



Der Werwolf

16

**Hyougetsu**  
ill. Nari Teshima

# Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— The Ideal Future, Realized —



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# Character

A black and white illustration of a young man with dark, wavy hair, looking slightly to the left. He is wearing a dark, sleeveless tunic with a wide, light-colored collar and a dark belt. A large, light-colored cape or cloak is draped over his shoulders. He is standing with his hands on his hips.

## Veight

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

A black and white illustration of a young woman with dark, wavy hair, looking slightly to the left. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless tunic with a wide, light-colored collar and a dark belt. A large, light-colored cape or cloak is draped over her shoulders. She is standing with her hands on her hips.

## Friede

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



A black and white illustration of a young woman with long, wavy, light-colored hair. She is looking slightly to the right with a gentle smile. She is wearing a simple, light-colored tunic.

## Airia:

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

A black and white illustration of a young woman with long, dark hair styled in two large pigtails. She is wearing a large, dark, pointed hat with a white feather. She has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left.

## Gomoviroa:

A powerful necromancer who taught Veight magic. Relinquished her position as Demon Lord and is now the Demon Empress.

A black and white illustration of a young man with short, dark, spiky hair. He is wearing a dark, high-collared tunic with a cape. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left.

## Shumar:

Son of the late Pajam the Second and heir to the Kuwol throne. Speaks softly but is wise beyond his years.

A black and white illustration of three characters. On the left is a young woman with dark hair in pigtails, looking to the right. In the middle is a dragon-like creature with a long, curved horn and a small body. On the right is a young man with short, dark hair, looking forward.

## Iori, Shirin, and Joshua:

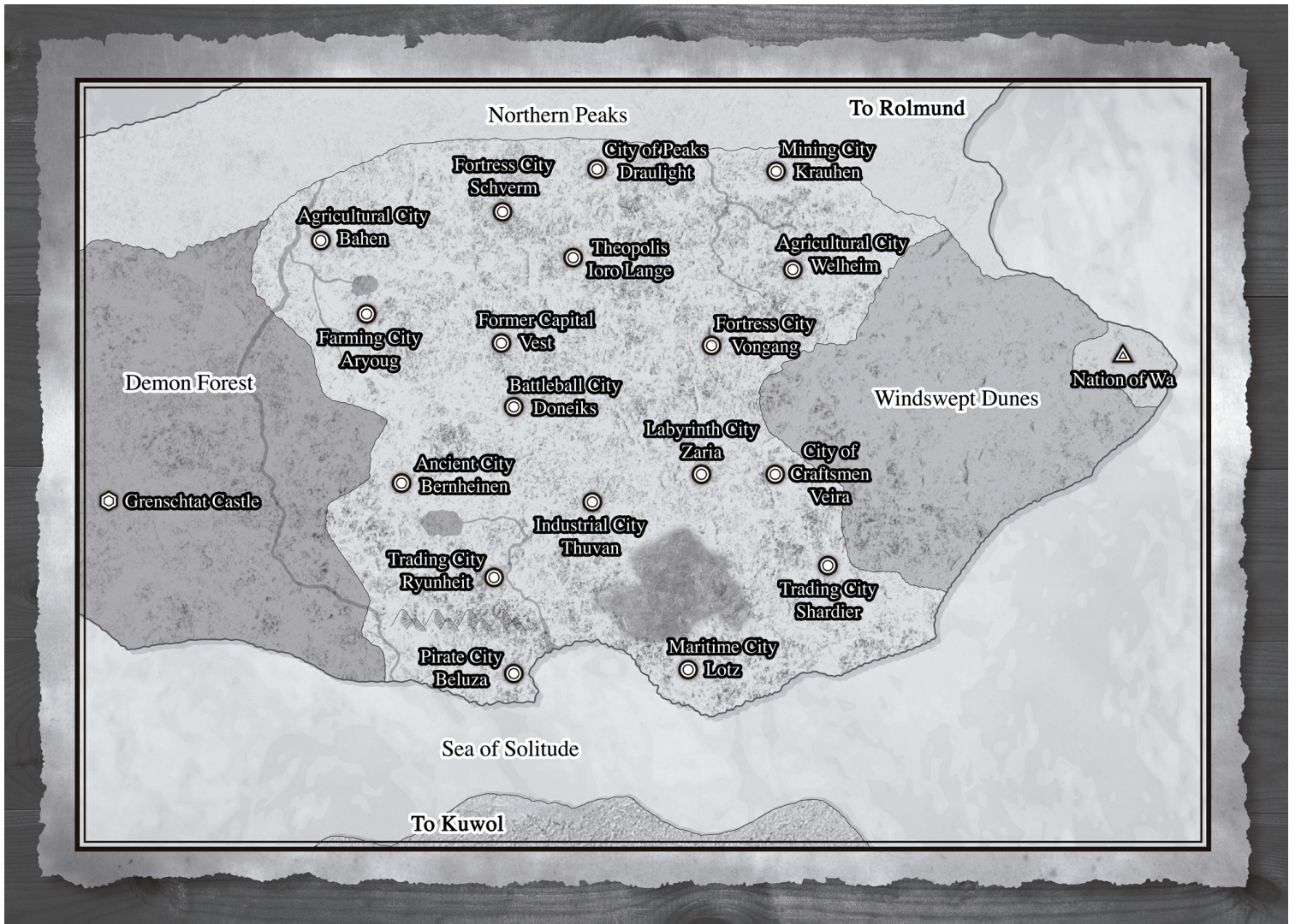
Friends of Friede who are all up-and-coming stars in their respective fields.

A black and white illustration of a young man with short, dark hair. He is wearing a dark, high-collared tunic with a cape. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left.

## Tiriya:

Prince Shumar's bodyguard and best friend. Hails from a nomadic tribe outside Kuwol's borders.







## — The Story So Far —

After defeating the false Ason in Wa, Friede journeyed to Meraldia where she continued attending classes while helping her father with work. In time, Meraldia University welcomed a new student, none other than Shumar, the prince of Kuwol. As the student body representative, Friede took on the responsibility of showing him around the campus and its facilities, leading to a fast friendship between the two.

Reports came of strange incidents deep within the heart of the forest west of Meraldia. Veight organized a scouting expedition and discovered that a dragon was responsible for these incidents. The dragon was constantly seeking more mana and moved from place to place, absorbing the land's mana. If left unchecked, it could easily transform into a Valkaan and terrorize the entire continent.

Realizing the urgency of the situation, Veight sought aid from neighboring nations while bravely diverting the dragon's attention to buy time. Meanwhile, Friede departed for Rolmund to ask Empress Eleora for assistance; upon her return, she brought back powerful magical weaponry. Friede then took over for her father, skillfully led the dragon to Doneiks, and forcefully grounded it outside the city walls. Through the combined might of Wa, Kuwol, Rolmund, and Meraldia, the dragon was successfully dispatched, and peace returned to the continent.

The story so far



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## Chapter 16

A few months had passed since the giant dragon appeared in the forest west of Meraldia, bringing the various nations together to defeat it. I spent most of that time dealing with the aftermath of the dragon's demise and researching how it had come to be. In the end, we confirmed it was indeed a regular lizard-type monster transformed by an immense quantity of mana. We found remnants of an ancient artifact in its stomach, which we surmised it must have ingested by accident. Though the scale was different, it was quite similar to how the Nue I'd fought in Wa had been created.

"Why is mana such a pain to deal with, Master?" I grumbled to my master, Gomoviroa, in one of the labs at Meraldia's university.

She closed the book she was reading and gave me a playful smile. "To think I would ever hear those words uttered by a mage. Although, I suppose I cannot disagree."

"Right? No matter the experiment, we need to account for the influence mana may have on the results. To conduct properly controlled experiments, we need to regulate not just temperature and weight but mana as well."

The existence of magic made it that much harder to advance in chemistry, physics, and even biology.

Master nodded and said, "It seems that if we wish to study the natural sciences properly, we must first advance the field of *magical* science. Unfortunately, magic did not exist in the world you lived in before, so we cannot rely on your knowledge to expedite our research."

"Yeah, even I don't know the best way to study magic."

I hadn't been a scientist, a professor, or an academic of any kind in my past life. All I could do was tell Master generally about the scientific and technological advancements mankind had made and what knowledge was commonplace in that time period. Fortunately, even that broad knowledge was



enough to guide people in the right direction and encourage them to test hypotheses that would yield results. However, magic hadn't existed back on Earth, so I had no idea how one could study it efficiently. If I'd been a proper researcher or something, I might've been able to utilize that knowledge, but sadly, I only had a layman's understanding of science. When it came to discovering new things, I was about as much of a layman as could be.

"I guess all we can do is try to apply the scientific method to the study of magic and go from there..." I sighed.

"Indeed. Good grief, there is still far too much we do not understand about this world. But you can at least count on me to keep deciphering the unknown one step at a time." Master tapped her chest proudly, her eyes glimmering with excitement. While I was glad she was looking towards the future, there were plenty of immediate problems that required our attention.

"...And that's why we need a bigger budget, Veight. C'mon! Give us more money," Ryucco said, rapidly stamping his foot against the desk.

The magical tools Ryucco had developed for the Demon Army were all useful inventions, and I knew research funding was as important as educational funding for building a strong foundation for Meraldia. Frankly, I'd have liked to give him as much money as he wanted. But while Meraldia's economy was growing due to increased trade, our coffers weren't limitless.

"How much do you need, and what do you plan to use it on?" I asked.

"I'm on the verge of a breakthrough with my idea for a teleportation device," Ryucco replied, proudly puffing out his chest. "But I need more data points to figure out how to incorporate accurate coordinates into the thing. I need money to do a few trial runs."

"Okay, but how much?"

Ryucco's ears drooped, and I knew I wouldn't like the number.

"Three..." he began.

"Three...thousand silver coins?"



If he only needed 300, he would've asked without beating around the bush. On the other hand, 3,000 silver coins were the equivalent of 20 to 30 million yen, so I could see why he hesitated. *Wait a sec. What if he wants even more than that?*

"Or is it thirty thousand?"

"No... I need three hundred thousand," he muttered.

In other words, he wanted the equivalent of 2 to 3 billion yen. *Is this damned hare trying to bleed our treasury dry?* While the amount was staggering, I knew Ryucco must've carefully calculated it to reflect what was strictly necessary. I'd known him long enough to understand he didn't take money lightly.

I folded my arms and frowned. "That's more money than I can approve on my own, at least."

"Figures... But the thing is, Veight, it's not easy to teleport living creatures that have a lot of mana, like humans or demons—especially since their mana levels fluctuate as they use magic. Here, take a look at this." Ryucco placed a withered carrot on the desk. It was a new species of carrot that Rolmund had started cultivating for medicinal purposes. It also had the unique property of absorbing mana from the soil. This carrot was quite gnarled and twisted compared to what you'd typically see.

"Is it just me, or does that carrot look stranger than usual?" I asked.

"It looked normal before I tried teleporting it. But when I activated the teleporter, it absorbed 1/10,000th of a kite of mana from the teleportation spell, which resulted in it coming out like this."

"Oh. So...could that happen to people as well?"

"No, we're safe there. Things that have a lot of mana and mass, like people, need way more mana to teleport. If the calculations were just a little off for them, they'd stay where they are instead of being teleported wrong."

*Thank god.* Messing up teleportation spells could lead to disastrous consequences, and it's one of the most difficult fields of magic, just like necromancy. Teleportation required a lot of advanced mathematics that was way beyond my level of comprehension.



I broke off a small piece of the twisted carrot and brought it to my face for closer examination. As I did so, Ryucco tugged on my sleeve.

“See, this is why I need the money,” he said. “I have an idea to prevent mana interference during the teleportation process with my device.”

“Are you sure you can’t test this with less money?”

“Look, you’re howling up the wrong tree. It’s the dragonkin engineers who told me I needed so many data points to be statistically certain of its safety.”

Neither Ryucco nor our dragonkin engineers were interested in amassing personal wealth, so this was likely the actual minimum they needed to make Ryucco’s device safe.

Grimacing, I reluctantly nodded and said, “There’s a council meeting soon. Write a proposal request and get me a copy of your invention’s blueprints. I’ll use them to ask the council to approve funding. It’ll be submitted as a formal proposal from the Demon Army, so hopefully that’ll help sway the viceroys.”

Ryucco hopped off the desk and turned to me with a satisfied smile. “All right. I’ll go get the dragonkin to write it up. Let me know when the money’s here!”

*There’s no guarantee they’ll agree to the proposal, you know...*

I headed back to my office, where I found yet more problems awaiting me.

“While relations with Rolmund are improving, the Demon Army’s standing with the northern territories has continued to decline,” Baltze said, handing me a sheaf of reports.

“I was prepared for this to happen,” I replied with a wan smile as I skimmed through the reports. “Understandably, many people in the northern cities still hate demons. For better or worse, we bear responsibility for the actions of the second regiment.”

“That may be the case, but the Demon Army has diligently defended the northern cities for the better half of twenty years. You’d think they wouldn’t have any complaints about us by now.”

I gave Baltze a simper and said, “The thing about military organizations is that



the moment there's peace, people start to dislike them. Furthermore, we're still outsiders from their perspective. You can't blame them for being unwelcoming."

I could spread propaganda that Rolmund was still a serious threat to make people more willing to rely on the Demon Army, but if I wasn't careful, that could sour diplomatic relations with Rolmund. In the worst case, it could lead to an actual war, which I wanted to avoid at all costs. Besides, I had a better idea that was more my style.

"The older folk might not like us, but from what I hear, the younger generation is friendlier towards demons. They've been interacting with our kind since they were old enough to talk, so they're not scared of us the way older people are. In fact, some of the younger boys idolize how dragonkin conduct themselves, aspiring to be like you guys."

"I'm glad to hear it," Baltze said, smiling.

It was difficult to read dragonkin expressions, but once you got to know them, you became much better at picking up on the subtle changes in their lizard-like faces. Hopefully, the day would come when most humans were familiar enough with dragonkin to do the same. Of course, I planned to do everything in my power to make that day come as soon as possible.

"Let's have the soldiers stationed in the north start building more leisure facilities in their respective cities to improve their image among the residents," I suggested. "I'll talk to Forne and find out what the best options might be."

"Thank you. To be frank, I'm not sure what kinds of things humans would enjoy."

Plus one to my list of things to take care of. But this, too, was the job of the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander. Humans were querulous enough that they frequently fought with one another, so ensuring peace between demons and humans was an important and daunting task.

After Baltze left, a Commonwealth Committee clerk entered with a report in her hands. "My lord, there's trouble in the north."

"If you're referring to the Demon Army's falling reputation, I'm already aware



of the situation.”

“No, it’s not that. There’s a conflict within the Sonnenlicht Order. Immigrants from Rolmund seem to consider Meraldian orthodox heretical, leaving the two churches at odds. It’s possible the split could turn violent.”

*You both are part of the same godsdamned religion. Can’t you get along?* I thought as I read through the report she handed me.

With a long sigh, I said, “We’ll have to be careful about this. People are far more sensitive to small differences among those they consider part of their in-group than to larger differences with those they consider *outsiders*.”

The clerk furrowed their brow and asked, “Is that really true?”

“Trust me, it is. At the very least, that’s how humans seem to a werewolf like me.”

In truth, I’d just read up on human psychology in my past life, but I doubted this clerk would easily grasp such a concept. Regardless, the biggest issue here was that I wasn’t a member of the Sonnenlicht Order, so it wasn’t really my place to interfere.

“Anyway, I think it’s best if we discuss this with Archbishop Yuhit.”

“Y-You mean I’ll get to speak with him?!” the clerk exclaimed, her eyes lighting up.

She was likely a member of the Sonnenlicht Order herself, and every member of Sonnenlicht’s Meraldian church knew of the famed Archbishop Yuhit. Granted, he’d damaged his leg during his time in prison, and was now so old that he’d retired from active public service. These days, he spent most of his time dispensing what advice he could to Sonnenlicht priests and adherents.

“I’m sure His Grace will be willing to help you, Lord Veight!”

“He probably will, but I really don’t want to burden him...”

Yuhit looked older every time I saw him, and it pained me to watch as he slowly succumbed to age. His granddaughter, Yuhette, would most likely succeed him, but she was still young and only a low-ranking priestess at the moment. It probably didn’t help that Friede was dragging her around on



adventures all the time, preventing her from building the political and religious connections she needed.

Unaware of my worries, the clerk smiled and said, “It’s true what everyone says—just bring your problem to Lord Veight, and he’ll solve it for you.”

“Haha... Yes, I’ll do my best.”

I felt my reputation starting to precede me again, but at least this meant everyone reported critical information to me first. My greatest fear was that people on the ground would stop reporting to me, and things would worsen without my knowledge. In the past, it was a lack of information that caused me to make critical errors in Rolmund and Kuwol.

With a gentle smile, I said, “There are some things even I can’t solve, but I’ll do all I can to help. So feel free to report everything you think is important to me from now on.”

“Of course, Lord Veight!” The clerk left, beaming, and I let out another sigh. I’d have to schedule a meeting with Yuhit, but my schedule was already packed with council meetings, university lectures, helping with Master’s research, and inspections.

As I tried to decide what I could drop to fit in this meeting, Fahn, the new leader of the werewolf squad, walked in.

“Elder Veight!”

“What now?”

“A few teenage giants got drunk and started fighting in the new residential district! You have to stop them!”

*Is this really something a Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander needs to handle?* I thought.

“Don’t give me that look; there are a dozen of them, okay?” she added. “We can’t take them all by ourselves! They’re waving huge sticks of lumber around too—three of my werewolves have already been injured trying to intervene!”

“What?!”

One of the ironclad rules of demon society was that if you got hit, you hit



back. I'd recently managed to convince most demons not to use violence as a first resort, but if someone else started the fight, the gloves came off. Demons instinctively deferred to those stronger than them, so if they thought you were weak, it would be hard to get them to listen afterwards. In other words, the reputation of the entire werewolf squad was at stake now.

I closed my planner and got to my feet.

"Lead the way."

It was time to teach these drunkards a lesson.

As I reached the new residential district, I saw just how bad the situation was.

"Graaaaah!"

"You bastaaaaard!"

Just as Fahn had said, a group of young, drunk giants was fighting. From the looks of it, they weren't part of the Demon Army. A few werewolves were there, trying to stop the commotion, but they were unfortunately outmatched.

"Hey, stop! I said, stop! Calm down, you idiots!" one of the werewolves shouted, but a giant just kicked him away.

After transforming, werewolves became quite strong, but they still couldn't match three-meter-tall giants. It was like a child trying to fight an adult.

"See, what did I tell you?" Fahn said with a sigh.

"No, this is good," I replied with a nod. "Our werewolves are actually trying to de-escalate the situation without immediately resorting to violence. It's not good to get rough with our own citizens, even if they are giants. You've done a good job teaching them, Fahn."

"You really think so?" Fahn said, blushing and scratching her head. But a few seconds later, her expression turned grim. "But if we're not supposed to fight, how are we going to stop them?! We can't use Blast Rifles on them, right?!"

"Of course not. From what I've observed, it's just a drunken brawl. Don't worry, I'll stop them."

“Oh okay. Good luck. I’ll be waiting here, far out of your way.”

Looking immensely relieved, Fahn retreated to a safe distance. I could handle this alone, so her getting out of the way was helpful.

I strode up to the two brawling giants and firmly said, “That’s quite enough.”

The giant closest to me turned around and glared, his eyes mildly glazed over.

“Da hell didya say, ya old fart?! You wanna die, huh?!”

*Excuse me? Did you just call me old?! I mentally quipped. I mean, my age is getting up there, but still.*

The giant turned back around, completely losing interest in me. He picked up a massive barrel of ale and took a big swig. I thought he would swing at me immediately, but he showed surprising restraint. *Not enough restraint, since he still called me old, but what can you do?* At the very least, I’d decided not to settle this with violence. It was important not to be too rough with your citizens, even if they did call you old.

First things first, I needed to get that alcohol away from him. I swung my hand down, unleashing a blade of pure mana at the barrel, slicing it in two.

“Bwuh?!” Ale poured down onto the giant’s head, and he turned to glare at me.

“Da hell wuzzat for?!”

“Drinking in public isn’t allowed in this district. Leave now, or...”

“Or wuh?!”

“Or *this*.” I picked up the giant with one hand and lifted him high above my head.

“Whaaa?! What da hell?!”

“I used magic to simultaneously increase my arm strength and lessen gravity’s hold on you. As you can see, I can lift you like an infant. So, I highly recommend you *sober up*.”

I took a few steps and dunked him into one of the water tanks every street had for fire emergencies. There was a huge splash, and he began sputtering



incoherently as he tried to climb out. It was a bit excessive for shock therapy, but demons needed to see the difference in power before they'd listen. I also kept his gravity light when throwing him, so there was no worry of him drowning.

Upon hearing the splash, the other giants turned around.

"Wuzzoin' on?!"

"Where'd Gwaza go?!"

I pointed over my shoulder to where the giant known as Gwaza was still splashing around ineffectively.

"Your friend Gwaza is taking a sober bath. As will all of you in a few seconds."

"Yer gonna pay fer dat!" One of the giants hefted a piece of timber big enough to be a support pillar in a house.

*Hey, wait! Those things are expensive; don't use them as weapons.*

"Take this!" As he swung the log down, I brought up one hand to stop it.

I used strengthening magic to harden my hand as much as possible, causing the timber to split in two upon impact. Despite this, though, the impact still hurt my hand a little. *Maybe I'm getting too old for this.*

"Wh-What da?!"

"You're going to have to pay for that piece of timber now, you know?" I said. There was no way I would let the Demon Army cover it.

The giant then swung a fist down at me, but I simply strengthened my legs and dodged to the side. I touched his fist as it came down and increased its weight tenfold.

"Nrrrgh?!" The giant pitched forward as his fist slammed into the ground with a ground-shattering force. He probably wouldn't be able to lift it back up.

"Hnnnrgh! Nnnnng!" Red-faced, the giant struggled to raise his fist again, but after a few attempts, he gave in, and a hint of fear crept into his expression.

Giants relied solely on their strength, so being placed in a situation where their strength was useless was a deeply terrifying experience. Giants were too

big to run or hide, so their only means of survival was overpowering threats. Rendering this one powerless seemed to have taught him a lesson. But doing this for every one of them would take too long.

“Drunkards are so full of openings that it’s actually hard to hold back enough. They can’t aim worth a damn, which actually makes it harder to dodge their attacks since they go all over the place.”

I wanted to return to my office and get back to work, but there were still a dozen more giants I had to subdue. Granted, this was nothing compared to the time I had to spar with a hundred werecats, at least.

“All right, who’s next? I have a meeting I need to make, so hurry it up.”

“Damn you!” yelled another giant as they charged in.

To my surprise, they decided to attack me one at a time. *Oh wait, it’s probably because the street is too narrow for more to attack at once.* I made the third giant’s left foot extremely heavy, applying the principles of Gusokujutsu, but with magic.

“Hwuh?!” the giant yelled in surprise as he fell, and I made his right hand heavier as well to keep him stuck to the ground.

*That’s another one down.* Grinning, I turned back to the remaining giants.

“Well, since I have to do this anyway, I might as well have some fun with it. So, who’s next?”

Half a minute later, the battle was over.

“I get that you wanted to blow off some steam after weeks of hard work. There’s nothing inherently wrong with getting drunk, but please do it outside the city next time, or you’ll end up destroying all the warehouses you worked so hard to build,” I said gently to the young giants. Eight of them were incapacitated, while the other five sat meekly on the ground, trembling in fear.

“W-We’re sorry!” one exclaimed.

“We won’t do it again!” added another.

*You don’t have to yell so loud... You’re gonna make me go deaf.* Ryunheit was



growing rapidly, and small villages were already popping up outside the newer districts of the city. These giants had all been hired to help construct new houses and buildings for those villages. They were new to the city, and the work had started stressing them out. Unsurprisingly, a human city felt a bit claustrophobic for giants. But still, I needed these guys to get along with humans, or it'd cause problems down the line—especially with how threatening humans could be. A human with a Blast Rifle could easily take down a giant.

I smiled at the giants and said, “If you really need to vent all that excess energy, come join the Demon Army. We’ll take good care of you.”

“O-Okay.” One of the giants nodded.

A few seconds later, a kentauros messenger galloped up to me. She was a young girl, still in her teens.

“Um, Lord Veight!”

“Is it time for the meeting? Don’t worry, I’ll be there soon.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Then what?”

In an apologetic tone, the girl said, “The Demon Lord said you haven’t finished today’s reports, and she needs them for the upcoming meeting.”

“Urgh! I totally forgot!”

I needed to get back ASAP.

Somehow, I managed to finish the reports in time for the meeting, but as always, the meeting itself was an exhausting ordeal.

“What kind of budget proposal is this?! Both Beluza and Lotz are raking in profits from the new trade routes! Us folk in the north need help the most!” shouted Yuninel, the new viceroy of Draulight.

Draulight, the City of Peaks, was the northernmost city in Meraldia and, as its name suggested, was surrounded by mountains. Yuninel was the youngest child of the old viceroy and hadn’t even celebrated his twentieth birthday yet. Back when I fought the Senate, he was just an infant. However, it seemed he had

support from his siblings, who held substantial influence in the city. He did seem to be trying his best to be a good viceroy.

Unfortunately, Beluza's viceroy Garsh wasn't one to let someone younger than his own son talk back to him.

"Oh, give me a break! Your city got all the funds back when the Senate still controlled Meraldia! We're finally catching up to your lot in the north, so don't say you need the money more!"

What Garsh said was true. The Senate was primarily staffed by people from the northern cities. Furthermore, the Senate seats were inherited positions, and after many generations, most Senators had become quite corrupt. However, Yuninel didn't live through the time of the Senate.

