. While this alphabet may even encompass different sounds than ours, by matching them to our own alphabet, we can discern what each letter represents. With that, we can substitute in part of the message, then start deducing what the letters adjacent to the ones we know are..."

Schwerin took out a piece of parchment and started listing the letters.

"See, with just this limited information we can decipher sixteen other letters. It'll get more difficult from here, but we can use context clues to help narrow down the possibilities."

"I see..."

The senators exchanged glances, then turned back to the messenger.

“We’ll decipher this. You get the search for the slaves started. Mobilize the city garrison as well.”

“Y-Yes, Your Excellency!”

It took an entire day before the Senators decoded the message and discovered that it said the slaves were planning to flee across the Glacier Sea to the north.

Three days had passed since Draulight’s escape, and the Senate still hadn’t been able to pick up the slaves’ trail. The reason for that was because Draulight and the others were hiding within Ioro Lange’s sewers.

“Hey, you sure we shouldn’t be running?” One of the gladiators whispered in the darkness.

Draulight, who was keeping an eye on the surface from a nearby tunnel, whispered back, “The soldiers searched the sewers the first day of our escape. They didn’t find anything, so they don’t think there’s any chance we could be here. That’s why we returned.”

“I get that, but we can’t just sit here forever. Who knows when someone might think to check again?”

“No, I’m pretty sure we’ll be safe for a while. The longer we wait, the further out they’ll have to extend their search net, which means they’ll start stretching themselves pretty thin. Right now they’re still trying to figure out which direction we went. And thanks to the hint we left behind, they’ll assume north.”

“You sure about that...”

Draulight returned to the passageway where the other gladiators were waiting and said, “There’s a lot less soldiers patrolling the city streets. And I bet you none of them are searching for us. Tonight we’ll sneak out of the city via these sewers.”

“So it’s finally time?”

“However, we’re going to be heading west first.”

“Why west!?”

“I thought you said we were escaping to the south?”

Draulight nodded firmly and replied, “If we go south now, we’ll all die. First, we need to make preparations to cross the mountains.”

Around the same time, the Senate was in the middle of a heated argument.

“Those blasted heretics live near the Glacier Sea. If those escaped gladiators join forces with them, things are going to get a lot worse.”

“Indeed, each of those gladiators is worth a hundred men. We cannot let them teach those *barbaric* heretics how Rolmund soldiers fight. Those gladiators know too much. They might even be able to teach the heretics metallurgy.”

“Then we have to send a search party to North Rolmund immediately!”

Schwerin, the senator who’d figured out how to decode Draulight’s message, frowned.

“But are we sure they went north?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” another senator replied.

“Think about it. Why would they leave behind a vital clue like this for us to find? They’re risking their lives on this escape.”

“You mean, you think this cipher is a diversion?”

“It’s a possibility at least.”

After a few minutes of silent consideration, the senators came to a unanimous conclusion.

“We’ll send search parties south as well. No, we’ll send them in all directions.”

A few more days after that, Draulight and his companions set out for the southern mountains. Along the way, he’d picked up various supplies and freed many more slaves. Their party exceeded one hundred people now. They were avoiding the main roads and sticking to mountain trails as they wound their way south. As it was winter, they were all marching through snow.

“Hey, Draulight. Why’d you take all those serfs with you? Those guys don’t even know how to hold a sword,” One of the gladiators asked.

Draulight surveyed his surroundings, then replied, “Yes, and all we know is how to fight. Once we’re over the mountains, we’re going to need their help to learn how to farm and build houses.”

“But a huge group like this is gonna stand out...”

“Which is why we’re going through the mountains. In winter, neither serfs nor pilgrims travel through here. There’s nowhere to get firewood or wild berries, and wolves are everywhere. The only people who’d brave the mountains in this season are hunters and woodcutters.”

Draulight waved off his companion’s worries and started barking orders to the group.

“Raise your knees when you walk, guys! Think of it like climbing stairs. Keep your back straight, and always be aware of your center of gravity.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll tire out slower when walking like this. It’s good practice for everyone before we start scaling the really big mountains. Everyone’s already got a bunch of stamina thanks to all the gladiator fights they’ve been through. All that’s left is using it efficiently.”

“You sure have a lot of energy...” The gladiator muttered sullenly. At this point, though, no one was going to disobey Draulight. He’d gotten them this far, after all. Suddenly, he turned around and said, “Also, it’s time we started making insulation gear for ourselves. We won’t survive in the mountains with these clothes.”

The gladiators exchanged glances.

“Why not?”

The gladiator who’d asked that question was wearing a thick fur cloak. It was crudely made, but it kept out the cold well. However, Draulight shook his head.

“These cloaks are too coarse, and they’re not waterproof. If they get wet they’ll be less than useless. Plus, as we get higher, the wind’ll start coming from

below, and it'll just blow your cloaks up. You'll freeze to death in a heartbeat."

The gladiators exchanged glances. One of them hesitantly asked, "You sure know a lot about mountain climbing. Have you done it before?"

Draulight resumed walking and looked off into the distance.

"Yeah...a very long time ago," he replied.

Half a month had passed, and the Senate still hadn't discovered Draulight's whereabouts. They'd sent out teams to sweep all the major highways and set up checkpoints on every entrance to the Glacier Sea, but they'd seen neither hide nor hair of the escaped slaves. Word of the coliseum breakout had reached the common people, and rumors and speculation abounded. Moreover, pilgrims and merchants were spreading those rumors all across Rolmund.

Meanwhile, Senator Schwerin had gathered his personal troops to lead an expedition out of Ioro Lange. As he prepared to set off, another senator wearing traveling garb came up to him. He was another young senator, roughly the same age as Schwerin.

"Where might you be headed, Lord Schwerin?"

"I'm returning to my lands in West Rolmund. If the slaves are heading south, they may have passed through my territory."

"I see. Well, I shall continue guarding the highways leading to the Glacier Sea. However, I've decided to take personal command of the border checkpoints."

Smiling conspiratorially, the senator added, "But really, you're doing all this to prepare for *next time* aren't you?"

Schwerin nodded calmly.

"Over these past five years, we've had sixteen different incidents. Mass escapes, revolts, you name it. Considering the situation, it is only prudent that I prepare for next time."

"Understandable, especially since we lost our gladiators this time. They were the most well-treated of all our slaves. If even they were unhappy with their lot in life, then..."

“Indeed. Their escape will embolden the remaining serfs. I cannot afford to sit idly by right now.”

Both of them knew exactly what they were referring to with “next time.” Hence, why they smiled.

“The next time we see each other might be on the battlefield, you know.”

“I pray that isn’t how things play out.”

Still smiling, the senator who controlled parts of North Rolmund grabbed his horse’s reins.

“Goodbye, Lord Schwerin. May we meet again,” he said.

Schwerin bowed his head in farewell.

“I’m sure we will, Lord Bolshevik,” he replied softly.

“I see the perceptive ones have already caught on. All that’s left is to see how we can escape this impending disaster.”

The cold winter wind whistled through Schwerin’s cloak as he spoke.

A few more days passed uneventfully. While a number of senators were catching on that the republic was on the verge of collapse, Draulight and his followers had reached the base of the mountains.

“Hmm...I see.”

Draulight nodded to himself as he looked up at the towering mountain before him. He’d already outfitted his party with waterproof jackets and insulating underclothes.

“According to the local serfs, the worst of the winter is behind us. The weather should be clear for a few days at least, too. We can do this.”

Many of the serfs living around the area had joined Draulight’s exodus. They were the ones who’d informed him of the local geography and weather patterns.

“I’ll consult with the locals and plot out our path. Meanwhile, you all rest. We’ll be starting our climb bright and early tomorrow.”

The gladiators nodded, their trust in Draulight now absolute. He'd somehow managed to avoid every single patrol while leading them here.

"Aye. I can't believe we're finally here..."

Draulight made to leave, but then turned back around as if he'd suddenly remembered something.

"Oh yeah. Once night falls light campfires and thoroughly cook all of our food. Then dry everything out, or it'll freeze up in the mountains."