"That's ancient history now! I wasn't even born to experience it!" Yuninel shot back. "You have to look at the *present*! If Rolmund attempts another invasion, Draught will be on the front lines! Without that funding, we'll fall instantly! Do you really want to give Rolmund a foothold to invade the rest of Meraldia?!"

This was a reasonable argument. Granted, I'd made plenty of under-the-table deals with Eleora, so it was unlikely Rolmund would invade. And since Rolmund had come to our aid when we'd asked for help in slaying the dragon, it was safe to say Rolmund was an allied nation at this point. But the official story was that tensions still existed between Meraldia and Rolmund, giving the northern viceroys a valid pretense to request more funding. The worry that Rolmund might attack again wasn't entirely unfounded. They didn't know Eleora as well as I did, after all. In her campaign, Eleora had managed to conquer a vast swath of northern Meraldia and even push as far south as Rynheit. If one focused solely on her military achievements, she made for a very dangerous empress.

"Calm yourself, Sir Yuninel. Let's hear what the other viceroys have to say," I said, giving him a placating smile. "The funds we have to allocate come from taxes we levy on each of the cities. We all have an equal say in how this money should be spent."

"If you say so, Professor..." Out of respect for me, Yuninel reluctantly backed down. Like most young nobles in Meraldia, Yuninel had graduated from Meraldia University.



The Commonwealth Council received a fixed amount of tax revenue from each city and then redistributed those funds each year. The goal was to remove as much economic disparity between the cities of the Meraldian Commonwealth as possible.

As I tried to think of a compromise for Yuninel and Garsh, I absentmindedly flipped through the budget proposal Ryucco had given me. Reading through his sloppy handwriting, I let out another sigh. With how strained relations already were over the current budget, I wasn't sure I could successfully advocate for diverting more funds to *research*.

Seeing an opportunity to interject, Belken, the viceroy of Krauhen, raised his hand. He was a sincere, mild-mannered man who'd served as viceroy for decades, but he was also shrewd enough to have sided with Eleora when Rolmund invaded sixteen years ago.

"I, too, would like to ask for more funds for Krauhen. One of the North's issues is the relative lack of trade routes. Trade with Rolmund has grown in recent years, but the mountain range separating our nations limits how much we can feasibly trade with them. On the other hand, if we create too many mountain passes for traversal, Rolmund could use them against us if they ever choose to invade."

*Says the guy who had his engineers dig a secret tunnel to Rolmund for Eleora.* That tunnel was still used today, but it was a convenient means of traveling between the two countries, so no one complained about it. Just in case, there was a regiment of elite Demon Army troops stationed there, but they were mostly for show.

The other northern viceroys all wanted more funds for their cities as well, so they nodded in agreement with Belken's words. Every city had started importing demon laborers to meet development demands. They needed money to cover construction costs, housing facilities for the new laborers, and more guards to keep the streets safe.

Myurei, the viceroy of Lotz, raised his hand and replied, "Mister Belken, the southern port cities are struggling just as much. With the increase in ships arriving at our shores, we've needed to rapidly expand the number of docks and

cranes in our ports, as well as hire many more translators and customs officials. We're barely keeping up as it is."

Myurei was speaking the truth too.

"Now is the time to invest heavily in Lotz and Beluza. If we miss this opportunity, trade will decline, and eventually, Wa and Kuwol will trade only with each other. We'll lose all the foreign capital currently flowing into Meraldia, which would devastate our long-term finances."

This would also mean less money for the Commonwealth, hurting everyone. Upon hearing Myurei's points, Yuninel and Belken exchanged glances.

"I understand Myurei's perspective, but..." Yuninel muttered.

"We're also suffering from a lack of funds," Belken added. "We need to strengthen our defenses in case Rolmund changes its approach, and construction projects in mountainous terrain like ours are quite costly. Our space is limited as well. Altering the mountain landscape will impact the snowmelt, which feeds into our irrigation systems."

"I understand, but..." Frowning, Myurei glanced in my direction, seeking support. Aram and Forne also looked my way.

In my opinion, investing more in harbor infrastructure was our top priority, but I didn't voice it. Or rather, I couldn't. The northern viceroys already thought the Demon Army favored the southern cities too much; it didn't help that our current Demon Lord was also a viceroy of a southern city. I didn't want to give the northern viceroys more reason to suspect favoritism. Meanwhile, the southern viceroys believed Airia and I could solve any problem they faced. We were caught between a rock and a hard place.

Airia also looked in my direction, unsure if she should speak her mind. Everything said in these meetings was recorded and made public, so we all had to be cautious about our words. At long last, I'd advanced so far up the ladder that I couldn't even express my thoughts. Even if the meeting wasn't recorded, every word I spoke held weight. This meant I had to maintain a safe, neutral stance at all times.

All this posturing made me understand why politicians back in Japan often



spoke in such roundabout, indecisive language. Clearing my throat could be interpreted in a dozen ways. But if I said nothing, I was merely an ornamental figurehead. I needed to take a stance, even if it cost me something. But before I could speak, Ryuunie, the viceroy of Doneiks, raised his hand.

“I would like to remind everyone that these meetings are a forum for us to understand each other’s positions. In Rolmund, we have a saying: ‘Steal from your neighbor, and you will both starve. Share with your neighbor, and you will both feast.’”

Ryuunie was an exiled prince from Rolmund—the nephew of the previous emperor, Ashley, and the current empress, Eleora. Because his late father, Ivan, staged a coup, he could never return to Rolmund. However, his exile was precisely why the viceroys of Meraldia’s northern cities trusted him. The southern viceroys liked him as well, since he’d been my protégé during his time at Meraldia University. Myurei, in particular, was one of his best friends. Ryuunie’s broad popularity gave him considerable influence, especially among the younger viceroys.

Everyone stopped arguing and waited to hear what Ryuunie had to say. Smiling gently, he looked at each viceroy in turn.

“Everyone here, myself included, has come to this meeting to advocate for the needs of our cities and the people living there. I understand why it’s difficult to reach a compromise. In fact, it was because my father and grandfather could not resolve their differences peacefully that I lost them both and was exiled along with my uncle.”

The uncle he referred to was Woroy, the man who’d built the Battleball City, Doneiks. His extensive list of deeds made him a national hero. Ryuunie mentioned him to leverage that fame but kept his expression neutral to show he wasn’t trying to lord that status over anyone.

“I learned a great deal from Professor Veight during my time at Meraldia University, but one lesson stood out to me,” he continued. “‘If you seek compromise, you must be bold.’ Since we don’t have enough funds to meet everyone’s demands, we must compromise. Therefore, I will be bold in suggesting mine.”

*Now he's using my name to give himself legitimacy. Well, that's advice for when you're trying to compromise with someone you're not already close to... Oh, whatever. Let's see how well you make this work.*

Myurei raised his hand and asked, "In that case, what compromise should Lotz be making, Ryuunie?"

*Are you sure you want to ask that of another viceroy? In a public meeting that everyone can read if they want?* I was surprised by how willing Myurei was to make concessions without even negotiating. It seemed Ryuunie had anticipated this, and he clapped his hands together.

"Lotz is already providing more than most other cities to the Commonwealth's coffers, so I wouldn't ask anything more of you," Ryuunie answered. "Still, you cannot expect to receive a proportional amount of that wealth back."

"Why not?"

"The Commonwealth Council's job is to equally redistribute wealth. It wouldn't make sense for Lotz to get more when others are making less, would it?"

"Well...you've got a point there."

These two were always like this. Ryuunie took the initiative, while Myurei made concessions. However, Myurei was by no means incompetent. The reason he was so willing to align with Ryuunie was that he respected his abilities. There were many expectations placed on Ryuunie, but he always managed to meet them. This time was no exception.

"But if this is the compromise Lotz is already making, then the northern viceroys need to compromise as well, wouldn't you say?" Ryuunie said, turning to Yuninel. "Our rapid development as a nation is largely thanks to the wealth coming from our two port cities. Would it not be wise to give them the funds they need to further develop their harbors and create an even larger wealth pool for us all to share?"

"Hahaha, that's a good way of putting it!" Zaria's viceroy, Shatina, cackled.

When I'd first met her, she was still a child, but now she was one of the most



respected voices on the Commonwealth Council.

Still chuckling, Shatina said, “Zaria’s soil isn’t suited for agriculture, and we don’t export any important products either. Of course, I plan to change that eventually, but for now, we’re one of the cities that benefits from the Commonwealth’s handouts. So, I don’t mind letting Lotz have a bit more money this time around so we can get more later!”

Zaria was one of the southern cities, but it lay in an arid region far from any coast. In fact, it was closer to the northern region than to any of the southern cities. Zaria showing support for funding Lotz’s harbors would be vital in getting the other northern cities to agree. *But why is she looking at me so smugly? Does she think she’s cool? I mean, yeah, she did say something pretty cool, but still.*

Shatina rested her chin in her hands and turned to Myurei. “How about this? We shift some of Zaria’s allocation over to Lotz? I’m sure Lotz would be willing to give us preferential harbor rights in return.”

*Hey, don’t start negotiating this before the budget’s even set!* I shot Shatina a glare, and she hurriedly cleared her throat.

“I-I, um, mean that is my way of showing I’m willing to compromise. Yes. I just want what’s best for everyone, humans and demons alike.” Shatina looked over at Firnir, the kentauros viceroy of Thuvan. She and Firnir were best friends, and while I didn’t know what Shatina’s look was supposed to mean, Firnir clearly did, since she nodded multiple times in agreement.

At any rate, thanks to the efforts of my former students, we were able to reach a compromise that everyone found acceptable. *Man, they really grew up, didn’t they?* Melaine, the viceroy of Bernheinen, must have thought the same, because she turned to me with a grin.

“So, does the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander have anything to add?”

It would probably be a good idea for me to say something. So, I cleared my throat and said, “I agree with Ryuunie. Inequality will only lead to strife. If we follow the path the Senate took, we’ll meet the same fate.”

Eleora had effectively executed every member of the Senate. It was a harsh judgment, but they brought it upon themselves.

“Naturally, we all have different ideas of what constitutes fair and equal distribution. There is no perfect solution everyone will agree on. But if we return to competing with one another because of that, then this Commonwealth will have no future. History has proved that many times already.”

I tried to make my speech sound impressive, but it might have been too vague. Fortunately, everyone present was smart enough to pick up on what I was insinuating and to agree. As a result, the meeting ended with unanimous agreement on the budget after a few minor alterations. The meeting itself dragged on longer than scheduled, but at least I was able to squeeze Ryucco’s proposal through as well. It was approved, albeit with a few concessions.

*What an exhausting meeting.* I stared out at the setting sun from my room and let out a sigh. Somehow, I’d made it through another day.

“I’m finally free...”

That meeting took a lot out of me. Most of the viceroys knew one another so well that they felt like family, but just like an actual family, they fought like animals once money was involved. My neck and back were stiff from sitting in that chair for so long.

“I really wish they wouldn’t fight over the budget so much. Thanks to international and domestic trade, we’re making way more money than before, and the budget allocations are much fairer than they were under the Senate,” I grumbled.

Airia, who was sitting next to me, smiled gently. “You’re right; things are much fairer than they were under the Senate.”

“Right? Inequality breeds strife. I realized this both from my life in Japan and from observing the old Meraldian Federation. The reason Zagar, the former king of Kuwol, gained so much support was because Pajam the Second ignored the plight of the poor and only cared about constructing his palaces.”

With another sigh, I signed the form that allowed today’s meeting to go public.



“Inequality creates strong resentment in those who get the short end of the stick, and eventually they run out of patience. That’s how it was back in Japan too.”

Memories of my past life flashed through my mind. *Despite my best efforts, nothing good happens. No matter how hard I try, it never goes anywhere. Why am I the only one who has to suffer like this? Why do they get to live an easy life?* I shook my head to dispel those thoughts and ran a hand through my bangs.

“If the size of the pie shrinks, everyone will feel like they’re getting the short end of the stick. On the other hand...if the pie gets bigger, people will be willing to tolerate a little unfairness as long as they’re confident they’ll get a larger share later on.”

Now that Meraldia’s humans and demons were no longer fighting, the country was developing rapidly. Even those who still harbored doubts about demons had realized that they provided much-needed physical labor and military strength. It was precisely because things were constantly improving that people were willing to set aside their prejudices. If Meraldia’s development began to stagnate, humans and demons would soon be at war again.

“My work isn’t done yet. I still need to...”

Before I could say anything more, Airia leaned her head against my shoulder. “You’re already working hard enough, Veight. You don’t need to shoulder all of these burdens alone.”

“Thank you. But everyone has become too accustomed to this peace. They don’t realize that the slightest issue could send us tumbling back into an age of war.”

Meraldia was a melting pot of various races, religions, and cultures. There were immigrants from Kuwol, Mondstrahl adherents, and vampires in the south. To the north were many immigrants from Rolmund and adherents to the Sonnenlicht Order. Those two groups had little in common. The only thing uniting them was the vague notion of being “Meraldian.”

“From here on out, we must cultivate a sense of national pride among the people. But that’s not something you can force with propaganda, at least not

permanently. They need to develop a natural pride in being Meraldian, or it's meaningless."

"Veight." Airia traced my jawline with a finger. That was enough to make me shut up. You didn't argue against the Demon Lord, especially not when she was your wife. She glared at me and said, "I want you to stop thinking about work for once and think about your happiness instead."

"Sorry..."

I often overlooked the importance of a proper work-life balance. History was filled with great men and women who neglected their families and suffered as a result. But considering the burdens they faced daily, it wasn't surprising they didn't have time for their families. In a sense, to become a historical figure, you needed to be willing to sacrifice your personal life. Yet all those great people achieved what they did only with the support of others. Their neglect meant they hadn't just sacrificed their own personal lives; they had effectively sacrificed those people to accomplish their goals.

Well, I wasn't a historical figure to begin with, but regardless, I wasn't willing to sacrifice Airia and Friede for some lofty aim like a greater Meraldia. I cared too much about my family for that.

"In that case, how about we take a vacation?"

"That sounds good to me," Airia said with a smile. Her smiles were always so beautiful.

I found myself smiling and said, "Why don't I take you and Friede on a trip somewhere? I feel like I haven't done anything for you guys in a while."

"You're doing it again," Airia said with a sigh. "You don't need to worry about us. I want you to focus on *your* happiness."

"I'm happy as long as you and Friede are happy."

If my wife and daughter weren't happy, I wouldn't be happy, no matter what I did.

In response, Airia said, "Well, I'm only happy if *you* and Friede are happy. How could I possibly be happy when you look so tired day in and day out?"

“Do I really look that bad?”

“Yes.”

*Oh...* I hadn't realized I was making Airia worry.

“Hmm...” Airia lapsed into thought as she stared into my eyes.

*Is it just me, or has she gotten prettier over the years? I feel she's even more beautiful than when we got married.* Normally, it was better for a Demon Lord to be menacing and intimidating rather than stunning, but in Airia's case, it was probably fine.

After a few minutes, Airia sighed and gave me a sad smile. “Even if I begged you to take a vacation, you probably wouldn't be able to truly rest, would you?”

“Not yet, at least. There's still too much left to do. Give me ten years, and then things will have calmed down enough that I can relax.”

“You said the exact same thing ten years ago.” Airia mused. Smiling, she continued, “But I suppose that's the Veight Von Aindorf I know and love. Fine. I'll give you some more work since you can't seem to get enough.”

*I don't like the look of that smile.*

“My dear vice-commander, I order you to go to Kuwol. If you recall, when Kuwol came to Meraldia's aid during the dragon's rampage, the royal family asked us to assist the werecats with a certain issue.”

“Oh yeah. Now that things have settled down internally, we should fulfill our promise, huh?”

The Demon Army's current ambassador to Kuwol was Kumluk, a native of Kuwol. Though he was the adjutant to the mercenary captain Zagar when I met him, he originally hailed from a merchant family in Bahza and was a gentle soul. Queen Fasleen had sent an official request to us through him on behalf of Kuwol's werecats.

“Something is going on at Mount Kayankaka, right?”

“Yes. It's deep in Kuwol's heartland, so most Meraldians rarely visit the area. You're the only person the werecats would trust to help them resolve this issue.”



The largest river in Kuwol, the Mejire, flowed down from Mount Kayankaka all the way to Kuwol's northern coast. The Mejire was vital in sustaining the desert nation of Kuwol. You could say Mount Kayankaka and the Mejire River were Kuwol's lifeblood. The werecats, Kuwol's only demon race, lived in the foothills of the mountain.

If I had to travel to Mount Kayankaka, it would probably be best to bring Prince Shumar, Tiriya, and the werecats living in Meraldia along. They hadn't seen their home in a while, and this would be a good opportunity to let them. In fact, it might not be a bad idea to bring my students along as well; there was a lot they could stand to learn.

Sensing my thoughts, Airia smiled brightly and said, "Feel free to take Prince Shumar and Tiriya with you. I'm sure they'd love to join."

"Airia, are you *sure* you're not secretly a werewolf?"

"I can't smell emotions on people, but even without that, I can figure out what you're thinking. So, do you think you can handle this job?"

"Absolutely. Thank you, Airia."

"I'm just doing my job as Demon Lord." Airia rubbed her cheek against mine. "And since I'm doing such a good job, surely my kind vice-commander will reward me, right?"

"Umm..."

*What does she want me to say? What's the correct answer here?* As always, my vast knowledge failed me when it came to understanding my wife.

Praying I'd read her correctly, I said, "We...could spend the night together?"

"That sounds splendid." Airia nodded, blushing.

*Phew, I got it right. I guess twenty years of marriage taught me something at least.*

Unsurprisingly, I didn't get any sleep that night.

Thanks to the wise and merciful Demon Lord Airia, I was sent off to Kuwol for a work vacation that would likely be more vacation than work. I had no set date

to return, and Airia gave me a blank check to spend as much as I wanted. The Demon Army's accountants and secretaries likely had a lot to say about that. Granted, that was better than knowing they'd let things slide; that led to internal corruption.

Because Prince Shumar was also coming along, we'd probably stop by Queen Fasleen's palace to pay her a visit. We'd likely spend a few days relaxing at the palace before even getting to Mount Kayankaka and talking to the werecats. Naturally, Shumar's presence meant Tiriya would come as well, along with the werecats who'd been training in Meraldia—both the contingent that'd joined the Demon Army and the werecat mages who'd become Master's disciples.

At Master's request, the werecat mage Elmersia had returned home and been sending promising mages to Meraldia over the years. I was looking forward to seeing her again. Many Meraldians were coming along as well. Kumluk, who was from Kuwol but was now a Meraldian through and through, would join as an official ambassador. Parker was also tagging along since he was good friends with most of the river lords along the Mejire. As much as I wanted to leave him behind, he was too important to exclude.

I had also picked a few werewolves to serve as an honor guard. Monza, who'd somehow become Fahn's right-hand woman, was leading the squad, which honestly worried me. Of course, the rising stars of the new generation—Friede, Shirin, Joshua, and Iori—were joining us too. The four of them had performed admirably during the dragon hunt. Everyone treated Friede as the leader of their little group, which surprised me. *I'm proud of my daughter, and I think she's grown up splendidly, but are you sure you want her as your leader?*

As I watched everyone assemble, I felt someone tug on my sleeve.

"Hey, you sure I can't come?" Ryucco asked, his ears drooping.

I gave him a small smile and said, "We're not going to Kuwol for fun, you know? Besides, don't you have to keep working on your teleportation device?"

"I mean, yeah, but..." Ryucco trailed off unhappily.

I crouched down to eye level and said, "I read your progress report. I'm amazed by what you've accomplished. If you can perfect the device, it'll revolutionize trade and transportation. You're basically inventing the aircraft of

this world.”

“The heck is an ‘aircraft’?”

“Just think of it as giving everyone wings.”

“Well, if it’s that important, I guess I need to keep testing,” Ryucco replied, smiling bashfully. “Just you wait; I’ll have a working prototype ready by the time you get back!”

*Definitely looking forward to it.*

Ryucco seemed to have forgotten we were going to Kuwol to visit the werecat village. As a lagomorph, he had a deep-seated instinctual fear of carnivorous demon races, which was why I didn’t want to bring him. He’d spend half the trip scared out of his wits.

Once everyone had gathered, we set off for Kuwol. We first journeyed to Beluza to board one of the Demon Army’s new state-of-the-art ships. Thanks to all the trade revenue Meraldia brought in, the Demon Army finally had enough financial leeway to upgrade its equipment. Of course, Beluza was benefiting the most from the trading boom.

“I’d read the reports, but Beluza’s harbor really has grown,” I said. “The roads within the city are much better paved and maintained now.”

Parker turned to me with a smile. “Come to think of it, you haven’t had a chance to tour Meraldia in a long time.”

“Every time I try to make time for it, something pops up and takes priority. There are meetings practically every day now too.”

I was starting to miss the days before we occupied Ryunheit, when we just fought sporadic battles against the Senate’s army. I had a lot more freedom when I was just the leader of the werewolf squad. We could camp wherever we wanted in the forest, fight battles when appropriate, and roam as we pleased...

Seeing my nostalgic expression, Parker patted my shoulder and said, “All this peace and prosperity is thanks to you, Veight. We wouldn’t be here without all you’ve done.”



“It’s thanks to everyone’s efforts, really. Humans and demons worked together to forge this peace. I was just a small part of it.”

“Don’t be so humble. You’ve accomplished enough to go down in history as a legend! It’s about time you accepted that fact.”

“No thanks,” I rebutted. I would much rather be a humble Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander than some great hero.

Parker shook his head in exasperation, then turned to Friede. “How come your father’s so stubborn? As his soul brother, I’m worried about him.”

Friede put on a sad expression and said, “I’m worried about him too, Uncle Parker.”

*Hold on, he is not your uncle.* I desperately wanted to say something, but I held it in. I knew this was Parker’s ploy to rope me into the conversation.

Since I wasn’t taking the bait, Parker continued talking to Friede. “You know, I’ve started writing a history book. I’ve been around since the war between northern and southern Meraldia, after all. I’m from the south, and Melaine’s from the north, so we’re working together to write this history from as many viewpoints as possible.”

“Wow, that sounds like fun! I love reading about history!”

*I’m glad you do.* After becoming friends with Micha and Iori, Friede’s interest in geography and history had grown considerably. It was nice that she had friends broadening her horizons. Unfortunately, it seemed Parker was intent on feeding her misinformation.

“But you know, ever since the Meraldian Federation collapsed, practically every historical or important event has involved your dad. When we reach that point, it stops being a history book and becomes a list of Veight’s accomplishments.”

“But it’s true that dad did all that, right?” Friede asked, as if it was common knowledge that I was a legend.

“That’s right.” Parker nodded. “But if I record things *truthfully*, future generations will think it’s propaganda. I don’t want to be seen as a historian

who spreads mistruths.”

“You’re never going to die, so can’t you just tell them the truth yourself, Uncle Parker?”

“Oh, good point. I could teach a course on Veight at Meraldia University...”

*Please don’t.* I couldn’t believe how brazenly they were discussing this in front of me. I leaned against the boat’s railing and hung my head over it, knowing there was nothing I could do to stop Parker from talking about me after I died.

There was a school of mermaids swimming around our ship. They were nautical escorts who kept an eye out for underwater dangers and used their magical song to speed along our journey. I waved a greeting to them, then let out a long sigh. *Why does life never go the way you want it to, Friedensrichter?*

Thankfully, the boat ride was uneventful, and we made it to Port Bahza without incident. Now that Bahza was trading regularly with Meraldia and Wa, they’d had to increase their number of docks, and the harbor had doubled in size since I’d last seen it. Despite its size, almost every dock was occupied. Bahza was completely unrecognizable from its old self, and I was suddenly looking forward to seeing how much the rest of Kuwol had transformed.

“The last time I visited the interior regions of Kuwol was when you gave me horse dung as a present, Tiriya.”

“Please don’t bring that up, Professor. It’s embarrassing.” Tiriya’s expression didn’t change, but I could tell from his scent that he was quite embarrassed. Desperate to change the topic, he hurriedly said, “Almost all of Kuwol’s sugar is exported from Bahza. Ships coming down the Mejire can immediately transfer their cargo to another ship without needing a caravan. This makes Bahza a much more appealing choice than other ports.”

“That makes sense.” Naval transport was both more efficient and simpler than land transport. The Mejire was a major transportation artery and provided water to most of Kuwol’s population and fields.

“Bahza’s previous lord, Birakoya, finally retired due to her advanced age,” I said. “But from what I’ve heard, she’s still quite lively. I’m looking forward to

seeing her again.”

“I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you too,” Tiriya said, nodding emphatically. He was clearly relieved I’d let him change the topic.

Upon meeting Birakoya, I first thanked her for the gifts she’d sent to Petore’s funeral. Lotz’s previous viceroy, Petore, had been a stalwart ally of the Demon Army and a good personal friend. He’d passed away a few years ago due to old age, and Birakoya had sent her son, the current lord of Bahza, along with a ship full of gifts to the funeral. That gesture had shown the rest of the world how strong the alliance between Meraldia and Kuwol was, but I simply wanted to thank her as an old comrade of Petore.

“On behalf of Petore’s friends, I would like to thank you for sending your son to attend his funeral,” I said.

“Oh, it was nothing. He was my friend too, after all. If anything, I should have gone in person. But at my age, a trip across the sea might have been my last.” Birakoya’s legs barely worked at this point, and she was almost completely blind. Still, she held a surprising amount of influence among Kuwol’s coastal lords, because she was like a mother to all of them. Without a doubt, she remained one of the most powerful people in Kuwol. That said, I was just here to reminisce about Petore with her.