"You sure we should light fires? What if the soldiers see them?"

When they'd been in the mountains, the slaves had been extremely careful about when and where they lit fires. Even on the coldest nights, they kept their fires small to make sure they wouldn't be spotted. However, Draulight just responded, "We won't have time to cook while we're up there. And we absolutely need preserved food we can eat while we walk. Hunger will make your body colder."

"In other words, we need the food more than we need to avoid detection. Gotcha."

At daybreak, the nearly two hundred slaves began their ascent up the snowcapped mountains.

"Be very careful not to get wet. Don't walk so fast that you start to sweat. Moisture will sap body heat like nothing else. Moreover, if you sweat, you'll need more water."

Draulight kept a watchful eye on everyone as he explained how to climb.

"Also, make sure you've all found sturdy walking sticks. The more you use your arms to climb, the more your legs will get to rest. And you'll need your legs."

Draulight led the climb, looking back often to make sure everyone was keeping up. The gladiators trailing behind him smiled in relief.

"I thought those serfs would slow us down, but they're keeping pace. I'm surprised," one of them mused.

Draulight nodded and replied, “They’ve all got pretty toned bodies too, thanks to all that farmwork. It’s just they’ve never had enough food to really make use of them.”

Just then, one of the serfs in the rear shouted, “They found us! There’s soldiers chasing us, Mr. Draulight!”

“There’s a hundred...no, two hundred of ‘em!”

The gladiators turned around and drew their swords.

“Tch, so they came.”

But before they could charge the oncoming soldiers, Draulight held out a hand.

“Wait. With our numbers and equipment, we can’t win. Especially when we’re dressed to climb, not fight. Besides, if you guys get exhausted here, you won’t have energy left for the ascent.”

“We’ve kinda got bigger problems than mountain climbing right now!”

“Besides, isn’t our job as gladiators to protect the serfs?”

Everyone was raring to fight. Draulight sighed and said, “Right now we don’t have armor or shields. All we’ve got are our swords and our climbing sticks. Do you really think we can win?”

“Well...”

There was no way gladiators burdened down with blankets and provisions could fight trained soldiers armed with spears and bows.

“But it’s not like we can just run! Our packs are too heavy for that! And there’s women and children with us!”

“I know. Leave this fight to me.” Draulight paused before adding, “The rest of you climb. We’re going with the plan I told you yesterday.”

“Hey Draulight, don’t tell me you’re planning to...”

Draulight waved to the other slaves, interrupting his friend.

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning to sacrifice myself. It’s not like a suicidal rush would even help us. Anyway, make sure you follow the path I plotted out. Don’t

go off-course.”

Draulight pointed to their destination to drive the point home, then started going down the path he’d come.

The pursuit party’s morale was low.

“Why’d those goddamn slaves have to show up here of all places...” One of the platoon captains muttered with a sigh. His fellow captains nodded in agreement.

“I heard they’d gone north, so I figured we’d be fine... Guess those fires that woodcutter saw really were from them.”

“Now that we’ve found them, we can’t let them go or we’ll be the ones punished. Still...”

The soldiers knew they were up against veteran gladiators. Unlike these troops who’d just received basic military training, the gladiators had fought life-and-death battles numerous times. Meanwhile, Rolmund’s soldiers had just been eliminating bandits and suppressing revolts. They were far from seasoned warriors.

“I heard some gladiator called Draulight’s leading them.”

“Oh, I’ve heard the rumors about him. Apparently he’s some kinda master fighter. They say he’s four Bashcals tall and has arms thicker than a tree trunk.”

“I heard he can split a man’s helm with one blow.”

“My friend told me he’s never lost a single battle, even though he’s fought hundreds of times.”

“Gladiators are monsters...”

As rumors of the escape had spread, stories of Draulight’s prowess had become highly exaggerated. Just then, one of the platoon captain’s soldiers shouted, “I’ve spotted the slaves, sir! They’re climbing up the mountain single-file!”

“Morons. They’re defenseless up there.”

“Sure, there might be gladiators mixed among them, but they’re still slaves. From the looks of it, they don’t even know how to organize a retreat.”