“You know, everyone in Meraldia thought of Petore as their cranky old grandpa.”

“Hahaha, we in Kuwol thought he was cranky, that’s for sure.”

Petore had been a shrewd, avaricious viceroy. But despite that, he always dealt fairly with people and delivered on what he promised. Lotz’s port checked things far more meticulously than Beluza’s, which some found a pain to deal with, but it meant there was never any cargo theft or bribery.

“Petore’s grandson, Myurei, inherited all of his good qualities. He’s not greedy like his grandfather was though.”

“Oh, I know. He came to meet me last year. He looks just like Petore did when he was young, but unlike his grandfather, he’s a real gentleman. Petore’s wife

must have done a good job beating some manners into him.”

Petore’s wife was gentle but didn’t budge on certain things. Petore had been a devoted husband, so he never argued against her when she put her foot down. She was still alive and well and a prominent member of the Fikartz family. *Is it just me, or are all of the women of the South strong-willed?*

Smiling, Birakoya looked off into the distance. “I bet Petore was able to pass on without any regrets. He’s probably happily sailing the moonlit seas with Grasco in the afterlife.”

Grasco was Garsh’s father and one of Petore’s best friends.

I smiled back and said, “If he is, I bet Grasco’s fed up with hearing Petore talk about his grandson.”

“Heh, no doubt.” Birakoya wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. She straightened her back and turned to me. “Now that he’s gone, we’ve got even more work to do. I’ll be here, ensuring Meraldia and Kuwol stay allies for as long as I can.”

“Thank you.”

Like Beluza and Lotz, Bahza also made a lot of money as one of the continent’s key ports. Furthermore, Bahza’s ruling family had been friends with southern Meraldia for generations, so they were our closest allies in Kuwol.

Now that we’d moved on to more businesslike matters, Birakoya smiled and said, “I suppose I should update Lord Veight on the current situation in Kuwol.”

“That would be much appreciated.”

I’d read the reports on Kuwol that made it to Meraldia, but foreign agents could only learn so much. On the other hand, the former ruler of Bahza probably knew all the important gossip in Kuwol.

Birakoya nodded and said, “On the surface, it might seem that Kuwol is at peace, but a new conflict is brewing. The various river lords have switched to primarily sugarcane production due to its profitability, but this has resulted in fewer meji fields, leading to a risk of famine if we have even one year of bad harvests.”



I'd heard similar things happening back on Earth centuries ago. Meji was a kind of grain similar to millet and served as the Kuwol people's primary food source. However, it wasn't nearly as valuable as sugarcane, so everyone was converting meji fields into sugarcane plantations.

"Sugarcane also requires more water to grow than meji, so people have been draining more from the holy Mejire River, causing its water level to drop. The waterline is low enough now that ships downstream are frequently running aground—especially those packed to the brim with heavy sugarcane."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Indeed... Thankfully, the current crop of nobles isn't completely incompetent. We set limits on sugarcane production at our last meeting. After all, we are beholden to the great Mejire."

After Pajam the Second's death, Kuwol shifted from an absolute monarchy to a mix of a monarchy and oligarchy, with the noble council granted an equal say in state matters. Naturally, the nobles weren't all united in their needs and desires, but things were better than they had been before. It helped that Kuwol's royal family retained much of its prestige and could unite disparate voices if necessary. According to legend, Kuwol's first king was a hero who defeated the Valkaan and brought peace to the Mejire region. Considering how many artifacts I'd seen on Mount Kayankaka, he must have fought through quite a few if that story was real. *Anyway, I should ask about how everyone else is doing.*

"How's Queen Fasleen?"

"She's doing well. She's surprisingly done a good job ruling in place of her late husband, and she's only gotten more beautiful over the years."

Fasleen had been more of an artist than a politician, but after her husband died, she had no choice but to take up the mantle of leadership to protect her newborn son. She learned quickly, and in just a few years, she became a formidable queen. From what I gathered, Kuwol had its troubles, but for the most part, things were going well. If there were any significant issues, Birakoya would surely inform me.

"Our political system has generally been stable, so there's little to worry

about. The nomads have become less of a problem too, now that many of them are choosing to settle in the cities. This is also thanks to you, Lord Veight.”

“I didn’t do anything. Once a nation grows wealthy, conflict naturally fades as long as that wealth is fairly distributed.”

The conflict between sedentary farmers and pastoral nomads was a tale as old as time. In Kuwol’s case, the farmers had an overwhelming advantage since they had access to the Mejire. Now that the nobles and farmers had grown wealthy from the sugarcane trade, the nomadic tribes couldn’t hope to match their military might. The nomads weren’t foolish enough to pick a fight they couldn’t win, but if the farmers and nobles mistreated them, they could be driven to revolt. As long as the nomads were treated fairly, that wouldn’t be an issue, but I wasn’t sure the nobles would be so accommodating.

That said, I couldn’t afford to stick my nose into other countries’ internal affairs all the time. If I kept doing it, people would find my presence overbearing, and if Kuwol thought I favored the nomads too much, it would have diplomatic ramifications.

*Man, it’s no different here.* Just like in Meraldia, I had too much influence to speak freely.

Seeing my expression, Birakoya gave me a quizzical look. “Why do you seem so worried now that we finally have peace, Lord Veight?”

“It’s precisely because we have peace that I don’t want to lose it.”

I felt like that was a reasonable response, but Birakoya looked at me with concern.

“When I first met you, it seemed like you were carrying a great deal on your shoulders. And as the decades have passed, your burden has only grown.”

“You might be right. There’s more to do than ever.”

Quietly but firmly, Birakoya continued, “Don’t try to take on too much. Even a hero has their limits. Eventually, you will have to pass your burden on to someone else. I’m not long for this world, so I’ve already learned to pass mine on.”

It was true. Birakoya looked and sounded far older than she used to. In fact, it was entirely possible this would be the last time I'd see her alive. The day would come when I would die too. I'd died once already, so I knew it was inescapable.

I looked down and muttered, "I guess one of our jobs is to raise people who can take on our burdens, huh?"

"Absolutely. Did you not build your university precisely because you understood the importance of that?"

*True enough.* The university was established partly to address the shortage of Meraldian engineers and scientists, but also because I wanted to foster the next generation of leaders. That was why I created the elementary branch—to start teaching kids while they were young. As a result, Ryuunie and Myurei grew up to be fine viceroys, and it was thanks to them that the meeting the other day had gone so smoothly. I was proud; they'd stood up to people their parents' age and convinced them to adopt their proposal.

Birakoya chuckled and said, "You're smiling again. Thinking about your students?"

"Was it that obvious?"

"Oh, it was."

*Crap, that's no good. I'm here as a diplomat right now, not a teacher. I need to focus on work.*

Still smiling, Birakoya said, "I hope you look after Shumar with that much passion as well."

"Of course."

I intended to turn Shumar into a skilled leader. *That reminds me—we've got a meeting with Queen Fasleen after this.*

Noticing another change in my expression, Birakoya said, "I hope this old lady's words were of some use to the Black Werewolf King."

"Absolutely. Thank you for your wisdom, Lady Birakoya."

"It was nothing, dear." She gave me a motherly smile as she saw me off.

In truth, I wanted to get to Mount Kayankaka as quickly as possible, but due to my position, I needed to stop and visit many places along the way. Birakoya had warned me that if I went straight to the palace, I'd hurt the nobles' standing because it would appear the Black Werewolf King didn't deem them worthy of a visit. It was a pain, but I had no choice but to stop and visit every noble along my route. Most places gave me an extremely warm welcome, which was tiring in its own right. Thankfully, our route passed near the one place I actually wanted to visit. And so, I made my way there.

"When you said there was one place you absolutely had to go, I figured it'd be here," Parker said with a smile, walking up to me.

I turned away and said, "Yeah. This is where Kuwol's king, Pajam the Second, met his end."

Indeed, I had come to the site of Pajam the Second's murder—the city ruins where Zagar had lured him out and assassinated him. I'd rather not have had anything to do with it, but Zagar had used my name to draw Pajam out, so I had become involved regardless. Incidentally, Friede and the others were currently being shown around the city of Karfal. I hadn't wanted to force the kids to come here just to watch me mope. Parker, however, had ignored my wish to come here alone and followed after me.

"Back then, we were able to summon Pajam the Second's spirit, but it doesn't seem to be here any longer," Parker mused. "There's no trace of his spiritual residue. He must have either reincarnated or returned to the afterlife, where all souls merge together."

"I'm glad he finally got to rest in peace," I said, walking over to the well where his corpse had been dumped.

I placed a bottle of Meraldian wine, Rolmundian whiskey, and Wa sake next to the well as an offering. Kumluk, who'd insisted on coming with me, helped arrange the offering with tears welling up in his eyes. He'd been tricked by Zagar and discarded like a disposable pawn, so he had a strong connection to this place.

I first softly spoke a prayer for Pajam in Kuwolese.

"Long time no see, Your Majesty," I said after finishing my prayer. "I brought



alcohol from three separate countries as an offering today. I hope you enjoy it with your royal guards in the afterlife.”

Pajam’s body had been recovered and buried in the royal mausoleum, but I preferred speaking to him here at the empty well.

“Your son, Shumar, has grown into a splendid young man. He has what it takes to be the next king of Kuwol. I plan to support him as best as I can.”

Exasperated, Parker said, “I just told you his spirit isn’t here anymore.”

“I know, I know. Just shut up and let me talk. When you speak to the dead, it’s so you can sort out your own feelings, not because you think they can actually hear you.”

“Really?”

Part of the reason necromancers felt so otherworldly to laymen was their vastly different outlook on death. While I’d studied necromancy, I wasn’t a fully-fledged necromancer, and I definitely had a more conventional view of death. The werewolves who’d come to guard me didn’t seem interested in mourning Pajam, but I didn’t mind. There was no point in asking those who didn’t care to mourn for someone.

After mourning silently for a few more minutes, I walked towards an abandoned house.

“Where are you going, Veight?” Kumluk asked, following but looking longingly back at the well. My werewolf guards trailed behind.

I gave him a sad smile and said, “It wasn’t just Pajam and his guards who Zagar killed here, remember?”

“It wasn’t?” Monza asked, tilting her head.

“I’m talking about Rafhad.”

“Who?” Everyone except Kumluk gave me confused looks.

*Come on, guys, you were all here with me, remember?*

“One of Zagar’s underlings. He pretended to be a messenger under Birakoya from Bahza and lured Pajam the Second out here. After that, Zagar killed him to

keep him quiet.”

“Oh yeah, his spirit was here too. It was backbreaking work bringing his spirit back—not that I have to worry about breaking my back anymore.” Parker chuckled as he reminisced about the spirit of the man he’d practically forgotten.

I ignored his terrible pun and placed another three bottles of the same liquor in front of the abandoned house. It was my policy to afford equal respect to the spirits of dead enemies and friends alike.

“He, too, was used by Zagar and killed once he’d outlived his usefulness. No one else in Kuwol knows of his demise here. We’re the only ones who can mourn him.”

It would shock the foundations of the country if people knew Pajam the Second, supposed descendant of a god, had been killed by a common mercenary. Thus, the details of Pajam’s death were hidden from the world at large, and Rafhad’s existence was scrubbed from all records. As far as the country was concerned, such a person had never existed.

“But even so, I haven’t forgotten you. And I never will, I promise. The Black Werewolf King prays you find peace in the afterlife, Rafhad.”

I probably wasn’t who he wanted mourning him, but I would feel bad if no one remembered him, so here I was. He might not have mattered to history, but he’d had his own life, aspirations, and dreams.

In a quiet voice, Kumluk said, “Rafhad is lucky to have the great hero, the Black Werewolf King himself, mourning him.”

“He deserves that much, at least.”

In truth, we’d never met, so if Rafhad was looking down on us right now, he was probably just confused. Well, technically, we’d spoken a bit after he’d died, but I wasn’t sure that counted.

I was simply mourning him because I wanted to. As someone who’d never been respected by others in my past life, I understood how much recognition mattered. Granted, I was a werewolf now and not a human, so maybe Rafhad didn’t want the respect of a werewolf.

Kumluk said a brief Mondstrahl prayer, then turned to me with a smile.

“I did, in fact, know Rafhad myself. We weren’t close, but I distinctly remember how much of a sweet tooth he had. He would even drink his rum with sugar.”

*I see.* Stories of the deceased made for good offerings, or at least, that’s what I believed.

“Next time, then, I suppose I’ll have to bring him some sugared rum. Maybe I’ll stop by here again on our way back.”

Parker looked at me incredulously. “You want to come back *here*? If you take every single death in your life this seriously, you’ll break under the strain.”

“That’s why I couldn’t become a real necromancer. But this is how I choose to live my life.”

Monza laughed and replied, “Ahaha, and that’s why you have such a hard life.”

*Oh, leave off.*

Once I was done paying my respects, we headed to Kuwol’s capital, Encaraga. As expected, the royal family prepared an overtly grand welcome for us, which was even more exhausting than the nobles’ receptions. To be fair, they had to go all out since this was also a welcome home party for Shumar, and anything less would be seen as a slight to outside observers. However, I’d come here to speak with Queen Fasleen and not to stuff my face full of banquet food, so as soon as I saw an opportunity, I approached her.

“Sir Veight, how’s my son doing?” Fasleen asked.

“Great. In fact, I can show you how well he’s doing.” I completely slipped into the role of a teacher and handed Shumar’s report cards to the queen. “He’s getting top marks in Kuwolese and Kuwolese history as expected, but he’s performing quite well in other subjects too. Our principal was lamenting how much of a shame it was that we’d have to send him back to Kuwol someday.”

“The Demon Empress said that?”

“Yes. She actually wanted Shumar to become one of her disciples.”

The specific words Master had said were “Nobles are so adept at learning, probably because they’re tutored from such a young age.” Of course, Shumar, as crown prince, had received the best education possible from the day he could speak. While Shumar was probably the most learned person in all of Kuwol, at Meraldia University, he was just one of many accomplished students. Meraldia University was, at this point, likely the greatest institute of learning in the world. However, having such accomplished peers was helping Shumar grow as a person and make connections with the brightest members of the coming generation.

“Most of the students respect Shumar quite a bit. He really has a knack for winning people over. Thanks to him, many Meraldians have come to learn a lot about Kuwol.”

“Oh my...” Fasleen said, blushing with pride.

She’d likely been worried about sending her only son to study abroad, but this should hopefully reassure her that she’d made the right choice.

Smiling, Fasleen looked to where Tiriya was sitting and asked, “Has Tiriya been learning a lot as well?”

“Of course. His strengths lie in mathematics and military strategy, where Shumar struggles a bit. A man with his talents could easily become a general or prime minister one day. He also does his best to ensure the prince is beloved by all.”

Shumar was so skilled that I worried our diplomats might struggle when dealing with him in the future.

“They’re both splendid students, and I’m honored to teach them.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Knowing that the Black Werewolf King’s students will lead Kuwol in the future is truly heartening.”

While I appreciated that Fasleen trusted me so much, it felt a bit overwhelming. On the other hand, no one had expected anything of me in my past life, so I didn’t dislike the feeling. Still, I was terrified of betraying her trust. However, I’d learned recently that my personality was the reason everyone



came to trust me in the first place.

“If anything, they’ve taught me more than I’ve taught them. I’m sure both Shumar and Tiriya will surpass me soon enough.”

In fact, I hoped they would. Once they surpassed me, I could fade away as a relic of the past without worry. My retirement depended on them becoming worthy successors.

Tears of happiness welled up in Fasleen’s eyes, and without thinking, I said, “The two of them will continue to grow from here on out. While they’re at Meraldia University, I’ll do my best to look after them, so rest easy.”

“Thank you so much... The royal family owes you everything. If I hadn’t met you that night, we...”

Overcome with emotion, Fasleen burst into tears. At this point, I could hardly add, “Though I’m not sure how often I’ll be around with how busy I am,” so instead, I simply took out a handkerchief and offered it to her. This meeting might have had more diplomatic importance than I’d initially realized, and I felt a little guilty for promising something I might not be able to deliver. But there was nothing I could do about it now, so when Fasleen finally calmed down, I decided to ask her about Mount Kayankaka.

“Prince Shumar is doing just fine, so let’s discuss more pressing matters. What exactly is going on with the werecats at Mount Kayankaka?”

“It’s a rather serious situation. Word of this cannot get out to the nobles or commoners, so please keep what you hear a secret from those not part of your group.”

*If it’s that bad, I wish you’d called me over sooner. Hell, is it all right that we just let this sit for a few months?*

Fasleen gave me a troubled smile and said, “In truth, we weren’t sure we should call you at all, but...”

Fasleen explained that Kuwol’s prosperity depended entirely on the Mejire. In that sense, it was much like ancient Egypt. Mount Kayankaka was the source of the river, making it extremely important. Strictly speaking, Mount Kayankaka

consisted of surrounding mountains that fed into the Mejire River. The mountains received an exceptional amount of rain and snow, which turned into the Mejire, eventually returning to the sea.

Thanks to the abundant precipitation, the mountains were lush with foliage. Forests acted as natural water reservoirs that could hold large quantities of rainfall. The ancient people of Kuwol seemed to have realized that they worshiped the mountain as much as the river. As a result of that reverence, the forest and river remained protected, and no land development occurred on Mount Kayankaka. However, even without human involvement, there seemed to be trouble with the mountain ecosystem.

“According to the werecats, the southern forests are starting to wither away.”

The forests kept the soil fertile, and the soil needed to remain fertile to retain as much water as the mountains received. If they were receding, that posed a huge problem. While it wasn’t the kind of issue I would typically be called in to handle, I imagined there was more to the story.

“Was an investigation conducted?” I asked.

“The werecats looked around the area, but since this is outside their field of expertise, they couldn’t learn anything substantial. However, their mages claimed that the mana in the area was unusually low, so we thought an expert mage like you might be able to understand more.”

*In that case, we should have sent Kite...* There were various fields of magic, and while ordinary people probably couldn’t tell the difference, Kite was the best at this kind of work. As a master of strengthening magic, I understood living creatures better than most, but climate, soil quality, and such were outside my wheelhouse. Asking me to investigate was like asking a cardiologist to fix someone’s bones.

“Did the royal family conduct its own investigation?”

“Everyone’s too scared to go.”

No one in Kuwol knew what lay on the other side of the mountains, and most Kuwolese were quite superstitious. It was commonly believed that the source of the Mejire was also where the world ended. And legends stated that if you

ventured past that point, you would lose the blessings of the Mejire and find only death. This superstition likely stemmed from the more reasonable fact that Kuwol was too hot and dry for people to survive far from the river, especially since Kuwol had historically been at odds with the nomadic tribes roaming the desert.

“I see. No wonder you’re having so much trouble,” I said.

Historically, Meraldia had been a country of magicians, so people were less superstitious. *I really wish you guys had told me this sooner though...* Of course, Kuwol probably didn’t want to leave such an important task to a foreigner, but even so, they needed to take their work more seriously. I understood how important this was for Kuwol’s royal family, especially, and why Fasleen probably still had some reservations about mentioning it to me.

Unfortunately, I was not the right man for this job. I debated returning home and having Kite come here in my place, but from the sound of it, months had already passed since the forests started withering. I wasn’t sure I’d learn much if I went, but I could at least buy Kuwol some more time until a more suitable researcher arrived.

“All right, I’ll go take a look. But we’ll need an epoch mage to draw any definitive conclusions, so I’ll ask Meraldia to send one over. We won’t be able to conduct a thorough investigation until he gets here.”

“I’ll leave the details to you, Veight. I’m sure the werecats will be relieved to know you’re the one coming.” Fasleen smiled and sighed in relief.

After I retired to the luxurious rooms Fasleen had prepared for us, I called everyone over to explain the situation.

“...That’s why we’re going to Mount Kayankaka to investigate what’s happened. It might be dangerous, so I’ll bring a few people with me.”

A few people frowned, knowing they would be left behind.

“You’re not going to leave us behind, right?”

“Please let us come with you!”

“Ahaha, we’re your guards, so you can’t stop us from coming.”

“You need me, of course, right?”

*Why are all my friends people who won’t listen to me?*

I cleared my throat and said sternly, “Prince Shumar. I hope you haven’t forgotten that you’re the only living male from Kuwol’s royal family. If something happens to you, the nation will be thrown into chaos. Tiriya, you’ll lead Kuwol in the future as well, so we can’t risk you coming either.”

The two boys looked at me angrily, but I ignored them.

“Friede, you and your friends can’t come either. I’m not as young as I used to be, and I won’t be able to protect all of you. Since we don’t know what’s waiting for us on the other side, I can’t bring anyone more important than my own life.”

My students were shouldering the future of Meraldia. I couldn’t let them die here.

“Kumluk, I understand you’re a trained warrior, but right now, you’re here as a diplomat. I can’t ask you to come on this mission. Monza, you won’t listen to me, so you stay behind too.”

“Aww...”

That was just how it had to be.

“I need as many mages as possible, so I’m taking Parker with me. I don’t have to worry about him since he can’t die.”

“H-Hold on a second!” Monza said, panicking. “You’re the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, and you’re only bringing *one* guard with you?! If I let you go, Airia will yell at me for weeks!”

“Will she really?”

“Of course! Not just her; Fahn and Jerrick will kill me! I’m coming, and that’s final!”

I could actually see them doing that, so I reluctantly agreed. “Okay, fine. You can come too, Monza.”

“Th-Then we’ll come as well!” The other werewolves and werecats exclaimed,

standing up.

I held out a hand to silence them.

“You’re all strong, but don’t forget that werewolves and werecats need to eat ten times as much as normal people. Unless we’re certain we’ll be getting into a fight, it’s not feasible to bring all of you.”

Werewolves and werecats were strong but needed so much food that they weren’t suited for long campaigns in foreign territories. Plus, with the existence of Blast Canes, the strength gap was slowly shrinking. At this point, two human soldiers with Blast Canes were stronger than a lone werewolf. It was a shame, but that was just how the march of progress went. In that sense, the smaller demons, like canines and grimalkin, would become the strongest soldiers. They needed the least sustenance and could use a Blast Cane as well as anyone else. Right now, people mostly wanted them as sailors, but when the time came for humanity to explore space, they’d be the first astronauts. Conversely, werewolves simply needed too much food, so they sadly wouldn’t be going to space until much later.

“Veight?” I heard someone call out to me.

“Hmm? Oh, it’s nothing.” I cleared my throat just in time to hear Shumar and a werecat whispering to each other.

“All right, I’m counting on you.”

“As you wish, Prince.”

*Hey, I can hear you guys. Did you forget how good werewolf hearing is?*

I glared at Shumar, and he gulped loudly. But a second later, he smiled and said, “Fine, Professor Veight, we’ll do as you say. You leave early for Mount Kayankaka tomorrow, so you should get some sleep. I still have some people I need to visit.”

“Sure... If you say so,” I replied. *I bet I know what you’re plotting, kid.*

The next morning, I discovered my fears had been well-founded.

“We have too many people!” Friede exclaimed, looking around.



I wanted to scream. Instead of shrinking, the party heading for Mount Kayankaka had swelled to a few *hundred* people. All of the newcomers were either palace officials or part of Kuwol's royal guard. There was only one person who could've gathered this many people on such short notice...

"Prince Shumar, explain yourself," I said, turning to him.

He grinned at me from atop his majestic white horse. "As the crown prince, it's only fitting I pay the werecats a courtesy visit as well—irrespective of what your mission may be, Professor Veight. In which case, I'll need a suitable retinue, won't I?"

"Any reason why your retinue is armed to the teeth?"

Not only were his guards heavily armed, but they'd brought wagons laden with supplies—far more than necessary for a trip to the werecat village. The village wasn't far from Lord Peshmet's domain, and he would gladly sell us more supplies if we needed them.

Shirin sidled up to me and said, "Uncle, I believe they intend to accompany you across Mount Kayankaka."

"Don't pretend like you're not trying to come too. I heard you talking with Friede earlier."

"W-We were just discussing the weather." Shirin was quite emotive for a dragonkin, and he was terrible at lying. He took after his father Baltze in that regard.

With a sigh, I turned to address everyone. "Fine, *fine*! Whatever. You can all come. But you better hurry, or I'll leave you behind!"

Everyone broke out in cheers.

We traveled upriver, visiting various nobles on the way to Lord Peshmet's territory. Since Kuwol's crown prince was with us, we were welcomed with open arms everywhere we went. Whenever a noble came out to greet us, the conversation went something like this: "Prince Shumar, you've grown into a splendid young man! Despite your youth, I can see the wisdom in your eyes. You're just like your father..."

*If you ask me, the less he's like his father, the better.* I had to admit, though, Shumar had inherited a bit of his father's personality. It was a little worrying.

While Shumar enjoyed the attention, Tiriya frowned.

"His Highness still needs more training," he said. "If everyone keeps praising him like this, he'll grow arrogant and conceited."

"So you say, but you seem pretty happy with how much attention your master's getting," I replied with a smile, patting Tiriya's shoulder.

"I know I said that," he retorted, blushing and looking away. "But he has been working hard, so I guess he deserves some praise..."

"You really know him well, don't you?" It was obvious Tiriya was just jealous that others were hogging his best friend. I smiled at him gently and said, "Besides, it's your job to show everyone else how hard he's been working. Think you can do that?"

"I'll try my best," Tiriya said brusquely, though I could tell he'd taken the words to heart.

When we arrived in Peshmet, Tiriya received the same grand welcome Shumar had enjoyed everywhere else. He was beloved by his Merca tribe and had become a bit of a celebrity at the school Valkel had established in Peshmet.