The captain had no experience with mountain climbing, and so was reading their formation from the perspective of a military commander.

“Alright, let’s wipe them out before they have a chance to get in formation. Chase them up the mountain.”

“*Up* the mountain, sir?” One of the junior captains asked the senior captain in command.

“It’ll be a pain if we lose them in the forest down below. But there’s only rocks and snow up above. They won’t have anywhere to hide there.”

“I see.”

Draulight’s party had already climbed above the tree line, so there was nowhere for them to hide. The soldiers caught up to the slaves before long. Before they could mount an attack, however, a lone swordsman jumped out from behind a nearby boulder and ran at them.

“KIYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Gwah!”

The swordsman cut down all the Rolmund soldiers in his path as he charged down the slope.

“Wh-What the hell!?”

“Enemy attack!”

“That scream—is that Draulight!?”

The soldiers readied their spears, but their footing was unstable and they had a hard time getting into formation. On the other hand, Draulight moved swiftly across the uneven ground. He deftly dodged the soldiers’ spears as he dashed through the snow.

“He’s the leader of the escaped slaves, capture him!”

At their captain’s command, the soldiers started running up the steep mountain slope. But their heavy armor, shields, and pikes weighed them down,

making it impossible for them to catch Draulight.

“Dammit! Shoot him, you fools!”

“We can’t, sir! It’s impossible to get our archers in formation on a slope like this! And the wind’s too strong to get a straight shot!”

Though they were struggling, Rolmund’s soldiers were slowly succeeding in cornering Draulight. There was a tiny dip in the mountain surface that they were driving him into. The slope there was extremely steep and covered in icy sleet. Even Draulight would have a hard time climbing out of that. Once they had Draulight where they wanted him, the soldiers crowded around the hollow’s rim, their spears held at the ready. Even now, they were wary of his exemplary swordsmanship.

“Good, we’ve got him! Advance, men!”

Draulight stood still, seemingly resigned to his fate. He held his stance, but made no move to try and escape. But then, just before the soldiers reached him, he raised his sword high and yelled, “Do it, now!”

A second later, a group of slaves with ropes tied to their waists appeared far above the battlefield. They thrust their walking poles into the snow and started shouting.

“Raaaaaaah!”

“Hyaaaaaaaah!”

The soldiers exchanged confused glances.

“The hell?”

“What’re they doing...”

“I thought they’d start shooting arrows at us, but they’re just shouting.”

Tactically, the slaves’ actions made no sense. After a few seconds of confusion, the captain in charge decided to ignore them.

“When all’s said and done, they’re just a bunch of ignorant slaves. Since they don’t know how to shoot bows, they’re just yelling to distract us. Forget about them, keep advancing!”

“Yes, sir!”

The soldiers readied their spears once more and bore down on Draulight. Draulight turned his back on the advancing soldiers and shouted up to his comrades, “Come on, is that all you’ve got!? Let these assholes know we’re not slaves! Show them our pride!”

The soldiers raised their eyebrows.

“What the heck’s that guy on about?”

“Slaves don’t have any pride. Hell, they’re not even worthy of being called human...”

But the slaves continued shouting and thrusting their sticks into the snow.

“Don’t let Draulight die!”

“Goddammiiiiit!”

Even as the slaves shouted, the soldiers continued advancing on Draulight. Right before they reached him, he suddenly started running.

“He’s trying to get away!”

“Chase him!”

The soldiers focused their attention on Draulight, and only Draulight. Which was why they didn’t realize there was an avalanche heading toward them until it was right on top of them.

That evening, the few survivors of the ill-fated assault returned home.

“You got caught in an avalanche!?”

The commander who’d ordered the attack was speechless. He hadn’t expected only a fraction of the two hundred men he’d sent out to return. There weren’t enough of them left to form even a single platoon. The soldiers who’d returned were all unhurt, but that just meant they hadn’t been able to rescue their wounded. Moreover, they all told their commander the same story.

“Our captains went missing in the avalanche, and the slaves launched a fierce counterattack. We were too disorganized to rescue our injured. It was hard

enough to save our own lives.”

The truth was that these soldiers had all fled the moment they’d seen the avalanche, which was why they’d been spared. But none of them were going to admit they deserted.

“Shit...this isn’t good.” The commander paled underneath his ornately decorated helm. “We’ve lost two hundred-man squads. And to a pack of slaves, no less...”

Just then, Schwerin entered the commander’s tent, flanked by his guards.

“Please explain what happened here, commander,” Schwerin said calmly.

“Y-Your Excellency Lord Schwerin!”

“I’ve brought four hundred cavalry with me as reinforcements, but it appears your advance party has been wiped out.”

“S-Sir! I humbly apologize for this failure! An avalanche happened to occur just as my pursuit squad reached the slaves, and...”

Schwerin thoughtfully interjected, “I wonder, was that avalanche really a coincidence?”

“What do you mean?” the commander asked timidly.

Schwerin shook his head and said, “It’s not important. What is important is that if word gets out, you’ll all be court-martialed. Not only did you lose two entire squads, but you let the slaves escape. At best, you’ll all be demoted to slaves; at worst, you might be exiled or executed.”

“You can’t be serious! P-Please, have mercy!”

Schwerin smiled at the despairing commander.

“Fear not. I’ll intercede on your behalf. I’ll tell the Senate that though you and your soldiers fought valiantly, the Hero Draught was just too strong. He annihilated an entire hundred-man squad all by himself. No, let’s make it a thousand-man army...or actually, why not ten thousand?”

“Umm, where are you going with this, Your Excellency?”

Schwerin’s smile grew deeper as he watched the commander’s confusion.

“Essentially, we’ll spin the story so that you didn’t fail, but rather Draulight’s strength was abnormal. I’ll stand witness for you.”

“I-I see...”

Schwerin shot the commander a suggestive look.

“Since Draulight’s escaped, I doubt he’ll be coming back. In which case, no one will complain if we say I killed him, right?”

“Umm... I suppose not?”

“Exactly.” Schwerin drew closer to the commander and added, “This way, I will become a legend who killed a Hero, and you and your men will be saved from the executioner’s axe.”

“A-As you say.”

“Now all that’s left is for you all to become my retainers.” Schwerin grinned. “Swear fealty to me, and I promise no harm will come to you.”

“Wait, are you planning on starting a rebellion!? And you want us to join you!?”

“Are you that keen to face a military tribunal?”

“No, Your Excellency, definitely not. Hrm...”

The commander trailed off, his resolve wavering. His officers exchanged worried looks, unsure of what to do. But in the end, the commander and his officers were military men. They knew what the only strategically viable option was.

“Do you swear to protect us if we join you?”

“Of course. I’ll have you promoted to generals—no, to nobles. I’ll even grant you your own territory. Your descendants will live prosperous lives.”

Schwerin patted the commander’s shoulder.

“This republic is on its last legs. I plan to destroy the Senate and become emperor of Rolmund. And if you follow me, I’ll let you share in my glory.”

“As you say, my lord.”

The commander and his officers bowed reverently to their new sovereign.

Draulight trudged through the thickly-packed snow, the remnants of the avalanche behind him. Strong evening winds buffeted his jacket, but could not penetrate to the layers beneath. As he brushed snow off his clothes, Draulight looked behind him. The avalanche had been funneled into a dry creek bed, which was where the Rolmund soldiers had ostensibly cornered him. The geography they'd thought was helping them had ended up betraying them, and now all the soldiers had either fled or died.

"Looks like the mountain saved us this time," Draulight muttered as his gladiator companions struggled to descend the mountain slope toward him.

"You okay, Draulight!?"

"Yeah. I can't believe I made it, actually. Running perpendicular to the avalanche was the only way out, but I didn't think I could run that fast..."

His comrades smiled in relief as they crowded around him.

"Anyway, thank God you're safe. We're all accounted for too."

"But man, I can't believe you came up with a plan like that. Who would have thought you could cause an avalanche?"