After leaving Peshmet, we reached the werecat village at the base of Mount Kayankaka. Thanks to the palace's support, the village had grown significantly since my last visit. There were new houses everywhere, along with a brand-new assembly hall. The population had grown as well, and I spotted many children running around. It was easier for families to have more kids with a stable income and steady food supply. Somehow, this remote village had managed to achieve this better than Japan.

"Veight!" one of the werecats shouted upon seeing me, and ran over.

"Elmersia!" I waved to her with a smile.

After I'd won the one-versus-one-hundred melee against the werecats, she'd come to Meraldia to study under Master. As fellow disciples, we'd studied a lot

together over the past decade. A few years ago, she returned to her village to teach the werecats what she'd learned. The most promising youngsters were sent to Master for training or to the royal palace to become guards. And right now, she looked more relieved to see me than happy, as if she desperately needed my help.

"I need your help, Veight!"

Perhaps the phenomenon of asking me for things has reached as far as Mount Kayankaka.

"What happened?!" I asked.

"The elders want me to be the next village elder!"

*Uh, okay? That's a good thing, isn't it?* I had also become the elder of Meraldia's werewolves.

During the welcome banquet, I managed to convince Elmersia that taking on the role of elder wouldn't be *that* bad. When she finally agreed, the older werecats thanked me profusely, lavishing me with food and alcohol. *Why am I always stuck doing this stuff?*

"I still think I'm too young to be an elder..." Elmersia grumbled.

"There are plenty of people who became elders when they were still young." I pointed out. "I had to take the role when I was in my thirties."

"Oh yeah, you did. I asked the wrong person for help." Elmersia hung her head.

"I know it can be a pain, but someone has to do the job. Besides, don't you want the elders who've protected the village all these years to have a peaceful retirement?"

"I guess so," Elmersia said, smiling a little. "I'll be counting on you for advice, Veight."

"Leave it to me. My first piece of advice is to train your successor as soon as possible. It'll make life easier down the road."

"Ah, good point!"

I eagerly awaited the day I could pass the reins of leadership down to Friede and the other youngsters.

“By the way, what do you make of the situation on the other side of Mount Kayankaka?” I asked.

“I’ve only explored the areas within a day’s travel of the village, but I’m certain magic is involved somehow. It’s slight, but the mana in the region is draining at a steady rate. I’ve been taking measurements.”

“Oh? Nice work.”

Master Gomoviroa thoroughly drilled the importance of a scientific approach into magic in all her disciples. Taking periodic measurements and recording any changes was the foundation of good experimentation. This meant I had one fewer job to do here.

Elmersia took out a sheaf of papers. “I was planning to send these in a report to Master, but since you’re here, you should look them over for any mistakes.”

“Will do. Let’s see... I think you should graph these data points. Hey, Friede! Get over here—I need your help with something! Parker, you too!”

Bar and line graphs hadn’t existed in this world until Friedensrichter and I started using them, but now they were pretty commonplace. Admittedly, they’d been a military secret within the Demon Army until Meraldia became a commonwealth and we were integrated into the nation properly. Friede, Parker, Elmersia, and I ignored the ongoing festivities and started making graphs. It reminded me of my first time in Rolmund.

“All right, perfect.”

Graphed out, it became clear that the decrease in mana over time followed an exponential curve.

As we stared at the graph, Parker said gravely, “This does not bode well...”

“At this rate, all these regions will be completely drained of mana in a few years,” Elmersia said, nodding.

Every living creature in this world possessed mana, even if they didn’t use magic. They absorbed it from the air they breathed, the food they ate, and so

on. My guess was that cells in this world needed it to function. When the mana in a region dried up, it became uninhabitable for most plants and animals, causing the entire ecology to collapse.

Friede gave me a worried look and said, “Is this why the forest is withering away?”

“We haven’t proved causation yet, but that’s the most likely possibility. This needs to be investigated right away. We need to find out *why* the mana is disappearing too.”

If the forest vanished, the Mejire would eventually dry up, which would bring an end to all agricultural production along the river delta. If that happened, Kuwol would collapse, leading to knock-on effects for Meraldia as well. Our economy has grown thanks to trade with Kuwol, after all.

Friede looked over the graphs and said, “We have a lot of data points for a few regions already. For this investigation, we should probably fan out and take measurements across wider swathes of land.”

“Hmm? Oh yeah, definitely.”

“We could ask the people Prince Shumar brought with him to do that, right?”

“I was afraid you were going to say that...”

Loath though I was to admit it, Shumar had made the right call in ignoring me. My students were getting to the point where they were beginning to surpass me. *I guess we do need the people, huh?*

The next morning, we set off for the far side of the mountain. Thankfully, Elmersia had made the journey numerous times for her measurements, so navigation wasn’t an issue. That said, we were still trudging through tropical forest, so it wasn’t easy going.

“Werewolves, werecats, advance in single file!” I shouted, and all the werewolves and werecats transformed before stepping into line.

“Clear a path!”

“Hraaaaaah!” Using their sharp claws, the werewolves and werecats cleared



the ivy and undergrowth.

“I’ve never seen such a dense forest...” Joshua said, scratching his head. He was from Rolmund, so he’d never seen a jungle before.

“No worries, I’ll clear the path.”

I transformed and suffused my claws with mana, creating blades of pure magic that extended from them. This was another application of strengthening magic, and exactly what the Hero Arshes had done long ago. Naturally, I couldn’t output as much power as he could, but it should be enough to clear away the thick jungle plants.

“Hngh!”

I swung my arms in a wide arc, cutting through the greenery. My output was higher than expected, and I had to hold back a little to avoid damaging the trees. I also didn’t want to cause unnecessary destruction since there were likely dozens of new species to study in this place. Some of them probably couldn’t survive in any other environment.

“By the way, Veight, how come you have so much mana?” Elmersia asked as she watched me carve a path through the jungle. “That’s way more than most demons have.”

“Oh right. I never told you, did I?” I smiled at her, thinking back to the distant past. “When I was much younger, I ended up absorbing all the mana stored in one of the Valkaan-spawning artifacts. I used up most of it immediately, but was left with about 1,000 kites of mana.”

Elmersia gave me an incredulous look. “You mean you *became* a Valkaan?!”

“For a brief moment. It was the only way to save Airia who’d been possessed by the artifact. Thinking back on it, I was really reckless then.”

*Ah, the follies of youth.* Had I made a single misstep, I would’ve died instantly. I was embarrassed by how foolish I’d been back then, so I didn’t tell that story often, but Elmersia looked at me with awe.

“If you have that much capacity for mana, then no wonder you’re a master of strengthening magic.”

“Actually, I think it’s the opposite.” I cut through a particularly thick vine with a grunt. “It’s only because I was born a werewolf and spent so much time practicing strengthening magic that I built up a constitution capable of withstanding 100,000 kites of mana. Which means, I think you and your disciples would be able to do the same, Elmersia.”

Upon hearing that, Elmersia looked up with a start. “Wait... Do you think the reason we werocats given the sacred duty of guarding Mount Kayankaka was because...”

“Yep. In case of an emergency, you guys would be able to become Valkaan and deal with any major threat. I’m sure the people who defeated Jakarn chose your ancestors with that in mind.”

Humans could become Valkaan too, but demons naturally had a larger mana capacity. Transforming took a lot of mana, so evolution had pushed werewolves and werocats in that direction. Giants and kentauros also had bodies that required a lot of mana to function, as otherwise the laws of physics would drag them down too much.

After a few minutes, Elmersia said, “But...we were only ever ordered to guard this sacred mountain. None of our legends mention becoming Valkaan, even by necessity.”

“They probably left it as a last resort for you guys. Nothing good comes from becoming a Valkaan.”

Elmersia gave me a quizzical look. “Even though you gain strength on par with a god?”

“Mortals like us aren’t meant to handle that much power. We can’t use it properly. Of the humans and demons I’ve known who became Valkaan, only those who didn’t use their power or willingly let it go found happiness in the end.”

Friedensrichter hadn’t used his might as a Demon Lord very often during the time I knew him. Master almost possessed enough power to be at that level too, but she was purposely limiting her strength to avoid crossing that line. Meanwhile, Airia and I had relinquished that power. On the other hand, Arshes had been driven by revenge and anger. Though he succeeded in killing

Friedensrichter, I got my own revenge by killing him.

I sliced through more vines and repeated what I'd said countless times. "This world doesn't need Valkaan anymore. The era where a single being could usher in a new age is over."

"I can't tell if that feels more convincing because you basically carved out a new era on your own, or less."

"I didn't do it alone. It was only thanks to everyone's help that we've come this far. All of you regular folk, not Valkaan. Although, I guess I am at least strong enough to carve a path through this jungle by myself." I grinned and sliced through a few more feet of jungle.

After two days of grueling jungle travel, we reached the southernmost point that Elmersia had visited.

"Any farther and even a werecat can't make it back in one day," Elmersia explained as we reached a clearing.

"Makes sense."

While it'd taken our group two days, a lone werecat or werewolf could probably make the journey in half a day or so. Of course, that meant the return journey would also take half a day, not to mention the time required to set up instruments and take readings.

"All right, let's set up camp here for... Wait, what are you guys doing?" I turned to Shumar's retainers, who had all started taking out axes.

"We need to build a proper cabin for His Highness if this will be our base camp."

*Do you guys seriously plan on cutting down trees and building a cabin here?*

Shumar hurriedly ran over and said, "I-I'm fine with a tent. Thank you all for your loyalty, but I don't need special treatment. We need to preserve our manpower, not waste it on luxuries."

"Yes, Your Highness!" The men put away their axes at once, as if they'd expected Shumar to say this.

“My apologies, Professor.” Shumar sighed. “They have to show their loyalty, or their superiors will scold them when we return.”

“That sounds rough...”

Shumar smiled wryly. “It is. That’s why I want to do away with these unnecessary formalities once I take the throne. But for now, the system exists as it does, and if I try to force change now, they’ll suffer.”

“You’re right. It’s important to show consideration for those who work for you.” I glanced back and saw Tiriya speaking to Shumar’s entourage.

“I’ll be sure to tell Her Majesty the queen you showed utmost loyalty to the prince,” I heard him say. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“Understood, Master Tiriya.”

Tiriya and Shumar really made a good team. I had faith the two of them could lead Kuwol in a better direction than Shumar’s father had.

After scouting the area, I had everyone set up two camps. We split our supplies between them so that we wouldn’t be helpless if one camp got attacked by monsters. And there was one other reason I wanted two camps...

“Raise the Kuwol royal family’s flag as high as you can at both camps.”

“What’s the point of doing that?” Tiriya asked, tilting his head.

“From here on out, we’ll split into small teams and comb a large area. But keeping your sense of direction in this jungle isn’t easy. That’s why I want two landmarks we can use to judge our relative position at all times.”

“I see,” Tiriya replied with a nod of understanding, “we’ll be able to use triangulation to estimate our location.”

“Exactly.”

Every squad would also have a compass, but it was never a good idea to rely solely on a single tool. If any team lost their compass or failed to read it correctly, they’d be lost.

“I’ll oversee the eastern camp. Elmersia, you’ll take charge of the western

one. That way, we'll have a healer ready at both locations in case of emergencies. If you sense any danger at all, return to camp immediately."

The fundamentals of healing and strengthening magic were closely related, so anyone who studied strengthening magic could also use basic healing magic.

Yuhette raised her hand and asked, "How do we measure the amount of mana in each location?"

"Apparently, Elmersia used strengthening magic to absorb some of the surrounding mana and then transferred it to a magesteel plate. She measured the discharge of the plate, but that's something only a mage can do, so we'll be using a different method this time."

I took a manameter out of my pocket. It looked like an old-school mercury thermometer, but the inside was filled with a thin sheet of magesteel instead of liquid mercury. Magesteel expanded as it absorbed mana, and I came up with the idea for these manameters after blowing up my Blast Rifle's magazine to take down a sandworm back in Wa's desert. It turned out that the explosion *had* been beneficial for science.

"These instruments measure the mana density of the surrounding area with relatively accurate precision. I'll explain how to use them, so get your notebooks out, everyone. I'm also going to have you practice measuring the mana density of our camps."

If they got the same results each time, that meant they were using them correctly. Thankfully, all of Shumar's retainers were sharp enough to figure out how to use the manameter after a few tries. Their excessive loyalty may be troublesome, but they were good people.

"I'm also giving every squad a transceiver; use it to contact us in case of an emergency. And make sure you return before the sun sets."

"Yes, sir!"

I then split our large group into small teams and sent them to their respective sectors.



I spread out a large map and waited for everyone to return. I couldn't run around as freely as I could when I was younger, so my job was now to manage things. A little past noon, the investigation teams started trickling back in. This was around the time I expected them to return as long as they didn't run into any trouble. By the time the sun started to set, most teams had returned, but one group of Shumar's retainers was still missing.

"Did something happen to them?" Friede muttered.

"I'm starting to get worried," Yuhette said.

Tiriya sighed. "Not again..."

Seeing that, Iori chuckled. "I see retainers in every country are desperate to prove their loyalty. I assume they're out working late to show how devoted they are to their task?"

Shumar smiled and asked, "Is it the same in Wa?"

"Absolutely. The people who work for the Chrysanthemum Court are no different. Funnily enough, there's an organization known as Tsukumo that's supposed to monitor them, but..." Iori trailed off with a frown.

She was part of the Heavenwatchers, an organization that existed to monitor and observe foreign nations. In contrast, Tsukumo's job was to keep an eye on activities within the country. Because of the nature of their work, the two branches did not get along. However, if you asked me, they were more similar than different.

"Don't worry, the Demon Army and the Commonwealth Council have the same problems too," I said. "Once you become someone of importance, people rush to ingratiate themselves with you. It's not right to blame them for it, and it's not as if they'll stop even if you tell them you don't want their devotion."

Shumar gave me a long stare. "I can tell you're speaking from experience, professor."

"Hahaha."

Honestly, I'd seen that happen far more in my past life than this one. Corporate culture was rife with this kind of behavior. *But I guess since you see it*

*here too, it's just a fundamental part of human nature...*

Parker said in a worried voice, "Wanting to show loyalty is all well and good, but they were ordered to be back by sunset. Surely they must know they'll be punished, not rewarded, for their lateness."

"True, if they don't come back soon, then—" Before I could finish that sentence, the last group finally returned to camp.

"Our sincerest apologies, Your Highness, we were so absorbed in our work that we lost track of time."

"It took longer to get through the jungle than we thought too..."

The men all looked and sounded exhausted, but I could tell from the scent of their sweat that they didn't actually feel all that tired. Chances were, they'd finished their work by noon and waited to make it look like they'd been working harder.

I shot Shumar a quick glance, and my expression alone was enough for him to figure out what was going on.

With a smile, he approached his retainers. "I appreciate your hard work, everyone. But remember that following orders is just as important as completing your tasks. Be sure to return before sunset tomorrow. I trust that men as capable and loyal as you can finish well before the appointed time."

The men bowed their heads reverently.

"As you wish, Your Highness."

"Thank you."

*Man, being in charge of other people is such a pain. I wish I could go back to being unimportant.*

"All right, now that everyone's here, let's eat dinner. I killed some wolves that were sniffing around our supplies, so we'll have Wa-style wolf teriyaki with sweet soy sauce tonight."

"When did you manage to do that, Professor?!"

*I mean, it's not like I had anything else to do while waiting for you guys. As*

always, the Kuwolese people were lax about rules, but at least we finished the first day without incident. Unfortunately, the second day didn't go as smoothly.

## —Overzealous Loyalty—

Various people served Kuwol's royal family, from priests to guards to gardeners. Naturally, these individuals came from diverse backgrounds. Some were minor nobles or distant relatives of the royal family, while others were commoners living in the capital. The people currently devouring roasted boar were commoners whose primary job was cleaning and maintaining the palace.

"Do you think he'll remember our faces now?"

"Nah, there were other teams that came back late too. We're gonna have to stand out even more if we want His Highness to remember us."

Of the campfires dotting the campsite, this group was the farthest from the crown prince and the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander.

One of the men looked up and said, "I signed up for this because I heard we'd get to travel with His Highness, but maybe this was a waste of time."

"Yeah, I thought this'd get me a promotion, but it's not looking promising."

The men sitting here were of various ages, but they all felt dissatisfied with their current positions.

"It doesn't matter how many decades you spend polishing the palace floor; they won't give you a good pension unless you get a secure job. I wanna retire already."

"I wish there'd be another war so I could rack up some achievements."

"You only say that 'cause you don't know what war is like. I'm tired of fighting."

Everyone fell silent at that and stared at the crackling flames for a bit.

"So? Wanna come back late tomorrow too?"

"Meh, we'll just get told to come back early like we did today. If we're gonna come back late again, it's gotta be because we actually put in some extra effort

into something.”

One of the servants unfurled a map he’d borrowed from Veight. “I heard we’ll be surveying even farther out tomorrow. So how about we scout some of the spots we’re supposed to go to ahead of time?”

“You sure that’s a good idea? We’re beyond the Mejire’s protection here.”

They were superstitious enough that this worried them. The man who proposed the plan was just as superstitious, but he shook off his concerns and said, “We’re not doing anything too crazy; just checking out our assigned area ahead of time. ‘Sides, the faster we get this over with, the sooner we can go home, right?”

The men exchanged uneasy glances.

“I guess so? That’ll make us stand out from the other teams too. I bet His Highness will be happy with us.”

None of them cared much for rules and regulations; they were far more interested in winning brownie points with the prince.

“All right, let’s get to sleep, then. We gotta get up bright and early tomorrow.”

“Man, if I could just get promoted to one of His Highness’s personal butlers, I’d be set for life.”

“Well, maybe we can make that happen.”

The men nodded to one another, downed the rum they’d been given, and went to bed.

The next morning, their group traveled beyond the edge of the forest.

“Damn, this place is barren.”

“I don’t see even a single blade of grass.”

After exiting the forest, they’d come out onto a large grassy plain, but after traveling for a while, the grass became more sparse until it vanished completely. Now, they found themselves in a rocky wasteland bereft of any life.

“Did you get the mana measurements?”

“Well, the thing’s still at zero. I think that means there’s no mana here at all.”

“You sure the manameter’s not broken?”

“No idea. But we should write this down just in case.”

Warily, the men took out their hatchets and crossbows before taking a few more steps forward.

“There are a lot of dead trees here. This place turned barren pretty recently.”

“Yeah, must’ve been a forest a few years ago. Bet His Highness will reward us if we report that too.”

“Hold on. I’m still writing down the measurements,” the youngest man said, but his comrades were too scared to stand still, so they kept on moving. The only person who stayed with him was the oldest member of the team.

“Good grief, how could they all leave you behind? Don’t they realize it’s dangerous to be alone out here?” the eldest said.

“Ah, sorry, I’ll be done soon.”

“No need to rush, son. I’m tired of walking anyway. We’ll let them scout ahead and join up later.” The old man knelt down and pointed to the manameter hanging from his waist. “By the way, son, is it just me, or is your mana-whatsit acting up?”

“Huh? Ah, you’re right! It’s saying there’s tons of mana here now!”

The manameter had displayed an ambient mana of zero earlier, but now it was maxed out.

“It’s even higher than what you see on Mount Kayankaka! What’s going—Whoa?!” The manameter suddenly shattered as the magesteel plate grew too large for the container. It was drawing off an inordinate amount of mana. “No way... There isn’t even any grass here. How come there’s so much mana?!”

“I don’t know, son, but something’s definitely wrong.”

The younger man looked up at the older one, worried. “Wh-What should we do?!”

The older man grabbed his pack and said, “My old soldier’s intuition is telling me we better scram. That’s how I survived the last war.”

“But everyone else went on ahead!”

“Yeah, we better call them back, quick.” The old man cupped his hands around his mouth, but just before he yelled out, he spotted something and dropped to the ground. “Hide! We’re under attack!”

“What?!” The younger man quickly scrambled behind a boulder and asked, “Are you telling me there are bandits all the way out here? What about the others?”

The older man quietly replied, “They all died just now...”

I went into the command tent to check on all the transceivers. Since each was paired with two others, one here and one at the other camp, I could roughly triangulate the location of each team based on the strength of the mana waves the transceivers picked up. It wasn’t nearly as accurate as satellite-based GPS, but it was the best we could do in this world.

“Oh, come on, why is one of the teams rushing ahead...”

The team moving beyond their assigned section was the same team of Shumar’s retainers who’d returned last yesterday. It consisted of commoners desperate to catch their prince’s attention. I’d been paying special attention to them because I figured they would do something like this, and they had.

“Monza.”

“Yeah?” Monza popped up out of the shadows and walked over to me.

“Send two werewolves to call Team 11 back,” I said with a frown. “They left the forest and entered the wasteland.”

“Why? Weren’t we gonna send them there tomorrow, anyway?”

“Because they’ve gone there alone. Plus, they’re all civilian humans. It’s too dangerous for them out there without guards.”

One of the older men on the team used to be a soldier, but the rest had no combat experience. They were likely to get stranded out there.



“Bring them back here ASAP. This is the second time they’ve disobeyed orders, so tell your guys they can be rough if they need to.”

“Wait, really?!”

Monza looked ready to hunt, so I quickly held out a hand and said, “Hold it. You’re not planning on going yourself, are you?!”

“But, boss—I mean, elder, you always run off alone.”

“Okay, you have a point, but...”

A leader really shouldn’t run out on their own. *Man, you remind me of myself.* Despite my misgivings, I would later come to thank Monza for running off ahead. Without her, the two survivors of Team 11 wouldn’t have made it either.

A few hours later, Monza returned with the young recordkeeper and the old retired soldier. Judging by when he’d started working at the palace, I guessed the older man was one of Zagar’s old retainers who’d been pardoned. Right now, he was pale as a sheet and barely able to keep his composure.

“I only saw ’em from a distance... It was just one guy who killed the others. He was bare-handed too. Kushum and the others were armed, but their weapons didn’t even...”

According to the old man’s story, the rest of their team went ahead while the recordkeeper was busy writing down the manometer’s readings. Inexperienced teams often made the mistake of splitting up like this. Regardless, those who had gone on were killed by a mysterious man who suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

“All he did was swing his arm, and he sliced through all of them like he was wielding a sword.”

*I don’t like the sound of that at all...* The old man and the recordkeeper had hidden immediately, and thankfully, it seemed this mysterious man didn’t have the keen senses of a werewolf. However, their fear had caused them to lose their bearings, and they’d gotten lost during their retreat. Monza had shown up just before they were about to make the monumental mistake of returning to the wasteland and dragged them here.

“I see, so that’s what happened. Well, I’m glad you’re still alive. It’s unfortunate what happened to your friends, but...”

The young recordkeeper shook his head, tears streaming down his face. “No... This is our fault. If we’d just followed orders...”

*Well, as long as you’ve learned your lesson.* I placed a hand on his shoulder and said, “What matters is that you survived. Now you can take what you learned today and use it in the future.”

*Am I starting to sound like one of those old men who dispenses advice to the young? I guess I am old, but still...*

I turned back to everyone else and said, “We’re suspending the investigation. Based on the sharp drop in mana where they were last seen, these men likely encountered a Valkaan. Call back all the teams; we’re getting out of here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Everyone stiffened up when I said the word Valkaan. Both the Demon Army and the people of Kuwol knew how deadly they could be. Unfortunately, before all the teams could be recalled, the manameter on my desk started vibrating erratically.

“The mana in the area is starting to dry up...”

“It’s just like what happened when we were in that wasteland, Lord Veight,” the young recordkeeper said, going pale. “It went down to almost zero, and then it suddenly shot up.”

I hefted my Blast Rifle, Ryuuga, and double-checked that it was loaded.

“Someone’s siphoning all the mana in the area,” I asserted. “But once that someone shows up here, the manameter will go haywire because the density of the mana in the area will jump back up.”

“D-Does that mean...?”

Now everyone looked afraid, even the werewolves and werecats.

I gave them all a confident grin and said, “Don’t worry. Even if we’re up against a Valkaan, I can at least buy you enough time to escape. Remain calm. Just continue packing up camp and get ready to leave.”

In truth, I could probably buy only a few seconds against a Valkaan. I had managed to beat Arshes only because Friedensrichter had gravely wounded him. If the Hero had been at full strength, he would have killed me and all of Friedensrichter's guards in seconds. All my magical tricks were useless against someone with hundreds of times more mana than me. Yet, everyone here believed that Veight the Hero Killer—Veight the legendary Black Werewolf King—could handle even a Valkaan. The only reason they weren't panicking was because I was here, even if I didn't want to admit it. I couldn't tell them I would likely last only a few seconds against a Valkaan. I needed to reassure everyone, or they would succumb to fear.

The problem was, I couldn't actually buy the time I was claiming I could.

As I tried to come up with a plan, I suddenly realized something. If all I needed to do was buy time, I could become bait. I could draw the Valkaan away from where everyone would be retreating, as he would likely chase the person with the most mana. Of course, once he caught up to me, I'd die, but that would give everyone else enough time to escape. Shumar, Parker, and Friede would surely be able to handle the rest.

Meraldia still had Gomoviroa, and she could use her vortex power to drain the Valkaan's mana. Things weren't completely hopeless. But if we all got wiped out here, there wouldn't be anyone left to warn the rest of the world and give them time to prepare.

*All right, I guess I'll die.* Humming, I shouldered Ryuuga and walked to the tent exit.

"We can't let the Valkaan find this base, so I'll distract him. You all retreat in the meantime."

"Y-Yes, sir!" Everyone said, saluting.

If Monza had been here, she would've insisted on coming with me, but thankfully, she was busy wrangling the werewolf squad right now. Parker was also occupied sending spirits off in all directions to gather as much intel as he could. Friede was still here, though, and she sensed that something was off.

"Dad..."

“Hmm?”

After a few seconds, she bit her lip and shook her head, retracting whatever she had been about to say. “Never mind, it’s nothing. Don’t die, Dad.”

“I’ll be fine,” I reassured her.

*Sorry for lying to you. Now that I think about it, this is the first time I’m lying to you, huh? But I have to protect you, even if that means not telling the truth. It’s the only lie I’ll ever tell you, so forgive me.* A father sacrificing himself for his daughter was a common theme in games and manga, but I never thought I’d be doing the same one day.

“Professor!” Shumar shouted, rushing into the tent.

“Please wait, Your Highness! We’ve been ordered to re— I said wait, you dumbass!” Tiriya ran in afterwards and tried to drag him out, but Shumar was stronger.

I smiled at the two of them and said, “I didn’t realize you were still here. This camp’s going to become a battlefield soon; you need to leave while you can.”

“I can’t allow you to risk your life for us, Professor!” Shumar shouted, tears welling up in his eyes.

I gently patted his head and said, “It’s a teacher’s job to do everything they can for their students.”

“But we’re only in this situation because of my retainers’ mistake! I’m the one who should bear the responsibility for this!”

“Perhaps. But you’re also the future of your nation. You can’t afford to throw your life away here. That is one of your responsibilities, and I have my own obligation to fulfill.”

The burden of responsibility was heavy, but it was even more painful to lose those responsibilities, which was why I had to do this.

I turned to Tiriya.

“Tiriya, make sure you guard the prince well. Elmersia will find a way to solve this crisis. Don’t worry.”

“Understood. Let’s go, Your Highness.”

“...Fine.”

*Oh, whoops, I almost forgot.*

“Friede, you go with the prince. Don’t forget, you’re also the Demon Lord’s daughter. You can’t afford to die in a place like this.”

“Well, you’re her vice-commander too, Dad!”

“A vice-commander is basically nobody. Anyone can replace them.” I pushed the youngsters out of the tent. “Besides, you’ll only get in my way if you stay. We’ll fight together once you’re stronger, but for now, leave this to me.”

“D-Dad?!”

I knew this was likely the last time I’d see Friede. I certainly hadn’t expected it this morning, but partings were always sudden. My last death had been sudden too, as was Friedensrichter’s. At least this time, I had the opportunity to say farewell.

I smiled at Friede and said, “Friede, I’m more proud of you than you can ever imagine. You don’t need my help anymore to make it in the world. I know you can handle anything that comes your way.”

It really was reassuring to know I had someone I could rely on. Friedensrichter had probably felt the same way when he died.

Before I could regret my decision, I jumped out of the tent. The sun was dipping below the horizon, and I idly realized this might be the last sunset I’d ever see. *At least it’s a beautiful one.*

I turned back to everyone and shouted, “Run through the night if you have to! You need to make it back to the northern side of Mount Kayankaka as fast as possible! Once you’re there, someone else will handle things so don’t think about anything else and just run!”

I then cast strengthening magic on my legs and dashed into the dark forest.

I exited the forest in the direction where Monza had found the two survivors and ended up on a grassy plain. It extended only a short distance before turning

into a barren wasteland. This was clearly the start of the mana disturbance's influence, but I didn't have time to take any readings. The surrounding mana was becoming dense and rising rapidly, whipping around into a spiral as if someone were inhaling and exhaling massive amounts of mana with each breath. I'd encountered Valkaan multiple times in my life, but this was the first time I'd seen something like this.

Acting purely on instinct, I jumped back. A second later, something crashed into where I'd been standing. The shock wave was powerful enough to pulverize the nearby boulders.

"Bwahaha!" I heard a man's boisterous laugh; not from below me where the impact had been, but from directly behind me.

*Crap!* I immediately increased my weight with strengthening magic and dropped to the ground like a rock. *So this is the kind of g-force fighting game characters feel when they jump cancel.* It was a feat that could only be accomplished with magic, so I hadn't physically experienced this kind of sudden directional shift in my past life. As I lowered myself, something zoomed past my head. If I'd reacted even a millisecond later, I probably would have died instantly.

"Hahaha! You're good! *Real good!*" the man boomed. His accent was thick, making it difficult to understand, but he spoke in the ancient language Master had taught me. I was sure of it; the grammar and pronunciation matched perfectly.

I sensed another attack coming from behind and strengthened my legs to the limit, leaping aside just in time.





*Who the hell is this guy?!* Once I put some distance between us, I turned around to see a giant of a man, nearly three meters tall, standing imposingly with his arms folded across his chest. He looked like the depictions of Roman gladiators I'd seen in history books. He had dark skin, was wearing only pants, and had tattoos across his muscular chest—except the tattoos were all magic circles. Directly inscribing magic circles onto one's body was an outdated and inefficient technique, but it was clear whoever had inked those circles had been a powerful mage.

The man's body was covered in scars, most of which resembled those left by punches and kicks. Only one appeared to be a sword cut: a thick, straight line running from his right hand to his elbow. If the cut had been as deep as the scar suggested, he should have lost his arm. Either there had been a skilled healer to stitch him up, or the bottomless wellspring of mana he'd gained upon becoming a Valkaan had enhanced his body's natural healing abilities. At the very least, I was certain he was a Valkaan. The amount of mana he exuded left no room for doubt.

"You're the first person I've met in a hundred years who could dodge three of my attacks! What is your name, warrior?"

*Well, yeah, most people aren't able to dodge surprise attacks from a Valkaan!* Annoyed, I shouted, "I don't name myself to cowards."

"Oho! Well, I'm Burbelga!"

*Does this guy know how conversations work? If he's sane, he wouldn't run around attacking every random person he sees. But if he's the one who killed Shumar's men, he's definitely got a few screws loose.* Arshes had been like this too. Why did humans lose their minds after gaining power? *Well, that's not important right now. I need to lead him away from the forest, or he'll reach everyone before they finish retreating. Talking is another way to buy time, I suppose.*

"Are you the one who killed the team from Kuwol?" I shouted.

"Kuwol? Never heard of it. I'm only interested in strong people! The weak deserve to die, so I killed them! Ahahaha!"

*Okay. He's totally insane. Why do these people always end up becoming Valkaan?* Fortunately, it seemed he mistakenly thought I was actually as strong as him. That would make it easier to keep his attention and lure him away from the forest, or so I thought... Burbelga went on the offensive again before I could formulate a plan.

"Let's have a fair fight!" he declared, rushing at me.

"There's nothing fair about this, you coward!" I transformed into a werewolf, knowing I'd need my full strength to last even a few seconds against this him.

"AWOOO!" I let out a howl, hitting Burbelga with a full-power Soul Shaker. Originally, the ability was meant to absorb nearby mana, but through refining the technique over my lifetime, I'd gotten it to the point where I could kill a human instantly with it. Of course, I didn't expect it to do any damage to a Valkaan.

Burbelga just smiled and launched a punch at my face. "Hah! A werewolf?! Then you must have been a slave like me!"

*Wait, what? Werewolves were slaves in the past? What kind of culture did the ancient civilization have?* I wanted to question him further, but I had no time to talk.

"Ngh!" His fist made contact. It wasn't particularly fast, but it was accurate enough that I couldn't completely dodge, and I was sent flying.

*So even a slow punch has tons of force when powered by a Valkaan's magical mass. Newton's laws state that kinetic energy is a product of speed and mass, so enough mass means even slow hits will hurt. Actually, do Newtonian mechanics even apply here? ...And why am I seeing so many apples?*

"Wha...?!" I must have lost consciousness for a moment while I was flying through the air. However brief, it had still been over a decade since someone had knocked me out.

Among strengthening magic's repertoire was a spell that increased overall toughness and made you more resistant to passing out. I'd cast it for this fight too, but Burbelga had managed to knock me out despite that.

Grinning, Burbelga shouted, "Oh! So you *can* take these hits! Wonderful! How

about this?!”

*Please, stop. I can't endure any more. I can't even buy anyone anytime.*

Though I was on the verge of giving up, my body moved on its own. No matter how hopeless the situation was, I knew I couldn't let myself fall too quickly. I used the Gusokujutsu I'd learned in Wa to redirect the force of Burbelga's roundhouse kick and circled behind him. He may be a Valkaan, but he still had the body of a human. And humans had very limited options when trying to hit behind them.

“What a slippery werewolf!”

As expected, Burbelga tried to punch backwards, and while it was a fast punch, the limited range of motion in his shoulder joints meant I could read the trajectory easily. I dodged it by a hair's breadth, then grabbed Burbelga's arm. My plan was to dislocate his shoulder, and eventually dislocate his other limbs as well to render him powerless. Unfortunately, I lacked the strength to even move his arm.

“Hrrraaaaaah!”

“Whoa!” My pinning techniques worked on even giants, but this Valkaan was able to swing me around like I weighed no more than a kitten. “Those are some interesting moves you've got! Hngh!”

He threw another basic punch at me. Honestly, with how much power and speed his punches possessed, he had no need for technique.

“Dammit!”

I strengthened my physical abilities as much as my magic would allow; increasing my durability, strength, speed, and regeneration and even numbing my pain. Over the past decade, I'd acquired many new spells from helping Master with her research and doing some direct research of my own. I was no longer the half-assed mage who'd only beaten Arshes through dumb luck. Plus, I'd also learned plenty of new techniques from Rolmund's werewolves, Meraldia's old werewolves, and Wa's martial artists. I used everything I'd learned in this life to parry Burbelga's punches, dodge his kicks, and evade his tackles. If he got even one clean hit in, I'd be dead for sure.

Burbelga laughed heartily as he watched me struggle. “Hahaha! What a strong foe! You must be a famous Valkaan!”

*No, I’m just a mage, you monstrous bastard. Are you blind?* Regardless, he was focused solely on his fight with me, which was a good thing. The farther south I could drag him, the more time everyone would have to escape. I was slowly inching southward, trying to make it seem natural enough that Burbelga didn’t get suspicious. I knew there was only so much time I could buy just by fighting him, so I needed to put more distance between us and Mount Kayankaka as well.

After a few more attacks, Burbelga frowned and said, “Why won’t you fight back?!”

*Because if I don’t focus on defense, you’ll kill me in seconds!* Of course, I couldn’t let him know that, so I grinned and said, “I don’t feel like showing my skills to a coward like you.”

That was a downright lie. I’d already used every technique I had up my sleeve.

But the bluff seemed to work, as Burbelga bellowed another laugh and said, “Oho! I see! Then it’s time to get serious!”

*Wait, wait, wait. Let’s take things easy for just a bit longer.* Before I could say anything, Burbelga came at me with a lightning-fast punch—clearly faster than the speed of sound since there was a wall of air in front of it.

“Nrgh!” The shock wave from the punch alone sent me flying, but that wasn’t even the worst part.

Burbelga had conjured a blade of mana at the edge of his fist, which gouged my stomach. I’d dodged the punch, but because mana wasn’t affected by air resistance, the blade reached me almost immediately after. The cut was deep enough that I didn’t have the strength to get back up.

Within the dust cloud he’d created, Burbelga shouted, “How’d you like that?! That’s what my punches are like when I get serious! Hmm? Where’d you go?!”

It seemed he’d lost sight of me. I wanted to keep him occupied, but I had no strength left. I was practically out of mana too and couldn’t recover any of it with Soul Shaker because it didn’t have enough power to overcome Burbelga’s

innate ability to draw mana towards him.

“Ugh...” I used a spell to deaden any noise I made and started crawling southward. I didn’t know how long the twilight would be able to mask my presence, but I wanted to be as far away from Kuwol as possible when Burbelga found me.

“Heeey, where are you?! You promised to show me your techniques!”

*No, I didn’t.* Judging by how far away his voice and scent were, he hadn’t moved from where he’d punched me. He really wasn’t the least bit worried that he might lose to me.

Sighing, I continued moving south. Unfortunately, I was so focused on the threat behind me that I failed to notice I was crawling right off a cliff. By the time I realized I was grasping at empty air, my body had already pitched forward, and I lost consciousness as I plummeted down to the depths below.

## —Burbelga’s Fear—

“Where did that werewolf Valkaan go?” Burbelga muttered, looking around fretfully. “Werewolves are scary... They’re even stronger than human Valkaan. Heeeey! Where are you?!” His shouts were met with silence.

He kept his guard up for a while, but after seeing no attack was coming, he started slowly backing away. *Where did he go? Is he waiting to ambush me? Wait, isn’t this where the castle of that one Valkaan is?*

Burbelga gingerly rubbed at the scar on his arm. “This place is filled with unpleasant memories...”

When he had been a normal human, Burbelga had been a gladiator slave. While popular gladiators fought with swords and spears, he was just a lowly fistfighter. Those who failed to keep up with swordsmanship training were relegated to fistfighting if they had a good enough physique. Those who lacked skill with the blade or were too afraid of being cut by a lethal weapon ended up in the same position. But Burbelga had been considered weak even among the fistfighters.



“Man, you’re hopeless...” The boxing instructor sighed.

The instructor had been a famous fighter in his prime, but now in the later years of his life, he’d retired and started teaching a new batch of fistfighters.

“You’re a well-built man with a solid physique. But it doesn’t matter if you’ve got a pretty face or fancy techniques. The audience wants big, tough men who can take a hit. And yet...”

He raised a hand, and Burbelga, who was covered in bruises, shrank back.

“I-I’m sorry... I’m just not very good at fighting.”

“Kid, I’m not great at it either. Your problem isn’t that you’re bad, it’s that you’re a *coward*.” The instructor jabbed at Burbelga’s solar plexus.

“Aaagh?!”

“Stop running away. Tense your muscles and take it. I know you’ve trained enough to be able to. Your muscles aren’t just for decoration, you know?”

“B-But...”

The instructor let out another sigh. “Oh, whatever. Cowards like you aren’t fit to be fighters in the first place. The problem is...the sponsors and the crowd won’t like it if you act like this in a real match. Your master won’t be happy either. At this rate, you’ll be sold off.” The instructor ran a hand through his graying hair. “You’ve got three matches left. I begged the fixers to let you fight in three more matches. If you can win even one of them, or at the very least put up a good enough fight to make the crowd happy, they’ll let you stay as a fighter.”

“G-Got it.” Burbelga nodded meekly.

He failed to perform in any of his next three matches.

Burbelga was booted out of the coliseum and sold to another master. The first thing his new master did was dump him into a tank of water infused with a high concentration of mana.

“Wha?! Pwah! Blegh!”

“Survive. If you can adapt to this environment, your body will withstand even greater concentrations of mana.”

“P-Please, let me out! I’ll die!” Burbelga pounded against the tank’s walls, but his trained fists made no dent. Though the tank looked like it was made of glass, it was evident the actual material was much sturdier.

The mage who’d dumped him in the tank ignored his pleas and began talking to a colleague. “Specimen five is surprisingly durable. I don’t know what kind of life he lived before this, but he has a higher mana tolerance than most. Let’s try raising the density by forty percent.”

“Won’t that kill him?”

“If it does, then he has no hope of becoming a Valkaan. This is the fastest way to get results.”

“Fair. You heard the man. Raise tank number five’s density by forty percent.”

A second later, Burbelga started heaving as an invisible pressure bore down on him from all sides.

“Bluuurgh! S-Stop ple— Gaaah!”

“So noisy. But he seems capable of withstanding the increased density.”

“He might be the one. Raise the density by another fifteen...no, another seventeen percent. If he survives that too, we’ll go in one percent increments. Once he hits thirty percent, send him to the next step.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Burbelga quickly realized they didn’t care about him at all. He also started to notice that his body was getting hotter. More specifically, it felt as if heated rods had been jammed into his bones and muscles. At the same time, he started hearing incoherent screaming in his head. It was a cacophony of many voices, and he couldn’t make out what any individual was saying.

*I-I don’t feel like myself anymore...* As his consciousness faded, he noticed there were slaves in the tanks next to his—all dead—but with expressions of pure hatred on their faces. They hadn’t been able to withstand the poison in the tanks. *Could these voices belong to them?*

Just before he lost consciousness, the voices suddenly faded, leaving him in complete silence. At the same time, his pain subsided, and he felt surprisingly good.

“Huh...?”

Confused, he pressed his hand against the tank. The wall broke with surprising ease.

“Whoa?!”

The water rushed out, carrying him with it. Before he could get up, something clicked around his neck.

“Wha?!” He found himself unable to move from the neck down. “What the —?! Hngh!”

Burbelga struggled as hard as he could to no avail. He then heard the voice of the mage who’d been talking earlier.

“Hmm. It seems this was a success.”

“We might be able to mass-produce Valkaan with this method. The empire will finally regain its rightful place in the world.”

“First, we need to see if this process is replicable, then experiment with variations on the current process to collect data. Run the usual tests on this sample and make sure that the collar doesn’t come off.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful. He’s one of the precious Valkaan who’ll protect our country, after all.”

And so began Burbelga’s worst nightmare.

The hellish life Burbelga had been forced to endure came to an abrupt end one day.

*What’s...going on?* he thought.

For what seemed like ages, Burbelga had been poked and prodded with needles, tortured with strange devices, and forced to ingest numerous substances. But suddenly, the room went dark, his pain disappeared, and the

restraining collar came off. He carefully removed the needles stabbing into his skin and jumped off the operating table he'd been confined to. Looking around, he saw that all the mages who'd been experimenting on him were lying on the ground, dead. Their faces were horrifically disfigured; whatever had killed them had done so with extreme brutality.

Burbelga could hear screams in the distance, which meant whatever had murdered these mages was still nearby. Terrified, he ran. Outside, he found even more death and slaughter. It seemed they'd been invaded by an enemy empire. Soldiers in uniform were ripping people apart with their bare hands, and were strong enough to shatter stone walls with a single punch.

"Oh, look, a slave. Hah! May as well kill him too."

Someone punched Burbelga from behind, but to his surprise, it didn't hurt. He didn't have time to think about *why* because fighter instincts kicked in, and he whirled around and punched back.

The soldier was sent flying through a stone building, but he quickly jumped back up and shouted, "That one hurt! Watch out, boys, this one's a Valkaan!"

A group of four soldiers surrounded Burbelga.

"Get him!" They coordinated their charge, rushing him from all sides.

Seeing as he had no way out, Burbelga steeled himself for combat. "I-I'm a gladiator, dammit!"

Burbelga expected this to be his final stand, but he would rather go out swinging than cowering in fear. Though his enemies rained down blows, Burbelga swung his fists with single-minded determination.

"Bwagh?!"

"Gyaaa!"

"Wh-What the hell is with this guy?!"

"Arrrgh!"

Before he knew it, his four opponents were lying on the ground in a bloody heap. Somehow, he'd taken them out with one punch each.

“H-Hehe... I guess I’m still better than these amateurs at fistfighting.”  
Burbelga dropped to the ground, rubbing the side of his cheek. “Huh? How come it doesn’t hurt?”

One of the attackers had landed a solid blow on his face, but he felt no pain. There was no bruising or blood either.

*Were these guys really that weak? No, that doesn’t make sense.* Burbelga had witnessed them rip people apart with their bare hands. *They’re not weak; I’m strong! But how did I get this strong?* Burbelga cocked his head to one side, pondering this revelation. Moments later, another group of soldiers arrived.

“Squad three’s been slain!”

“It must’ve been that guy! He’s a Valkaan!”

Burbelga slowly got to his feet, not to run, but to see just how much stronger he had become.

*Have I really gotten that much stronger? Can I beat these guys?* Burbelga balled his hands into fists and dropped into the stance his instructor had taught him.

“Bring it on, you bastards!” he shouted with a grin.

This new group of four soldiers surrounded him in the same formation as the last group. Burbelga ran forward, punching one of them in the face.

“My name is Burbelga! Gladiator from the Akuneion Empire!”

Burbelga fought his way through the city, killing everyone he encountered. He had no idea how he’d gotten so strong, but he was overjoyed. What really made him happy was that it didn’t hurt even when someone punched him. He could finally fight without fearing pain. He had no idea what a “Valkaan” was, but everyone called him one. *I guess that’s what they call strong people? But how can you tell whether someone’s strong before you even fight them?* As he had no concept of what a Valkaan looked like, Burbelga decided to fight everyone he saw to determine whether they were weak or strong.

*If they die when I punch them, then they’ve gotta be weak. It’s their fault for*

*being weak, so it's their fault they died.* After crushing countless squads of soldiers, Burbelga found himself back at the arena. But the arena had been destroyed, and no matches were being held. He found a few of those so-called Valkaan there, but dispatched them without issue.

*I've finally become strong enough to fight in this arena; it's a shame it's ruined now. Oh well.* Burbelga could take whatever he wanted by force, and if someone complained, he could just kill them. His life had finally turned around.

But as time passed, people started to disappear from the city. Burbelga had killed all his enemies, but even those who weren't his foes began to vanish.

*I even said I wouldn't kill them if they didn't oppose me. I can't believe they're all leaving me behind.* With all the people gone, Burbelga couldn't get free clothes and food. And since he'd been raised as a slave gladiator, all he knew was to fight. He couldn't sew, fish, or farm. In less than a year, Burbelga had devolved to wearing just a ragged loincloth and grilling the beasts he hunted over a coarse campfire for food. He knew of no other way to survive.

*Well, I guess this is fine.* His sturdy Valkaan body could survive off such basic sustenance, so he found it an acceptable enough life. He spent his days wandering the land searching for powerful foes, attacking anyone he encountered like a rabid dog. But eventually, those days also came to an end.

"Valkaan, I cannot allow you to pass. If you agree to turn back, I will give you a few days' worth of food and water," an old man said calmly, standing in front of a sturdy fortress.

*Is he afraid of fighting? That means he's gotta be weak, right?!* Burbelga had no compunction about killing the weak now.

He charged at the old man, roaring, "If you're weak, then shut up and die!"

Burbelga's punches were strong enough to shatter boulders, and he was certain just one hit would be enough to crush this old man's head to a pulp. But that wasn't what happened.

"Whuh?!" His fist found only empty air.

"Your footwork is sloppy," the old man said flatly, driving a fist into Burbelga's



stomach.

“Urgh!” For the first time in centuries, Burbelga felt pain.

As he doubled over, the man sliced at Burbelga’s neck with his hand. “If I were being serious, that would have chopped your head off.”

“N-No!” Eyes watering in pain, Burbelga hurriedly scurried backwards.

*I haven’t lost yet. And since I haven’t lost, I’m not weak! I’ve still got my head on my shoulders!* Burbelga rubbed the back of his neck to make sure it was still attached, which it thankfully was. His opponent’s stance spoke to the years he must have spent training.

*I’m strong...but so is this guy.* Burbelga assumed the boxing stance his instructor had taught him; it’d seemingly been a lifetime since he last took this pose.

“Are you a Valkaan?” he asked the old man.

“I have been called that before.” The old warrior drew a curved sword and pointed it at Burbelga. “But if you intend to fight, I won’t hold back.”

*He’s like the swordsmen I used to see in the arena.* Burbelga wasn’t sure if this man was a gladiator, but he was clearly more accustomed to wielding a sword than fighting bare-handed. He seemed more like someone who valued swordsmanship for its own sake than a typical warrior. *I don’t like his attitude.* Burbelga still remembered how fistfighters had been seen as lesser compared to swordsmen, which stoked his simmering anger.

“I won’t lose to you!” Burbelga lunged forward and threw his best punch. *Let’s see you try to block this with that iron stick of yours!* But a second later, searing pain shot through his hand.

“Argaaah!” The man’s sword sliced through his fist, cutting all the way up to his elbow. “Waaah!”

Resisting the urge to collapse, Burbelga jumped back.

“H-How can you cut me with that lump of iron?! I-I’m supposed to be strong!”

The man quietly replied, “You are strong. But not as strong as me.”

With his dominant hand cut down the middle, Burbelga couldn't really protest. The man raised his bloodstained blade and stepped forward.

"Nngh!" Burbelga stumbled backwards, staying well out of the sword's range. His wound was closing up already, but he could feel his strength draining away as his body healed. It seemed not even a Valkaan could regenerate forever. He would definitely die if he got cut like that a few more times.

*He's...scary!* For the first time since becoming a Valkaan, Burbelga felt fear. He knew now there were Valkaan stronger than him.

The old man gave him a pitying look and pointed to the wilderness. "Go. But be warned: if we meet again, I *will* kill you. Even Buddha's mercy has its limits."

*Buddha? What's that?* Confused by a word he'd never heard before, Burbelga cradled his bleeding arm and ran off.

"Uwaaah!"

From that day on, Burbelga stopped challenging other Valkaan.

*There are people out there stronger than me... People like that guy who I definitely can't beat.* Burbelga fled to the south, but the south was a wasteland. There was very little food and water for him to find. The only way he could survive was by stealing from others. However, few people lived in such a desolate place. Most survivors of Burbelga's kingdom had fled to the lush mountains of the north. There were no villages left in this barren land.

*I'm so hungry...* As he wandered aimlessly across the wastes, Burbelga suddenly smelled grilled meat.

*Someone's cooking meat. I could steal it, but what if they're a Valkaan?* He slowly approached the source of the smell and found several men sitting around a campfire. The group's leader appeared to be a well-built man wearing fancy clothes. The others were dressed poorly, and unarmed.

*The big guy looks like a Valkaan. The rest must be slaves.* Burbelga wasn't worried about the slaves, but the Valkaan might be stronger than him. At the same time, he was starving. *I'd rather die fighting than die of an empty stomach!* Gathering what remained of his pride, Burbelga rushed forward.

“Hraaah!” He swung at the man who looked like a Valkaan, landing a clean hit before he could even turn around.

“Wha?! You little—”

*He’s still alive?! Oh no!* Seeing the anger on his opponent’s face, Burbelga desperately threw out punch after punch.

“Take thiiiis!” He beat the man until he collapsed, then mounted him and continued his assault. “Die! Die! Die diie!”