Draulight replied casually, "This is the season where new snowfall starts hardening the snow beneath into ice. I knew if you guys disturbed the upper layer of snow, it'd slide easily on the ice underneath. It was a pretty risky gamble, but it was the only way I could think of to keep us all alive."

"I-I see..."

"You know, Draulight, sometimes I have no idea what you're talking about..."

Draulight shook his head and replied, "My name's not actually Draulight. Once we cross these mountains, I'll tell you guys my real name."

"Your real name?"

"Yeah. Not the slave name I was given, but the real name I've had since before I was born. That's the name I'm gonna live by from now on."

The man who'd once been Draulight gripped his walking pole and smiled triumphantly.

“Now come on, let's go!”

Afterword

Hello everyone, Hyougetsu here.

It's a relief to finally complete the Rolmund Empire arc. Like I mentioned in a previous afterword, I wrote the conclusion to volume four in a way that the series could end there if it needed to, but there was no good intermediate stopping point in the middle of the empire arc. Anyway, I'm just glad *Der Werwolf* didn't get canceled before it was over.

So with this volume, the main antagonists were Shallier Bolshevik and Princess Dillier. Unlike Eleora and Woroy, they don't end up on Veight's side by the end, but they don't end up dead like Ivan either. I feel like the two of them ended up as pretty divisive characters. You either love them or you hate them. Of course, as the author, I love every character I introduce, including all the villains, but I know that's not the same for my readers. At any rate, it's possible Shallier and Dillier might show up in the story again. (In fact I've already written a side story about them.)

Oh yeah, I also got to collaborate on a short story with the *Satan's Secretary* manga. I remember mentioning to my editor that the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander and Satan's Secretary are kinda the same position, and then somehow the conversation advanced to the point where we were doing a collab. For those of you who don't know, *Satan's Secretary* is about a beautiful but sharp-tongued secretary who gets abducted by Satan but then willingly works for his army. It's a comedy manga where most of the humor comes from the secretary berating the weak-willed Satan.

Moving on, it's time for the acknowledgments. As always, I'd like to thank my editor, the great Fusanon. I'd also like to thank Nishi(E)da-sensei for his amazing illustrations, as well as all my proofreaders. It's all thanks to your support that *Der Werwolf* is as good as it is.

Last but not least, thank you, dear readers, for sticking with me. If not for you, I wouldn't have made it all the way to seven volumes. Of course, there's still a

lot more of Veight's story left to tell, so let's hope I don't get canceled before it's done. Please support me all the way to the end, guys.

Incidentally volume eight is going to go into more detail about what causes reincarnations, and explore Veight's inner conflicts. The Champion who's saved Meraldia and Rolmund has a lot of worries on his plate, and it's about time he took some time for himself. I hope you guys are looking forward to seeing the secrets of reincarnation unveiled. (Unless for some reason I decide to change my plans for volume eight, in which case I'm terribly sorry.)

Regardless, let us meet again in the next volume.



Volka

✂ Character
rough drafts ✂

By nishi(e)da



Volka 2

scribble
design

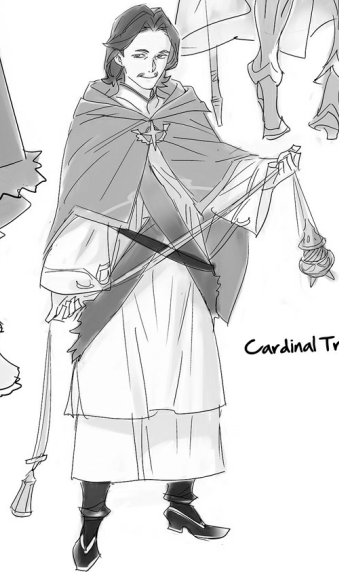


Lord shallier Bolshevik

Volka's outfit
is one of his
hand-me-downs



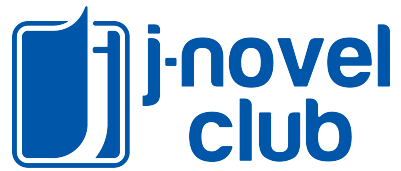
Cardinal Kushmer



Cardinal Traja



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again in the
next volume!



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 7

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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