Burbelga didn’t know how long he’d been punching, but when he came to his senses, he noticed the man’s head had been completely pulverized. For a while now, he’d been punching the bloody ground.

“H-hehehe... I did it! I won! Burbelga takes the round!” He raised his arms into the air like a victorious gladiator. He then looked around and saw that the men who’d been with the Valkaan were gone. They’d probably fled the moment they saw their master die. Burbelga felt relieved and more than a little ashamed of himself.

*That was a pretty despicable thing to do. I’m sure the instructor would’ve gotten angry if he saw me savage a defeated opponent like that.* Burbelga thought back to the Valkaan who’d bested him. *He’d been strong, calm, and fought fairly. I should start fighting fairly like him, and then I’d also be someone to look up to.* Burbelga folded his arms and struck an imposing stance.

“W-Wahaha! What kind of weakling doesn’t even realize he’s being ambushed?! You’re not even worthy of being my opponent!”

Belittling his defeated foe somehow made Burbelga feel stronger. There was no one around to see him anyway.

“O-Okay, then.” Burbelga sat down next to the corpse of the Valkaan and grabbed the meat they were grilling. He didn’t care that he was getting blood all over the food as he chowed down.

“Man, that’s good...”

As he satiated his hunger, a revelation came to him.

*I just have to become the scariest guy around. That way I won’t have anything*

*to be afraid of. Everyone'll tremble in fear at my strength, and I won't have to worry about anything!*

And so Burbelga's reign of terror began.

## —Missing Hero—

Airia listened to Parker's report via one of the new mana communicators that Ryucco had developed.

"And...Veight is still missing?" she asked, her voice trembling.

In a grave voice, Parker replied, "I'm sorry, Demon Lord. I was with him, but all I could do was run. If anything, I would have gotten in his way."

Airia took a breath to calm herself and replied, "No, it's thanks to you that Friede and Prince Shumar made it safely back to Mount Kayankaka. It's reassuring to know that you're by their side."

There was a long silence before Parker spoke.

"Thank you... You and Veight really are too kind..."

"We'll need your strength in the coming days, Parker," Airia said gently. She then said in a much sterner voice, "I order you to safely escort Prince Shumar to Encaraga. That's our top priority right now. Regardless of what he says, he cannot join the search for Veight."

Parker nodded, though he knew Airia couldn't see that through the transceiver. "Understood. I'll take Friede and her friends back as well. She'll be sure to listen once she hears that it was a direct order from the Demon Lord."

"Thank you. See, you're more reliable than you think, Parker."

"I-It's nothing. I appreciate the encouragement though. I'm done beating myself up over things I couldn't control," Parker said, his tone turning cheerful.

"Meraldia won't sit idly by while Kuwol is in crisis," Airia replied with a smile. "First, I'll send another forty werewolves to help guard Kuwol and search for Veight. Fahn will be in charge, but since you're the most aware one on the ground, I'll tell her to defer to your advice, Parker."

“Understood. I’ll do everything I can. If we’re up against a Valkaan, humans will just get in the way, so send only werewolves and werecats if possible. I’ll have my skeletons start searching the region as well.”

“Thank you.”

The two of them worked out a plan of action, but before long, the transceiver started running low on battery. It took a lot of mana to converse over long distances like this.

“If anything happens, contact me immediately, even if it doesn’t seem important.”

“Yes, ma’am. Don’t worry, we’ll bring Veight back safe and sound. He’s not the kind of man who’ll die easily, after all.”

“...True enough.”

Airia turned off the transceiver and placed it on the desk. She then flopped down onto her chair, exhausted.

“Veight, Friede...please come back alive,” she muttered softly before falling asleep.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in an unfamiliar room...

“Nngh...” Everything hurt, but my stomach hurt the most. *That Burbelga guy got me good.*

I gingerly touched my stomach. The wound was still there, but the bleeding had stopped. It seemed I’d managed to heal enough before my strengthening magic wore off to avoid death by blood loss. That said, my head was still spinning from the amount of blood I *had* lost. It was too dark to make out what kind of room I was in, and I didn’t have the energy to transform and use my enhanced vision. The last thing I remembered was falling.

“You’re finally awake. Can you understand me?” came a voice spoken in the ancient language.

I reflexively tensed up, but soon realized it wasn’t Burbelga’s voice.

“Relax, this old castle has long been buried under the dunes. You fell here through an opening in the ceiling. Burbelga won’t be able to find you here.

Good grief... That man has gone completely mad.”

I turned my head and saw a thin old man who looked to be in his seventies. He was wrapped in a faded sheet like a monk’s robe, with a weathered iron circlet atop his head. The sheet was so old that it was impossible to discern what color it might have once been.





*Something's off about him.* He resembled an ascetic who didn't care about worldly affairs, but he lacked the sense of detachment I got from devout believers like Yuhit. I could tell he possessed a lot of mana—more than 1,000 kites' worth, most likely. Not only that, but he was using a spell to mask the enormity of his mana reserves. The fact that I could sense more than a 1,000 kites despite that meant he had an astounding amount of mana. *Is he also a Valkaan?*

"Who... Who are you?" I asked warily, and he turned to me.

"My name is Neptotes. I am a master of the Dunne style of Obra swordsmanship from Falkan. I was once a Kubrasa for Yodoth."

I didn't recognize any of those words. I really needed to brush up on my ancient language studies. Master might have known what he was talking about, but my vocabulary was too limited. Either way, this guy clearly wasn't from Kuwol, so I needed to remain cautious around him. Still, it was only proper manners to at least give my name.

"I'm Veight, from Meraldia... If you're the one who saved me...then thank you."

Neptotes didn't react to my name, but he raised an eyebrow upon hearing where I was from.

"Meraldia. I have not heard of such a land. Is it to the north?" he asked.

"Yes." I replied curtly, both due to my limited vocabulary and the fact that I didn't trust him.

He looked me up and down and said, "I watched your fight with Burbelga. This is the first time I've seen someone survive an encounter with him. The reason I didn't kill you when you fell down here was that I believed we could have a proper conversation."

It seemed Neptotes had some history with Burbelga, which only worried me more. His words carried a callous arrogance that made it hard for me to like him.

"You're a mage, aren't you?" Neptotes asked bluntly. "I saw the strengthening

magic you used.”

“I am.”

That seemed to pique his interest.

“Tell me. What is there in the lands of the north?”

Honestly, I didn’t want to say anything, but I owed him for saving my life, so I reluctantly replied, “Villages and cities populated with werecats and humans.”

“Oho. So there are still humans left.”

*Does that mean all the humans this far south died?* If there were Valkaan like Burbelga roaming these wastes, it was easy to guess what had led to humans going extinct out here. The ancient civilization had created Valkaan to serve as tactical nukes, granting them the power to destroy civilizations.

Neptotes stared at me for a few seconds before offering some information in return, “These lands to the south have become a barren desert of sand and rock. No one has lived there for centuries.”

I didn’t smell a lie, so I trusted his words.

Curiosity overcame my caution, and I asked, “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me more about the north. Are there any Valkaan there? Don’t lie to me about this.”

“...No.” I didn’t want to reveal the truth, but a fair exchange of information required a baseline level of trust. It went against my principles to lie. Either I told him the truth, or we didn’t exchange information at all.

“Then is it the werecats who rule over the humans?” Neptotes asked.

“No. If you want to know more, tell me about the south first.”

“Very well. It seems wise to inform you regardless,” Neptotes replied with a grin. “The great nations of Akuneion and Kainetiros to the south were constantly at war in the past.”

*Oh, hell yeah. A history lesson! If this guy’s a living witness to what happened centuries ago, I could learn so much from him! I guess becoming a Valkaan extends your lifespan indefinitely, huh?*

“The Valkaan were created as a superweapon to end these wars once and for all. A single Valkaan could annihilate entire civilizations. But because of their overwhelming power, both nations tried to compete by creating more Valkaan than their rivals rather than fighting directly. Unlike conventional weapons, Valkaan were people with minds of their own, and not all of them were content to stay on the sidelines.”

Indeed. Unlike nukes, Valkaan had autonomy.

“Of course, the researchers who created the Valkaan used spells and artifacts to keep them subservient, but fully controlling someone with that much mana is impossible. Eventually, the Valkaan broke free of their restraints, and both nations perished.”

*Yeah, I could easily see that happening.*

Neptotes let out a long sigh. “You said there were no Valkaan to the north... What happened to them?”

Again, I didn’t want to tell him, but he’d been kind enough to give me a history lesson. Besides, it wasn’t confirmed that we were enemies yet.

“Records say that a human convinced a few Valkaan to join his cause, then he eliminated those who were rampaging.”

“I see,” Neptotes said, chewing over my words. “So what happened to the traitorous Valkaan who sided with that human?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. The records make no mention of their fate.” That was the truth. There were no Valkaan left in Kuwol, but we didn’t know what had happened to the Valkaan who sided with Kuwol’s ancient hero.

“Does this mean Valkaan have been completely eradicated from the north?”

“Not quite. They show up from time to time. I served under one myself.”

Technically, since Friedensrichter had never relieved me of my post, I was still his vice-commander. Neptotes seemed wary of other Valkaan, so I gladly gave up this particular detail. Plus, it was the truth.

“What happened to your master?”

“He died...fighting another Valkaan. Can we talk about something else now?”

Having lived two lifetimes, I'd become a pretty good judge of whether or not someone was trustworthy, and Neptotes definitely wasn't.

He nodded and said, "I have my ways of discerning whether someone is lying, and I can tell that you have not lied to me. Rejoice, for your sincerity has saved your life." Neptotes barked out a laugh.

*So you would've killed me if I lied?* There was no way I was getting along with this guy.

Not even hiding my displeasure, I asked, "So what will you do now that you've learned about the lands to the north?"

His next words proved I had been right to worry.

"Simple. I will conquer them."

"Why?" I prepared to fight, doing my best not to let Neptotes notice the change in my demeanor.

He laughed and replied, "If there are still humans living in the north, I can secure a much better life for myself by conquering them. I have grown quite tired of living in this dusty castle and avoiding that madman Burbelga. Do you know how many centuries it has been since I last tasted wine?"

*Look, I know how you feel, but you did this to yourself. Power alone won't bring you happiness.* I wanted to tell him as much, but I held my tongue. If he wanted to kill me, I wouldn't last five seconds.

Neptotes grinned and said, "At any rate, that's enough talk of the past. Let's discuss the future."

"Sure."

"I saved your life. You owe me for that. I will need a guide and interpreter when I conquer the north. Swear fealty to me. Do so, and I promise you and your retainers will enjoy the same life under me as you do in your country. If you serve me well, I may even make you my right-hand man. Surely this is an appealing proposition?"

*You want me to help you invade Kuwol? Don't be ridiculous. There's no way I would swear fealty to anyone. I decide what to do with my life, not anyone else.*

I used strengthening magic to accelerate the healing of my stomach wound and slowly got to my feet.

“I’m grateful to you for saving me. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to serve you.”

“If you won’t, then I’ll kill you,” Neptotes said simply.

I didn’t know the true extent of his mana since he was hiding it from me, but he was clearly a Valkaan. And if he was a mage on top of that, he could utilize that vast mana pool far better than Burbelga. I didn’t stand a chance. But even so, I would never kneel to this man. I’d spent most of my past life bowing to superiors who didn’t deserve my respect. I’d die before doing that again in this life.

I swung my hand through the air and said, “If you’re a Valkaan, you can easily break your word, and no one could hold you accountable. There’s no point in negotiating with someone like that. I can’t trust you.”

Those who relied solely on power always found themselves alone. Indeed—the stronger they got, the more isolated they became.

Neptotes’s face contorted into an ugly scowl, and I smelled a hint of fear from him. It seemed my refusal was something he actually feared.

“Fool. If you will not follow me, then perish. *Vaz gues erpimanues! Vaz dan!*” He chanted in a language I didn’t recognize, then lightning shot from fingertips. If it hit me, I’d die for sure. But the lightning arced away from me and shot up through the hole in the ceiling.

Neptotes stared at me in shock.

“How?!” he gasped.

“Lightning moving through the air follows the trail of ionized particles. You didn’t know?”

I’d swung my hand through the air and cast a spell to deionize everything my fingers touched, creating a barrier against electricity. I wouldn’t have needed the hand motion, but it was a spell I wasn’t too familiar with, and the gesture helped cast it without an incantation.

Way back when we'd conquered Thuvan, Master had used lightning magic to bring the city down. She'd developed a spell to ionize the air back then, and after further research, we'd created a way to do the reverse. While I hadn't known what Neptotes was chanting, I'd smelled the distinct scent of static in the air around him, so I'd known what kind of attack was coming. As always, my enhanced sense of smell saved my life.

Neptotes stared at me for a few seconds before letting out a long sigh. "I admit you know some interesting spells, but this is a waste of time. If you won't serve me, then death is all that awaits."

"We'll see about that," I said defiantly.

Truthfully, I was in dire straits. I'd used most of my mana fighting Burbelga, and my wounds hadn't fully healed either. Neptotes was absorbing the nearby mana, which proved he was a Valkaan. When he'd been hiding the extent of his mana pool from me, the air was still. But now that he was fighting, his concealment spell was gone, and mana was gathering around him.

"If lightning won't work, then I'll simply burn you with fire." Neptotes unleashed a torrent of flame from his hands. However, fire moved slower than electricity, and I could easily leap out of the way using strengthening magic. Furthermore, magical flames didn't last long, and petered out after a few seconds.

"Grrr..." Neptotes growled with impatience.

Even if I'd been in top shape, I'd only be able to buy seconds against him at best. As I was now, Neptotes could easily kill me. But for some reason, he kept using weak destruction magic instead of a more direct approach. In fact, he'd only used a few kites of mana for both spells. That was still enough to instantly kill a normal person, but any mage worth their salt could deal with attacks like this. *Why's he taking things so slowly?*

After a few seconds, I had a sudden realization. There was still hope for me yet.

"You're afraid of Burbelga finding you, aren't you?"

"I am not *afraid* of him," he grunted. "I am far stronger than that brute. But

fighting him would be a waste of time and energy.”

Neptotes started to back away slowly. He seemed worried I might transform and rush him. *What a cautious guy.* That made it even easier for me to bluff him. Using the last of my strength, I transformed. The pain from my stomach wound hit me tenfold, and I let out a howl.

“Awoooo!”

“Hmm?!” Neptotes hurriedly cast another spell. I didn’t recognize it, but it appeared to be some sort of defensive spell. I wasn’t trying to attack him in the first place though.

“Awooooooo!” I let out another howl—one loud enough to shake the castle’s walls. If Burbelga was close enough to hear it, he’d definitely be coming straight here.

Neptotes turned pale and shouted, “S-Stop! That fool will hear you!”

*Yeah? That’s what I want,* I thought before letting out another howl.  
“AWOOOOOOO!”

Neptotes jumped out of the room and started running. From the looks of it, he couldn’t use teleportation magic. This old abandoned castle had a labyrinthine layout, and I wasn’t sure where exactly he’d gone. I could use my sense of smell to track him down, but right now, I wanted to put more distance between us because there was no chance Burbelga had heard me. I’d cast a sound-dampening spell on the room that absorbed all sound waves heading out. I had absolutely no desire to get caught up in a brawl between two Valkaan.

“Owww...” I’d forced a transformation despite my injuries, and the pain was almost enough to knock me out. But if I lost consciousness here, Neptotes would kill me for sure when he returned.

I canceled my transformation and left the room through a different exit than Neptotes’s. I fumbled my way through the dark hallways, searching for somewhere safe. Unfortunately, Neptotes was in the castle, and Burbelga was up on the surface. There was nowhere I’d be safe with two Valkaan hunting me. Dejected, I leaned against the wall. Even taking another step was a gargantuan



effort. My wounds ached, my throat was parched, and I was all out of mana.

“I...might be done for...” I muttered.

I’d already died once, and I’d been prepared to die here the moment I ran off to buy time. But just as I was about to give up, Airia and Friede’s faces flashed through my mind. If I died, my family would be devastated. Likewise, I hated the thought of never seeing them again. I couldn’t afford to die just yet.

“Dammit...” Still leaning against the wall, I took a step forward. Then another. And another. And another.

After walking for what felt like an eternity, I found myself in front of a spiral staircase leading downwards. I started walking down, my whole body so numb I couldn’t tell if I was actually moving or not. To make matters worse, I was beginning to hallucinate from exhaustion.

“You finally made it. Look at how beat up you are!”

*Huh? Who’s that? They sound familiar. And reliable.*

“Of course I sound familiar, you dolt.”

*They say the bonds you forge with those you serve are stronger than anything. I guess that’s why I’m seeing you now, huh?*

“I wouldn’t say our relationship was really that of master and servant.”

*Is it really you, F—*

Before the nation of Kuwol was founded, the area around the Mejire River was ruled by Valkaan. Even if humans managed to create small nations of their own, Valkaan would immediately subjugate them. After this, the nations would quickly collapse under their despotic rule. Though Valkaan looked like humans, they were walking natural disasters. No one could live safely under the thumb of someone who could obliterate entire cities on a whim. It was in these turbulent times that a certain man was born.

*I died in yet another war and was once again granted life. It seems I’ve yet to fully atone for the carnage I wrought in my past. But how many more lives will I have to live before the Buddha forgives me?* the man thought, gently stroking

his cheek as a fierce wind blew past him.

It was refreshing to have a scaleless human body again, but at the same time, it reminded him of the fragility of humans.

The man had been born a Valkaan and had been a peerless martial artist since his youth. At the tender age of eight, he had defeated grown adults in fencing tournaments. But eventually, rumors started circulating that he might be a Valkaan, so he was forced to leave his home village. No one wanted a Valkaan in their vicinity, after all.

Later, the man heard that his hometown had been destroyed by another Valkaan. *Those without power struggle to survive, but those who have nothing but power lead a solitary existence. My past life was far better than this one.* These days, the man lived alone and survived by hunting in the forest. It wasn't too different from his past life as a dragonkin, but he had no family or friends here. People feared him because he was a Valkaan, and no one dared approach him.

*This must be karma for indulging my strength so irresponsibly in my last life. The Buddha is trying to tell me I need to mature further before I'm free from the cycle.* As the man was musing on his many lives, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye.

"Hmph!" Instead of drawing the sword at his waist, the man picked up a pebble and threw it where he'd seen movement. However, a pebble thrown by a Valkaan was more powerful than a bullet fired from a rifle.

The pebble shot through the undergrowth and hit the man's target a few dozen meters away. The target happened to be a deer, which dropped to the ground with a pained bleat. The man walked over to the deer and pressed his hands together to say a silent prayer for the creature.

"Forgive me, but I must eat." He unsheathed his dagger and cut the deer's throat to drain it of blood. Then, without turning around, he said, "I know you're there. If you're simply hungry and want food, I will gladly share this deer with you."

A young man slowly walked out of the bushes.

“N-No thank you, sir. But, um, are you the Valkaan everyone’s been talking about?”

“Hahaha. I’ve been living like a hermit in these woods, so I’m afraid I don’t know the current gossip. But yes, I have been called a Valkaan before.”

“Thank goodness you’re not as bloodthirsty as the rumors say.” The young man gave the Valkaan a relieved smile. “I’m Shumar.”

“Well met, Shumar. I’m...” The man trailed off. *Who am I, really?*

Shumar gave the man a worried look and asked, “Is something wrong?”

“Ah, no I’m fine. You can call me...Richter.”

“Lord Richter?”

“Just Richter will do. I’m just an ordinary old man after all,” Richter replied with a sad smile.

*For a man like me who has made so many mistakes in the past...this is the only name I can give.*

Richter shook his head, then brightened up and asked Shumar, “I don’t know what business you have with me, but how about we eat first? You appear to be quite hungry, Shumar.”

“Wha?!” Shumar looked at Richter with surprise, but then his stomach growled, and he looked away bashfully. “I’m sorry, I ate all the food I brought with me.”

“Hahaha! Fear not, the deer will be grilled soon,” Richter said, starting a small campfire.

Between bites of salted deer meat that Richter had grilled, Shumar explained his situation. “I’m a farmer who lives in a village near Mount Kayankaka.”

“I didn’t know people lived there.”

“My tribe arrived there around a decade ago and built a village at the foothills of the mountain. The village we used to live in was destroyed in a battle between two Valkaan,” Shumar said sadly. He then explained that things had

finally settled down in their village enough for people to live stable lives.

Richter nodded and said, “The soil here is fertile, but it still takes a lot of effort to grow meji in places like this. It must have taken many years to get the soil conditions right.”

“I’m impressed you know that. I’m sorry if this is rude, but I thought Valkaan didn’t bother with peasant work like farming.”

Richter offered Shumar another skewer of deer meat, then said with a smile, “Back when I was a child, I helped my parents on their rice farm.”

“What’s rice?”

“You haven’t heard of it? It’s a white grain you grow in flooded paddies.”

“I’m afraid I’ve never heard of such a crop.” Shumar gave Richter an apologetic look.

“No need to apologize,” he replied, shaking his head. “I just thought I might be able to eat it again, but...”

*No rice here, huh? What a shame. It’s the perfect climate for growing rice too.* Unlike Meraldia, where he’d been in his past life, this region was hot and humid—ideal conditions for rice cultivation. The meji favored here instead was not to Richter’s tastes at all. It reminded him of the rations he’d eaten during the war in his first life.

“I imagine you didn’t come to a Valkaan for farming advice though. Is there some problem your village is facing that requires my might?” Shumar nodded.

“It’s as you say, Richter. A Valkaan named Agar has come to our village. He said if we didn’t obey him, he’d kill us and raze the village, so we had no choice but to become his slaves. But the way he treats us is awful. I ran when he wasn’t looking and came to find you.”

“That was rather reckless, don’t you think? He would have killed you if he’d spotted you.”

Shumar puffed his chest out proudly. “I’m not going to be anyone’s slave! I decide what to do with my life, not anyone else! And I’d heard there was another Valkaan living nearby, so I thought maybe I’d ask them for help.”

“What you did was foolhardy yet courageous. A world where courage isn’t rewarded is not one worth living in,” Richter said with a smile. “I don’t know for sure if I can defeat this Agar. If I lose, both you and I will be killed, Shumar. In fact, your entire village may be massacred. Do you still wish to be freed from tyranny after learning what defeat will mean for you and your family?”

“Yes,” Shumar said without hesitation. “My tribe came here to escape oppression from Valkaan. We’re tired of being subjugated by those barbarians.”

“Very well. Then your lives are in my hands, I suppose.” Richter finished eating and got to his feet. There was nothing in this for him. Helping Shumar put him at risk with no return.

*Even if I defeat that other Valkaan, I’m still a Valkaan myself. Shumar’s tribe will still drive me away out of fear.* But even so, Richter didn’t regret agreeing to help. The fact that evil was running rampant was reason enough for him to step in. If there was no justice in this world, then he would be that justice. Besides, he’d come to like young Shumar in the brief time they’d spent together.

“Thank you, Shumar.”

“Huh? What for? Just so you know, the only thing we can give you in return is a bit of meji, okay?!” Shumar said hurriedly, and Richter burst into laughter.

“Don’t worry, I need no reward. If anything, you’ve already given me all the reward I could ask for.”

“Um, what do you mean by that?”

“I’m just reflecting on my past regrets, that’s all. When the strong abuse their power, they can only be stopped by someone just as strong. This time, I’ll be the one to stop them.” Richter patted the sword at his waist and smiled. “All right, Shumar, let’s go enact some justice.”

“Okay!” Shumar said with a nod.

I couldn’t tell if the vision I was seeing was a dream, an illusion someone was showing me, or a flashback. I could, however, discern that it was slowly receding into the distance. *Wait. Don’t go.* Still leaning against the wall, I hobbled forward to chase after the vision.

A giant of a man covered in tattoos faced off against Richter.

“Who’re you? A Valkaan?”

“I have been called that before. But my name is Richter. I’ve come to challenge you to a duel.” Richter drew the curved sword at his waist and pointed it at the man.

“Draw your blade. If you do not wish to fight, then leave this village and never return. I promise to spare your life if you retreat.”

“Hah! You sure know how to bark! But can you bite?!” Cackling, the man jumped higher than should have been possible for a regular human. His movements were so fast it was impossible to track him with the naked eye. “Diiie!”

Richter casually dodged out of the way, not even bothering to block the man’s attack.

“A chain user?” he asked calmly.

“You can’t beat my chains with that tiny sword of yours. But it’s too late to back out now, fool!” Agar pulled back his weighted chains and smirked. “What good is one sword against chains that can wrap around anything?! Take this!”

Still unperturbed, Richter dashed forward. Agar stared at him in shock.

“What?!”

*Chains need centrifugal force to function, so they’re stronger at longer ranges. But if I can close in...* Richter drew his sword back in preparation for a thrust, and Agar smirked again.

“You fell for it, idiot!” Agar threw away his chains and moved to grapple Richter. “Those chains aren’t my only weapon! I’ve got the strength of a hundred men too!”

*Any self-respecting chain user would have countermeasures for dealing with opponents at close range. And, of course, grappling is the most natural choice.* Richter also threw away his sword and grabbed Agar’s arms. He then swept Agar’s legs out from under him and pinned him to the ground.

“Argh!”

Normally, Agar would have been able to throw Richter off using his superhuman strength, but Richter was also a Valkaan. Furthermore, Richter was the more skilled wrestler, so he could keep Agar from bringing his full strength to bear. Agar's frantic struggle accomplished little more than gouging out the ground around him.

As Richter continued applying pressure, Agar's bones began to creak.

"S-Stop! Wait!" Agar pleaded.

"Valkaan have no higher power holding them in check, so their words cannot be trusted. I'm afraid I cannot accept your surrender. This is your punishment for walking the path of carnage."

There was an ominous crack as Richter snapped Agar's neck.

*Though people call us Valkaan—War Gods—we are not true gods. We can be killed.* Richter got back to his feet, and Shumar slowly walked up to him.

"Um, is it really over?"

Richter picked up his sword and resheathed it, then turned to Agar's corpse and brought his hands together in prayer. "Forgive me, Agar. I did not have the strength to go easy on you."

"Y-You're really strong, Richter," Shumar said in awe.

"No..." Richter shook his head. "Agar was just weak. He clearly wasn't used to fighting other Valkaan. He must have been one of the weaker ones who was driven away from the river and ended up settling here."

"I didn't know some Valkaan were weaker than others."

"There's a hierarchy even among us, Shumar," Richter said with a sad smile, turning away from him. "The threat to your village has passed. All that's left is for me to take my leave. If you need anything, you know where to find me."

"P-Please, wait! We haven't even given you anything in return!"

Richter started walking off, ignoring Shumar's pleas.

"To the people of this village, I'm no different from Agar. Just another Valkaan," he cautioned. "Everyone will feel safer with me gone."



“Hold it right there! Why are you in such a hurry to leave?! Hey, everyone! Hurry up! We gotta hold a feast for Richter!” Shumar ran over, grabbed Richter by the sleeve, and tried to pull him back.

Sighing, Richter stopped.

“Let go.”

“Never! It goes against my principles to leave a debt unpaid!”

“But look at how scared the rest of the villagers are.” Richter pointed to the crowd staring at him from a safe distance. They were hiding in the shadows of nearby buildings, half grateful, half terrified that Richter would just replace Agar. It was clear he wasn’t welcome here.

Shumar looked sadly over at them. “Come on, guys, he saved our village! You don’t have to be scared of him!”

“It’s fine, Shumar. If a tiger kills another tiger, it doesn’t change the fact that there’s a tiger prowling around. It’s not their fault they’re afraid.” Richter bowed politely to the villagers. “I’m sorry I caused such a ruckus. But I have no intention of disturbing the peace of this village. Farewell.”

“Waaait! I’m not letting go, no matter what! I refuse to become a leech who doesn’t repay their debts!”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Shumar, but it’s fine. Really.” Richter resumed walking. However, Shumar refused to let go and let himself be dragged along.

“Please, let go.”

“Never! Not even if it kills me!”

“Good grief.”

Richter came to a halt once they were far enough away from the village. Shumar was covered in mud and scrapes, but his grip on Richter’s sleeve was as tight as ever.

“This is about my principles, Richter. No matter how you feel, I won’t leave. Not until I’ve properly thanked you for saving my village. If you believe you can’t stay there, then I’ll leave too.”

“I understand how you feel, but...” Sighing, Richter looked into Shumar’s eyes. *His appearance and personality are totally different, but he reminds me of a certain vice-commander I once had.*

Veight’s carefree smile flashed through Richter’s mind. Shaking away that nostalgic image, Richter looked down at Shumar again.

*If he were here, he wouldn’t tell Shumar to leave. And, well, I wouldn’t want to disappoint him.* Richter let out a small laugh.

“Hey, if you’re laughing, that means you’re willing to let me come with you, right?” Shumar asked.

“Fine, fine. It’d be dangerous to leave you out here alone anyway. You’d probably stalk the mountainside for days looking for me.”

“How’d you know?”

“I once had a friend much like you, and he would have done the same.” Smiling, Richter picked Shumar up with one hand.

“Whoa?!”

He set Shumar down on his feet and wiped the mud off his face.

“You just never stop being reckless, huh?”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Who can say?” Richter looked off into the distance. “I suppose I can’t just turn a blind eye to the Valkaan’s villainy. I’m thinking of traveling the land and saving as many villages as I can. It’ll be a dangerous journey, but will you come with me?”

“You bet.” Shumar nodded, a determined look on his face.

“Then let us journey to the ends of the world together!”

“Okay!” And so, the two men’s journey to save Kuwol began.



I crawled along the dark corridor, desperately chasing after the retreating vision. I wanted to see more of the man who called himself Richter and the boy who shared Prince Shumar's name. *Wasn't Shumar the name of the hero who founded Kuwol?* Legend claimed he'd defeated the Valkaan Jakan despite being an ordinary human.

There was one other thing nagging at me. In the vision, Richter had claimed that the word "richter" meant "just an ordinary person," but in the ancient tongue, the phrase for that was *Cormo marun* or *Noor marun*. In Kuwolese, it was *dashi messa*. Even in Meraldian or Rolmundian, it wasn't "richter." *The only language where richter means person is...*

I chased after the vision with renewed determination, a tantalizing possibility coming to mind.

Richter and Shumar's journey was an eventful one.

"Richteeeeeer!"

"Shumar, don't move!"

Richter swung his sword in a wide arc, cutting through a circle of people. The duo was beset not by Valkaan but by regular bandits. Valkaan weren't the only dangers on the road.

"I am Richter the Valkaan! Will you still fight me knowing you face a god of war?!" Richter shouted.

"Liar! No Valkaan would ever protect a regular human! Die!!!"

One of the bandits charged at Richter, who cleaved the bandit in half with a single stroke of his sword. Half a dozen corpses lined the ground around them—he'd already slain half of the attacking group.

"D-Damn it!"

"Maybe he really is a Valkaan?!"

As the remaining bandits began to lose their nerve, Richter flicked the blood and gore off his sword and declared, "Only those prepared to be killed have the right to kill others."

That was enough to shatter what remained of the bandits' fighting spirit.

"Shit! We can't beat this guy!"

"R-Run!" The bandits turned and fled, trampling over the corpses of their slain allies. Once they were out of sight, Richter sheathed his sword with a sigh.

"What's the point of trying to save human society when humans are like this?"

Shumar ran up to him and tugged on his shirt. "You can't just let them go, Richter! If we let them live, they'll attack other travelers and kill even more people! Besides..."

"Besides, what?"

The boy looked up at Richter and said, "It hurts me to see you look so pained about killing these men! They're bandits who deserve nothing less, so you don't need to feel bad about it!"

"I guess that's true." Richter gave Shumar a faint smile and patted him on the shoulder. "I appreciate your unwavering support, my friend. So long as I have you by my side, I will never break."

"You don't have to thank me. You've already shown me so much kindness. I just wish you'd be kinder to yourself."

"Fine, fine."

*They look like they're really enjoying themselves...* I wanted to watch their journey to the end, so I mustered what little strength I had left and kept crawling.

Richter had fought many other Valkaan, and those battles always changed the landscape. Conflicts between Valkaan caused more damage than a herd of rampaging elephants. However, using a combination of courage and martial skill to dispose of his foes, Richter did his best to limit the destruction his battles caused. Shumar really served as a pillar of support for Richter. Because he had someone to protect, Richter fought twice as hard. Just as Barnack had become an unstoppable force when protecting Ryuunie, and I'd torn the slavers apart when coming to young Friede's defense, Richter fought with the ferocity of a

demon when Shumar was in danger.

Not all Valkaan proved to be Richter and Shumar's enemies. Some shared Richter's ideals, and a few were moved by his determination after crossing swords with him. These Valkaan became Richter and Shumar's companions, and together they began recruiting regular humans to their cause. It wasn't all that different from when Friedensrichter and Master Gomoviroa had started the Demon Army together.

By the time I joined them, they had already formed a sizable guerrilla army. I remember Friedensrichter telling me that when he started the Demon Army with Master, neither expected it to grow so large. That was, in fact, why I joined. There was no distinction between vice-commanders and vice-captains—they were simply called vice-commanders—and soldiers fell under the same leadership structure as military engineers and bureaucratic officials. Of course, part of the reason the organization's structure had been kept simple was because demons weren't suited to operating within complex social systems, so I couldn't blame that on Friedensrichter.

Regardless, once Richter and Shumar had gathered enough comrades, they embarked on their ultimate quest to free the Mejire River from the clutches of the Valkaan.

"Jakarn, you've lost! Surrender, and I'll spare your life!" Shumar shouted, standing imposingly before the Valkaan Jakarn. Over the years, Shumar had grown into a rugged, well-built young man.

Though Jakarn was covered in blood and could barely stand, he scoffed at Shumar. "I refuse! I would rather die than bend the knee to a lowly human like you!"

Numerous Valkaan surrounded Jakarn, including Richter. They were all Shumar's allies and had swords and spears pointed menacingly at Jakarn.

"Let's grant his wish, Shumar! He clearly has no desire to repent—sparing him would be a mistake!" Richter shouted.

"But, Richter..." Shumar frowned. "We always thought the Valkaan were monsters beyond our comprehension, but look at how many turned out to be good people. Jakarn, it's not too late to change your ways. Won't you work with

us to build a better future?”

Jakarn silently shook his head. He had nothing more to say.

Shumar’s frown deepened. “Alas... Jakarn, I respect the life you chose, but your path has destroyed countless others. If we let you live, it will destroy even more. I’m afraid you must die.”

Jakarn looked into Shumar’s eyes. At Shumar’s signal, Richter stepped forward and raised his blade. Though Jakarn was on the verge of death, he was still a Valkaan. A regular human’s strength wouldn’t be enough to finish him off. Only another Valkaan could deliver the final blow.

In a quiet voice, Richter said, “Unlike the violent Valkaan we’ve slain on this journey, you are a man who lived with honor. Our names may be forgotten, but I promise the name of Jakarn will live on in history as the last *true* Valkaan.”

Surprised, Jakarn turned to Richter. After a few seconds, he smiled slightly and closed his eyes.

“That would be nice...” he said softly.

“I’ll make this quick.” With a single stroke, Richter severed Jakarn’s head. He then grasped Jakarn’s back and slowly lowered the body to the ground. “May you find peace in the next life,” he whispered.

Shumar approached him. With a somber tone, he said, “It’s over, isn’t it?”

“It is. There are no hostile Valkaan left along the Mejire.”

The only remaining Valkaan were those who agreed with Shumar and Richter’s ideals. They didn’t want to fight or rule over others. Most of them just wanted to return to being human.

One of those Valkaan, a young man covered in wounds, smiled and said, “Now we just need to find empty artifacts to pour all our mana into, then we can go back to being human. We’re counting on you for that.” He turned to Richter, and the other Valkaan nodded in agreement.

“We used all the ones we found at the ruins to seal away our enemies’ mana, so I’ll have to search for more, but I promise I’ll find enough for everyone,” Richter said.



“I’ll finally be able to return to my old life...”

“I’m so tired of breaking walls when I accidentally bump into them. I can’t even fix what I break because just a touch of extra force causes even more damage.”

“We’re not all as clumsy as you!”

As the other Valkaan celebrated their victory, Richter and Shumar turned to each other.

“What will you do now that we’ve finally achieved peace, Shumar?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but since I brought all these people together, I think it’s my responsibility to look after them. Besides, we’ve finally all become friends; it would be a shame if everyone got split up,” Shumar said a little bashfully, and Richter nodded.

“In that case, how about I serve as your vice-commander? I can be the one you push all the odd jobs onto.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one doing odd jobs for you?!”

“I’ve always wanted to see what it was like serving under someone else. The good friend I told you about before really enjoyed it. It seems like it would be a fun life,” Richter said with a smile.

*Okay. The guy who called himself Richter has got to be Friedensrichter. But why does everyone want to be a vice-commander? It’s the most mundane job in the world. It’s fine for boring people like me, but guys like you need to be leaders, Friedensrichter.* Seeing that exchange gave me a second wind, and I pushed myself to my feet and started walking again. There was no way I was going to stop before I saw the end of this saga.

“I can’t believe you wouldn’t let me be your vice-commander...” Richter sighed in the now-restored Jakarn Castle.

Shumar, who was wearing a ceremonial robe, smiled awkwardly and said, “I couldn’t do that to you, Richter. Sorry, *Lord* Richter. There are still many Valkaan to the south. I need a former Valkaan like you to take control of this region and protect our southern border.”

“If that is what my king commands, then I simply must obey,” Richter joked. “All of the magical artifacts are hidden in the mountain cave behind this castle, I suppose. Speaking of which, who do you plan to assign to guard them?”

“I was planning on asking the werecats. There aren’t many of them, but they’re much stronger than humans.”

Richter closed his eyes and said, “They’re a good choice. Valkaan are a threat, but so are humans who desire to become Valkaan. In that sense, humans are who we need to be wary of.”

“Exactly. But if there ever comes a time you need those artifacts for whatever reason, feel free to take them out.”

“Understood. If an emergency arises, I’ll distribute them to our ex-Valkaan comrades,” Richter said with a nod. “By the way, when will I get to stop being a Valkaan?”

“There’s still the threat of whatever Valkaan live in the south, and disputes with the nomad tribes have been on the rise, so I’d like you to at least wait until things settle down internally. In five...no, seven years, I think you’ll be able to retire. It’s not an order but a request. Please stay a Valkaan until then.”

“Well, I certainly can’t turn down a request from a friend.” Richter patted Shumar on the back. “And since we’re friends, you’ll surely join me for dinner tonight, right? My wife’s cooked up something special today, and my daughters have been dying to meet Kuwol’s legendary king.”

“You better not have told them to call me ‘Your Majesty.’ I’d much rather be just ‘Uncle Shumar.’”

“Hahaha!”

Unfortunately for Richter, it was a full thirty years before he could give up being a Valkaan.

“Granny Ailya, what’s this place?” a young girl asked, looking up at an old woman.

The old woman, Ailya, smiled and replied, “This is your great-grandpa’s grave. Would you like to say hi to him?”

“Okay. What kind of person was my great-grandpa?”

Ailya looked off into the distance, recalling old memories. “He was a strong, kind, intelligent, and hardworking man.”

“Um, so he was like grandpa?”

“Hehe, you could say that. Perhaps I fell in love with your grandpa because he was just like my father.”

Ailya knelt before the grave and laid a hand on the scabbard of the sword enshrined atop it.

“Father... Your grandson Aindow has decided to cross the sea and search for the lands that exist to the north. We’ve heard rumors there’s an entire continent up there, and he’s eager to explore it. Haha, he’s just like you in that regard, always seeking adventure.” Ailya gently pushed the young girl’s back. “Why don’t you say something to your great-grandpa too? Pray for safe passage for your father while you’re at it.”

“Okaaay. Um, please look after dad, Great-Grandpa. Oh, and I hope I get to go north someday too!” The girl looked up, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

The vision ended, and I looked around in a daze. I was in a dark, quiet room. I couldn’t hear any movement except my own, so hopefully, I was alone. While the vision could have just been a hallucination, I felt it was something more.

For one thing, Ailya was a common name in Kuwol, but in Meraldia’s dialect, it became Airia. Aindow also became Aindorf. Airia Aindorf was my wife’s name, and it didn’t feel like a coincidence that Ailya and Aindow had appeared in this vision. The Aindorf family traced its roots back to Kuwol’s nobility. In Kuwol people named themselves as “so-and-so’s son,” thus it would’ve made sense for someone calling themselves “Something-something, son of Aindow” to eventually simplify it to just “Aindorf” as their family name. As impossible as it was to believe, I might have just seen a vision of the origins of the Aindorf family.

“Where...am I...?”

The room I was in was underground, with no windows or skylights. Despite that, it was very faintly lit, allowing me to barely make out my surroundings. It

felt strangely peaceful here, and the mana in the room wasn't being sucked away like it was in the rest of the castle. As I searched for the source of the glow, I found a small stone altar. An old sword was enshrined on the altar, but this wasn't just any sword—it was a Japanese katana. While the hilt had Kuwolese embroidery, it was the exact shape and length of a standard katana.

“Don't tell me...”

Somewhat skeptically, I reached out to touch the sword. As my fingers made contact with the scabbard, I sensed an enormous amount of mana. More than 10,000 kites, easily. *Is this another artifact with the power to turn someone into a Valkaan?* Careful not to let any mana leak out, I slowly drew the blade from its sheath.



“Whoa?!”

Japanese kanji had been carved into the blade’s metal—just the two characters for “peace.” Peace was such a commonplace word that it had been used to death. Everyone claimed we should strive for peace and that peace was the way. The only notable thing about it was that the words had been carved into a tool whose sole purpose was violence.

However, as someone who’d dedicated my life to creating a peaceful world, I understood the inherent contradiction Friedensrichter must have grappled with during his life. He also wanted peace, but to achieve it, he had to become a warlord. Furthermore, he had reincarnated from a war-torn Japan.

“So this is where you ended up, huh?” I resheathed the blade and hugged it close. Thoughts and memories flooded my mind, and I was overcome with tears.

Friedensrichter had been a fan of classic Chinese poetry and was fluent in English, German, and Japanese. There must have been plenty of profound phrases he could have carved into his blade. At the very least, he’d known far more fancy sayings than I had.

But I knew why he’d chosen the word peace instead. That, above all, was what he wished for during his life. To him, that one word—peace—held more meaning and weight than all the poems and philosophies in the world. And no matter how many times he reincarnated, he always gravitated towards that straightforward, awkward way of life.

“You never change, do you?” I murmured. *No wonder Master hadn’t been able to find his soul; he’d been reincarnated into the past.*

When the people of Wa tried to summon someone from another world using the Great Torii of the Divine, they also sent someone back into Rolmund’s distant past. That person became the legendary Hero, Draulight. These instances proved that reincarnation didn’t just straddle worlds, but time as well.

“I finally found clues to where you ended up, only to learn you’re gone again...” I sighed.

*Can’t you just wait for me for once? You could have stayed immortal until the*

*present, and then we could have met again. Why'd you seal away your mana and return to being human?* Of course, I knew why he'd done it. I understood him too well not to.

"But thank you...for becoming Airia's ancestor..."

Richter's blade felt warm and reassuring, and I could feel it filling me with mana, allowing me to cast strengthening magic to heal my wounds.

While I would have preferred actually seeing Friedensrichter again, learning how his next life had unfolded brought me a sense of closure. I'd finally closed the gaping hole in my heart created the day he died.

As relief and exhaustion washed over me, my eyelids started to close, and I fell asleep.

## **—The Plan to Rescue the Black Werewolf King—**

I did as dad asked and retreated back to Mount Kayankaka with everyone.

With a wary eye on the path behind us, I said to Prince Shumar, "Just leave the Valkaan to dad! He's the legendary Black Werewolf King who defeated the Hero Arshes, remember?!"

"I understand that, but it's hard to remain calm when Professor Veight might be in danger because he agreed to help Kuwol with an internal problem. It's galling that all I can do is run away." Shumar gritted his teeth.

"Everyone has their own role to play." I smiled at him to ease his worries. "And right now, your job is to escape safely, Shumar."

"Yeah, I guess that's true. Thank you, Friede. You always know the right thing to say."

Tiriya grabbed Shumar by the shoulder and said, "Your Highness, please watch your step. If you trip and make a fool of yourself, everyone will become even more worried. Since you can't help him, the least you can do is act normal to avoid lowering everyone's morale."

"Good point." Shumar forced a smile, doing his best to look confident. "Look, everyone, the mountain's in sight! We're almost to the werecat village, where



we'll be safe! Onward!"

Shumar purposely said "onward" even though they were retreating, trying to raise everyone's spirits. *Nice going, Shumar.* Once everyone safely reached the foot of Mount Kayankaka, I stealthily broke away from the group. I had to go back to save Dad. But before I could start running, Iori called out to me.

"Friede, what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going back to save my dad." Upon hearing that, Yuhette and Shirin turned around.

"Don't you realize how dangerous that is?" Yuhette insisted.

"Friede, have you forgotten what uncle ordered you to do?" Shirin asked, clearly worried.

I shook my head. "Dad can't beat a Valkaan on his own. He probably can't even run away safely."

"Surely he'd at least be able to run away? He managed to fight that dragon nonstop for days," Joshua said nonchalantly.

Being the only mage in our group, I understood how much mana Valkaan had compared to regular people.

Trying to keep things simple, I explained, "The dragon from before hadn't become a Valkaan, that's why. A *real* Valkaan could kill that dragon in one hit."

"Hold on a second, Friede. Didn't uncle struggle to even scratch the dragon by himself?" Shirin asked, surprised.

"That's right," I said with a nod. "Valkaan are so strong that only another Valkaan stands a chance against them. Dad's probably the strongest among everyone we know, but since he's not a Valkaan, he doesn't stand a chance."

Everyone fell silent upon hearing that.

"Also, werewolves normally fight in packs. They're strongest when they have allies to coordinate with. That's why dad mandated that werewolves always work together in units of four, and if the group ever splits, they should always remain in pairs."

With a group of four, even if one member got injured, another could cover them while the remaining two took down any enemies. Thanks to dad's tactics, none of the werewolves in the werewolf squad died when the Demon Army first invaded Meraldia.

Also, it was a secret from everyone else, but I knew dad had been human in a past life. Humans were weak on their own and needed to band together to accomplish anything. However, humans who became Valkaan were exceptions.

"Someone else needs to help him, or he won't come back alive. I'm half-werewolf and a mage, and I know how he usually fights, so I'm the best choice."

"You sound just like uncle, you know that?" Shirin said with a sigh. He then looked over at everyone else. "I've known her long enough to understand we won't be able to stop her. So what do you guys want to do?"

"We'd just get in her way, unfortunately..." Yuhette said, frowning. But after a few seconds, she smiled and exchanged looks with everyone else.

"If we can't stop her, then we just gotta let her go, right?" Joshua sighed.

"In which case, our new job is to protect Prince Shumar," Shirin said with a nod. "I'd like to go with you, Friede, but I'm not sure I could avoid even a single attack from a Valkaan."

"Same. I'm an expert in covert operations, but that probably won't mean anything to a Valkaan," Iori said, biting her lip in frustration.

Everyone understood their limits well. I knew mine too, but I still had to go. If I didn't, Dad would die for sure, and I couldn't let that happen. *It's possible we'll both die if I go, but... No, with my strengthening magic, I'm sure we'll be able to get out okay. Right?*

"I need to stay out of the Valkaan's sight, so it'll be best if I go alone. You guys make sure Shumar makes it safely back to Encaraga."

As I turned to run back into the forest, I came face-to-face with Monza, who was hanging upside down from a nearby tree.

"Ahaha, I see someone's being a bad girl."

"Whoa?!" I gasped.

*I didn't sense her at all! She's even better at stealth than—oh wait, I get it.*

"Monza."

"Yeees?"

"I'm going to save dad. Will you come with me?"

"Sure."

That went even easier than I expected.

"I thought you were going to stop me," I replied.

"Well, I don't want the boss—I mean, Veight—to die either. We've been friends since we were kids, you know?" Monza said with a grin.

"Thank you, Monza."

"Don't mention it. Fahn gave me permission to go with you anyway."

*So she knew from the start I was gonna go. The veterans from the werewolf squad sure are something else...* Monza dropped down from the branch she was hanging from and landed feetfirst without a sound.

"Me, Fahn, and Jerrick all love Veight to death. So there's no way we're letting some Valkaan kill him. Let's go."

"O-Okay!"

Monza transformed and dashed off into the forest. She moved so fast that she was almost out of sight just as I got my stride.

"Make sure you keep up!" she shouted from afar.

"H-Hey! Slow down a bit, please!" I used strengthening magic on my legs and chased after Monza.

The two of us ran for a while, keeping our eyes and ears peeled.

"What's the plan, Monza?"

"I doubt this Valkaan's hiding. He's definitely confident in his own strength, so that he wouldn't bother to hide."

"Oh, okay."

That made sense, but for some reason, I felt like that wasn't quite right. *What if a Valkaan met another Valkaan? If he was scared of him, he'd try to hide, right?* Although, there weren't any other Valkaan around, so that was an unlikely issue.

As Monza ran, she asked, "Do you sense anything off about the mana here?"

"Not as far as I can tell. The Valkaan must not have come this far in yet."

Monza cocked her head to one side as she ran and asked, "I get that Valkaan have tons of mana, but what does that have to do with the mana out here in nature? I remember Veight said something about it getting drained, but shouldn't there be *more* mana if someone with a lot of mana is around?"

"Well..." I decided to skip the complicated technical explanation and keep things simple. "Valkaan are like walking mana whirlpools. They have hundreds of thousands of kites of mana, and they suck in nearby mana in a swirling vortex."

Dad had once said, "They're like black holes, though I guess you don't know what black holes are either, huh?" Apparently, a similar phenomenon occurred way out in space, far above the sky. Dad had at least explained that space was this vast expanse where all the stars were far, far away from our world. But it would take too long to explain all of that to Monza.

"Anyway, if mages like us sense mana flowing in a whirlpool, it's because a Valkaan is sucking it all up. It's also why we have a hard time fighting them; we can't use any of the mana that would normally be out and about in nature."

"Does that mean Veight would have a hard time fighting a Valkaan too?"

"Yeah, dad's no exception." Indeed, we mages couldn't bring all of our magical power to bear against Valkaan. When dad beat Arshes, he told me he'd used his fangs to deal the finishing blow, not magic. "But even if using magic wasn't an issue, Valkaan seemingly have infinite amounts of mana, so our magic can barely scratch them."

"That's not good. Without magic, Veight's weaker than Vodd or the Garneys. Though he can beat me or Jerrick in a wrestling match."

*Yeah, that makes sense.* Dad spent some time learning martial arts, but he

was really more of a scholar than a fighter—just like me. Without magic, I was pretty weak.

“It’ll be hard to run away if the Valkaan spots us, Monza. So we have to advance carefully.”

“Yeah. Veight’s pretty good at hiding. If he got away, the Valkaan won’t be able to find him, so we should look in the places the Valkaan isn’t.”

Monza had an enormous amount of faith in dad. Everyone from the werewolf squad did.

She grinned at me and said, “I’ll keep my eyes, ears, and nose peeled, so I’m counting on you to handle everything that has to do with magic, Friede.”

“Sure thing.”

There was a bit of pressure knowing the werewolf squad’s greatest scout was relying on me. Apparently, Monza was so adept at hiding and tracking that she’d developed the entire stealth and scouting curriculum young werewolves learned all by herself. Joshua was taking lessons from her as well. *I wonder if she’s just saying that because I’m the Black Werewolf King’s daughter, or if she’s really counting on me.*

Monza seemed to notice my pensive expression and said, “I’m not counting on you because your dad’s not here, Friede. I’m counting on you because I know you can do this. You don’t have to compare yourself to him.”

“Hwuh?!” That caught me off guard. *How did she see through me so easily?!*

She scratched her head awkwardly and said, “Hmm, how do I put this? If Joshua had said he was going to save Veight, I would’ve stopped him for sure. At the very least, I wouldn’t have gone with him since I don’t think I would’ve made it back. But I know if I’m with you, we’ll both make it out of this, Friede.”

Monza was more of a lone wolf than most werewolves. She preferred hunting on her own rather than in a pack, and she wasn’t fond of coordinating her actions with others.

Carefully choosing her words, Monza added, “I don’t really like matching myself to others or reading the mood, or any stuff like that. I only pick people

whose skills and strength I trust to hunt with. I don't care if you're the Demon Lord's daughter, Veight's daughter, or whatever. I don't give special treatment to anyone. I'm here with you because I trust *you*, Friede."

"R-Really?!"

"Really. When you fought that fake Ason guy in the Windswept Dunes, you were kinda unreliable, but you proved yourself in the battle with the dragon. Everyone in the werewolf squad knows you're the real deal now. You're not just a little kid anymore—you're a full-fledged werewolf."

*Wow... That makes me so happy!* I hadn't spent much time with Monza, so it was surprising how talkative she was. She always struck me as asocial, but she was surprisingly observant of others.

"Thank you. I'll do my best!"

"Just don't work yourself to death like a certain someone," Monza said with a smile, patting my head.

But a second later, she came to a sudden stop. It was amazing how quickly she could go from full speed to zero in such a large body. It took me a good three seconds to slow down.

I turned back to Monza, thinking one of her heightened senses must have caught something. Of course, I kept my mouth shut—it wouldn't do to give away our position.

Monza brought her face close to my ear and whispered, "Burbelga's fifty bowshots past that big tree. From the sound of it, he's snoring atop some kind of reed mat."

*You can tell that much from this far away?! That's over five kilometers!* I knew werewolves had an acute sense of smell and hearing while transformed, but Monza was something else. She silently clambered up a nearby tree and took a retractable telescope out of her pocket.

"Aha, he's definitely asleep. Out in the open on a tiny mat too. Must suck being unable to make even a basic shed despite having a Valkaan's strength."

I gingerly climbed the same tree and took an identical telescope from my

pocket. I looked in the direction Monza pointed and saw a large man sleeping on what appeared to be a crudely woven bed of grass. *So that's Burbelga...* I couldn't smell anything of him from here, nor could I sense the flow of mana around him. The whirlpool probably didn't extend too far where he was. However, I would definitely have a hard time using magic once we got close to him. Staying away would be best.

Monza leapt off the branch she was perched on and landed silently on the ground below. If I didn't know she wasn't a mage, I would've assumed she was using magic to be virtually silent despite her giant werewolf form. I jumped down after her, but I couldn't make my landing silent.

Monza pocketed her telescope and grinned. "Now we know where he is. We just have to stay away from him, find Veight, and get outta here."

"Yeah, easy as pie."

Valkaan were strong, but most were more simpleminded than the magical artifacts that birthed them. As long as we didn't get too close to Burbelga, he probably wouldn't even know we were here. Really, things should be quite simple, but for some reason, I couldn't shake the nagging worry that I was missing something.

Monza turned to me and said, "I can sense smells and sounds, but I don't know the first thing about magic. What's the mana around here look like, Friede?"

"Let me check." I honed my mage senses and examined the flow of mana around me. Just as a hunter could track the position of their prey or predict the weather from the scents carried by the wind, a mage could learn a lot by observing the flow of mana. This was admittedly an epoch mage's area of expertise, but I had a basic understanding of how to do it too.

As I concentrated, the flow of mana became clear to me. Because Burbelga was absorbing the mana near him, the mana from our location flowed in that direction to fill the void he was creating. Mana followed the laws of physics, which meant it flowed from higher density to lower density. However, the flow wasn't as constant as it should have been. Every now and then, it shifted in a different direction as well.

“One second. I’m going to use strengthening magic to sharpen my senses. Something’s not right.”

My dad, having made breakthroughs in strengthening magic, had developed spells to heighten one’s mana senses and their mundane ones. They weren’t super useful since manameters could do the job just as well, but I’d learned them because I wanted to know the spells my dad created. And now, they were proving to be quite useful.

I felt the core of my body heat up as the various flows of mana came into sharper focus. In the same way that the smell of the wind carried a plethora of information, the flow of mana told a mage more than just where mana was going. And while I referred to it as “seeing,” I was really experiencing the flow of mana with my entire body. Regardless, now that I’d heightened my mana sense, I could tell that there was definitely something strange going on. *It’s like...this big beast is trying to lie in wait to ambush someone. It’s hard to explain...* But dad had always told me to pay special attention to small inconsistencies like this, even if they weren’t clear.

I turned to Monza and said, “Every now and then, the flow of mana becomes a little irregular. It’s different than what it would be if Burbelga was the only Valkaan here. I don’t really know how to explain it, but...”

“It’s okay. The explanation isn’t important. What matters is that we still need to be careful.” Monza ruffled my hair with a grin. “I may be clueless about magic, but I know I won’t make it back alive without you, so I’m counting on you, partner.”

“O-Okay.”

*This makes me nervous.* At the very least, we knew where Burbelga was and which area to avoid, so now we just had to focus on finding dad.

“Monza, can you smell dad anywhere?”

“I’ve caught his trail, so I know which direction he went. But...he’s hurt. I smell blood. Werewolf blood. So it’s definitely him.”

“Oh no! How badly is he hurt?!”

“I can’t say for sure, but it’s pretty bad, I think. There’s no smell of vultures or



decay, so he's not dead yet."

*That's...gross, but okay.* All of dad's friends had lived through a war, and hearing Monza say things like that so casually, I could tell they'd seen way too much death. It was commonplace for them.

"We need to hurry," I said urgently.

"Yeah," Monza replied with a stern nod.

We detoured around Burbelga, giving him an extremely wide berth. There was no telling how sharp a Valkaan's senses were, and we wouldn't be able to escape if he found us. Monza traced dad's scent to a crumbling ruin at the bottom of a cliff.

"He fell down the cliff from here," Monza said confidently.

"That's a long fall..." I muttered, staring down at the drop.

"The smell of blood was coming from above the cliff, so he got badly hurt and then fell down. That canceled his transformation as well, it seems."

"Isn't that really bad?!"

"It is, and that's precisely why you need to calm down." Monza looked me in the eyes. "I'm doing my best to stay calm too. If we lose it here, we're dead. And if that happens, we can't help Veight. So do you think you can calm down, or will I have to make you go back, Friede?"

*How could I have forgotten? Monza wants to save dad just as badly as I do.* However, we were in Valkaan territory right now. If we didn't proceed carefully, our lives were forfeit. *I can't believe I overlooked something so obvious.* Upon closer inspection, I noticed Monza's fingers were trembling. I couldn't smell people's emotions like a full werewolf could, but even I could tell she was shaken.

But she patted me on the head and said, "Don't worry. I'm here for you, Friede. And don't forget that everyone is waiting for us back home. So we gotta survive this, or there'll be no one left to report the truth of what we find, no matter what it is. Now let's go."

Monza gave me a reassuring smile and started climbing down the cliff. *She's so cool...*

We made it down the cliff without incident, but when we reached the entrance to the ruins, Monza suddenly stopped.

"It's faint, but I can smell another person inside. They're...an older man, I think? Just one person. *Bleh*. And they haven't bathed in ages."

"Maybe it's a bandit? Or a nomad taking shelter for the night? It's strange that they're alone though. There's something off about these ruins too." I pointed to the walls. "Based on the construction, this was probably a castle long ago. But you'd normally build a defensive fortress atop a cliff rather than at the bottom. It's easier to defend from high ground."

"Huh, good point. I didn't realize that since werewolves don't really build castles. See, this is why I need you, Friede." Monza clapped me on the shoulder.

*I'm glad dad got me to study history and military affairs.* Feeling proud of myself, I added, "It's a well-built castle, and it's the perfect place for a bandit hideout. People coming from Kuwol wouldn't even know it's here unless they went to the cliff's edge."

"I see. The wind still carries the smell of people, so it wouldn't let you hide from a werewolf. But humans wouldn't normally find this place, I guess."

Werewolves and humans had completely different priorities and skills, so the logic behind human buildings seemed strange to werewolves. I remembered Dad had explained that to us during one of his lectures.

With that in mind, I explained, "This castle was probably built by someone who wanted a secret fortress to raid Kuwol. It's hidden from the north by cliffs, and the only defenses to the south are the stone walls."

"So you think the person inside is a bandit?"

"It's hard to be sure. Let me see what the flow of mana is like inside. I'm still curious why I sensed something lying in wait here to ambush people back when we were in the forest."

Trying to pinpoint the source of this strange sensation, I focused once more on the flow of mana. We were a good distance from Burbelga now, so the surrounding mana was minimally impacted by his presence. However, that sensation of a powerful beast lying in wait was much stronger now. It was as if someone with a vast quantity of mana was doing their best to hide themselves.

“There’s something weird going on inside. I’m not sure how to describe it... If you think of it like regular hunting...it’s as if there’s a wild boar inside trying its best to be inconspicuous.”

“So there’s something dangerous inside?”

“I think so. It might be the old man you smelled.”

Monza lapsed into thought for a few seconds.

“Do you think there might be a second Valkaan here?” she asked.

“That’s the most logical explanation. But I don’t know why he’s trying so hard to hide.”

“Got it.” Monza nodded, seemingly making a decision. “Friede, can you sneak into the castle alone?”

“A-Alone? Wh-Why?!”

“I hate to admit it, but I’d just get in your way. I can’t sense mana, and I’m not strong enough to escape from a Valkaan, or even fight one.” Though Monza kept her tone even, I could tell how much it pained her to say that. She picked up a nearby rock and squeezed her fist so hard it crumbled to pieces.

“Human buildings are too narrow for a transformed werewolf anyway. And in human form, you’re definitely stronger than me. With your mana sensing skills, it would be far safer to let you scout alone than to force myself to tag along.”

I knew Monza wasn’t a coward. If anything, she loved putting herself in danger so much that dad and Fahn always worried about her. She also had absolute faith in her stealth abilities. It must have galled her to swallow her pride and tell me to do this solo.

I nodded somberly and said, “Got it. If I find anything, I’ll let you know with a wolf whistle. In that case, prioritize reporting back to Fahn before doing

anything else.”

“Will do. But you better come back alive. No matter what you find inside, make sure... *You. Come. Back.*” Monza hugged me tight, her soft fur tickling my cheeks. Her embrace was warm and reassuring.

*Yeah. I'll definitely come back alive. With dad.*

Smiling, I said, “See you soon.”

“Yeah.” Monza waved as she saw me off.

I used strengthening magic on my legs and quietly sprinted into the castle ruins.

The castle might have been impressive once, but years of desert sun and wind had worn it down considerably. The walls were dilapidated, and it felt like the entire building was barely standing. If Monza had entered while transformed, her weight might have caused the floors on the upper levels to collapse. Fortunately, I was light enough that I didn't have to worry about that. Or so I hoped, anyway.

I stuck to the shadows, trying to stay as hidden as possible while exploring the castle. I was using magic to cancel out any sounds I made, so the only way someone could find me was if they could smell me. Without magic, I couldn't hold a candle to Monza, but with it, I could sneak around almost as well as she could. *I managed to slip into a slaver's den in the past, after all. So I'll be fine. Just fine.*

The farther I went, the more apparent the smell of dad's blood became, and I started following his trail. The other person's scent seemed to diminish the farther I got, which was good for me. On the other hand, dad's scent grew stronger. He didn't smell like a corpse, which meant he was definitely alive. I could still save him. I needed to get him out of here so he could live his dream of retiring from being a vice-commander and spend his days studying magic. He worked so hard for everyone; it wouldn't be fair if he died here.

I hurried down the corridor, newfound resolve quickening my steps. But just as I rounded a turn, I felt something touch my back.

“Aaaaaaah?!” I screamed, but thankfully the sound dampening magic canceled out the noise. I was able to whirl around and launch a roundhouse kick before the supposed assailant could react. To my surprise, my kick met only air. “Who’s there?!”

Utilizing the momentum of my kick, I somersaulted forward and followed up with a bone-crushing axe kick. But my attack was stopped in midair, and I found myself trapped, unable to move. *Oh no, is it the Valkaan?!* No, wait...

“Dad? Is that you?”

“Sure is. You used to kick me a lot in your sleep as a baby, so I guess nothing’s changed,” he said with a weary smile.

At some point, dad had canceled out my sound dampening spell. I’d heard that battles between strengthening mages often turned into a contest to see who could cancel out the other’s spells faster. Not that any of that mattered right now.

“Are you all right, Dad?!”

“All right enough to stop your kicks, at least. But my nose isn’t working right, so I wasn’t actually able to tell it was you until I got closer.” Dad gently lowered me to the floor, and I took a good look at him. He didn’t seem gravely injured at all.

“What happened to your wound, Dad?”

“I got my mana back, so I was able to heal it.”

Dad did seem to be full of mana again. Strengthening mages could regenerate all but the most life-threatening wounds as long as they had the mana. *But how did he recover his mana when the Valkaan is sucking it all away around here?* It was then I noticed dad had an unfamiliar sword belted to his waist. Though it looked like a Kuwolese scimitar at first glance, the curvature of the blade was more in line with the swords you found in Wa. Also, from what I could tell, it was a magic artifact.

“Is that sword...?”

“Quick on the uptake as always, Friede.” Dad smiled at me, but then his

expression turned grim. “I’ll explain everything later. There’s another Valkaan in this castle, and he’s a mage. He calls himself Neptotes.”

“So there really is a second Valkaan?! Is he a bad guy too?”

“Seems like it. At the very least, I don’t think we’ll see eye to eye with him. And since he’s a mage, he knows what we’re capable of, which complicates things. I’m surprised you were able to avoid him.”

*Now that dad mentions it, I don’t smell that man at all anymore,* I thought. “I think I smelled him when I first entered the castle, but his scent faded the further in I went. It’s completely gone now.”

“It’d be nice if that means he left, but he’s a master of stealth. It’s possible he has a way of hiding his scent.”

*But why would someone as strong as a Valkaan want to hide?* I had numerous questions, but just then, I smelled Monza approaching.

“That Nepto-whatever guy left the castle. I didn’t see him, but I smelled and heard him heading south at a normal human walking speed,” she said with a grin, waving at us. She’d transformed back into a human, probably to move around more easily. “Aha, glad to see you’re alive, boss.”

“It’s ‘elder,’ not ‘boss.’ Your boss is Fahn now, remember? But man, nothing fazes you, huh? Not even two Valkaan,” Dad said with a smile.

Of course, Monza was acting casual now, but I knew she’d been genuinely worried about him.

“Um...” I started. But before I could continue, Monza patted me on the shoulder and put a finger to her lips. *Huh, why do you want me to be quiet?*

Monza then turned back to dad and said, “Prince Shumar safely made it back to the werecat village. Along the way, we also spotted the first Valkaan. He’s sleeping in the forest to the north. What’s the plan, elder?”

“Let me think...”

Monza reported only the relevant information and then waited for dad to decide. She trusted him to always make the best choices, and he trusted her to provide accurate and succinct intel. Apparently the two of them had always

been like this, even before I was born.

After a few seconds, dad said, “We should head back to the werecat village first. We have a high-power communicator there that we can use to contact Ryunheit. Everyone needs to know about this.”

“Gotcha. I’ll lead the way to the village. Let’s go, Friede.” Monza turned and gave me a wink.

*What’s that wink supposed to mean?* I had no idea what was going through Monza’s head right now.

Thanks to Friede and Monza’s timely rescue, I made it safely to the werecat village. I thought I’d never see my daughter’s face again, so I was overjoyed that she’d come. But at the same time, it was pathetic that I’d made her put herself in harm’s way for me. *How mad is Airia going to be at me for this?*

“That concludes my report,” I said into the communicator, timidly awaiting Airia’s reaction. “I barely escaped with my life while dealing with two Valkaan, and if Friede and Monza hadn’t rescued me, I don’t think I’d be here talking to you. So please don’t blame Friede for being reckless.”

There was a moment of silence, though that was purely due to the time it took for sound to travel between these magic communicators. Still, I was terrified of what Airia might say when she finally spoke.

“Thank goodness...” Airia trembled. “I’m just glad that you and Friede are safe. Don’t rush to deal with these two Valkaan. It’s more important that you come back safely than quickly.”

I knew what she really wanted to say was, “Come back right this instant.” We weren’t citizens of Kuwol. It didn’t matter to Meraldia if Valkaan started causing trouble in the southern regions. However, Meraldia’s economy was now deeply linked to Kuwol’s. Even if it wasn’t, Airia knew Friede and I couldn’t just ignore this problem. Neither of us wanted to see people’s lives get disrupted by cruel Valkaan. Furthermore, Burbelga and Neptotes were dangerous in different ways. Burbelga wanted to rampage, but Neptotes actually wanted to rule. If the two clashed, it wouldn’t matter which one survived; Kuwol would still suffer.

So even though I knew Airia wanted us to come home, I said, “Thank you. If

we don't stop the Valkaan here, the peace we finally attained will shatter. I want to do everything I can to protect the world you, Master, and Friedensrichter worked so hard to build."

"I knew you'd say that. But don't do anything rash. I'll ask the Demon Empress if she will go to Kuwol."

"That'll be a huge help." Normal soldiers can't do anything against a Valkaan, but Master was in a completely different league. "If necessary, Master can fully unleash her vortex powers and suck in enough mana to become a Valkaan herself. But tell her to save that as a last resort. Taking in all of the nearby mana will turn half of Kuwol into a wasteland."

The reason the land south of Mount Kayankaka is a barren desert is likely because Valkaan have fought one another constantly in that region for centuries. Battles between Valkaan can level mountains and change the course of rivers. Airia understood that as well.

"Of course. I'm sure she also knows to avoid going that far unless there's truly no other way."

"Yeah, probably."

We'd likely be in dire straits if it came to that. However, if push came to shove, I knew Airia would be willing to make that call. After all, she had the guts to abandon the Senate and align herself with the Demon Army. But that was precisely why I wanted to protect her and her hometown at all costs. To do that, I needed to fight smart instead of recklessly.

"Actually, there is one thing I'd like you to send over as fast as you can. Tell Ryucco I need his prototype."

"Understood. I'll have it delivered immediately."

*We might be able to beat the Valkaan with that.*

Though Master Gomoviroa was primarily a necromancer, she was skilled in multiple fields of magic—including teleportation magic—which required an advanced understanding of mathematics.

"Yo, Veight. The cavalry's here!" Ryucco said, hopping over to me. He and the



dragonkin engineers he'd come with all looked exhausted. "Why'd we have to walk the last leg? Couldn't we have just teleported straight here?"

"There's technical limitations to teleporting. Plus, Kuwol's top brass probably wouldn't appreciate it if you teleported directly into the heart of their territory," I replied.

You needed accurate coordinates when teleporting, or you could screw yourself over big time. That was why mages had to do extensive calculations to pinpoint the precise spot they were going to. As a result, there were only a few places in Kuwol that Master could teleport to. Encaraga was one of them, but we were keeping that a secret. Kuwol's military wouldn't sleep soundly at night if they knew we could send heavily armed werewolf soldiers right into their capital whenever we wanted.

Seizing control of the palace would be a breeze. But it was precisely because we didn't want to scare Kuwol that I had Ryucco and the others teleport to a dry, empty part of the continent and walk from there. The nomadic tribes roamed that region, so Kuwol's nobles didn't consider it part of the country. Even if Kuwol found out we'd calculated a teleportation zone this close to them, we could say it was to assist them if the nomadic tribes ever revolted, thus avoiding a diplomatic issue. Of course, everyone would know it was an excuse, but it would serve its purpose as an officially acceptable one. That said, I knew Ryucco had no interest in the particulars of foreign relations, so I didn't bother explaining all that.

"Did you bring the devices?" I asked.

"Yessir. Well, they're still prototypes, so who knows if they'll work right. I also only have a few. Here you go." As Ryucco spoke, the dragonkin engineers hefted a large wooden crate and brought it forward. Ryucco hopped on top of it and tapped his foot proudly. "There are six teleporters in here, and they've all had at least one successful test run. Think that'll be enough?"

"Well, it's my job to ensure it's enough, so don't worry." If I were to convert it back into yen, this box contained billions of yen worth of equipment. Just the thought of how expensive they were made me afraid to even hold them.

"So this is Mount Kayankaka, the sacred home of the werocats..." I heard

Fumino's voice and whirled around in surprise. Indeed, Fumino of the Heavenwatchers was here, along with Mao, the corrupt merchant I somehow always ended up doing business with.

"Lady Fumino, can we trust you to keep your word?" I asked.

"Have I ever broken a promise before?"

"Multiple times, actually..." Fumino and Mao were friends, but I had no idea why they were here right now.

Mao gave me an awkward smile and said, "Sorry, Veight. The Heavenwatchers learned that we have teleportation coordinates here, and..."

"So Fumino threatened to tell Kuwol unless Wa was allowed to also use this location?"

"Insightful as always, my friend."

*I don't want your praise, buddy. Tell me how this secret leaked.* I hadn't realized our counterspy measures were so lacking. While Wa was Meraldia's ally, there was still a good amount of intel we were hiding from one another. Friendships between countries didn't work the same way as friendships between people.

I glared at Fumino, but she just smiled at me.

"Fumino."

"Yes?"

"It's dangerous here."

"I'm aware." Fumino shook her head and added, "But it would be a stain on my honor if I missed the opportunity to see the Black Werewolf King's greatest battle."

"Wait, are you not here on orders from the Chrysanthemum Court?"

"Wa has no reason to intervene in this affair, so Lord Tokitaka has only dispatched a few agents to collect information. I am, in fact, disobeying orders right now. I imagine I'll be punished *severely* when I go back."

*Are you really okay with that?* I thought, then said, "Your precognitive skills

will be a huge help. But are you really fine with ignoring orders like this?”

“If you lose here, then the entire world will be threatened by these two Valkaan. I don’t think this is only Kuwol’s or Meraldia’s problem.”

*You have a point, but...* To make matters worse, there was another person who I really preferred to stay back home.

“You’ll need my help, won’t you, Veight?” Kite said, looking ready and raring to go.

“No, Kite, it’s *way* too dangerous for you here.” He was old enough to have some white hair, but he was still as energetic as ever.

“Don’t be like that. I’m *your* vice-commander, aren’t I?”

“Uhh... I mean, you were once, but...”

While I appreciated his concern for me, epoch mages had no means of defending themselves. Mages like Fumino, who could use prediction magic, could foresee and avoid enemy attacks. But epoch mages couldn’t see anything beyond the past or present. In combat, they were the weakest type of mage. Furthermore, Kite had no martial training and had spent the last few decades doing primarily desk work. He wasn’t even young anymore.

“We’re putting our lives on the line here, you know?” I warned.

“I know. But I’m sure you need my epoch magic for something, right?”

“It’ll definitely come in handy, that’s for sure.”

I had asked Airia to send over an epoch mage to help analyze the Valkaan we were dealing with. I just hadn’t expected her to send our very best one. Well, the thought that she might ask him had crossed my mind, but I hadn’t expected him to actually come. He was Meraldia’s top mage and integral to keeping the country running smoothly, after all.

“There’s no way I’m letting you die here, Veight! I can’t trust our younger batch of epoch mages to handle such an important mission, so I came in person!”

I had no chance of sending him back after hearing such a declaration.

“All right, all right. I’m counting on you. But don’t try to be a hero, okay? Just focus on what you’re good at.”

“Hahaha, do I really seem that reckless to you?”

*Yes? Have you forgotten what happened in the past?* Sighing, I turned to Elmersia and said, “Sorry, but could you be Kite’s bodyguard for a while? He’s not familiar with this part of Kuwol.”

“Of course. I’m sure there’s a lot I can learn from a skilled mage like him.”

*Thank god she’s willing to keep an eye on Kite.* Once everyone was assembled, I looked at who we had. It’d been a decade since this many of my friends had come together in one place. I was honestly moved by how many people were willing to come to my aid.

“So, what’s the plan?” Jerrick asked, looking expectantly at me.

Ever since I’d taken down that rampaging boar when we were kids, he’d always eagerly awaited my next plan. Monza and even the Garney brothers were looking at me with the same excitement.

“Okay, let’s get this over with, Veight.”

“I don’t care if we’re up against a Hero or a Valkaan; I’m sure you’ve got a plan to take ’em down.”

The pressure of living up to everyone’s expectations made me a little nervous. In my past life, I’d always been afraid of disappointing others. I worried it would make them think less of me and eventually cost me my place in an organization. I had to meet expectations, or I’d be discarded, but having expectations placed upon me was terrifying. It was even scarier to be in a position with a lot of responsibility, as it naturally came with constant expectations. That was why I wanted to stick to a less important role like vice-commander, but in the end, everyone still had huge expectations of me.

But to my surprise, I wasn’t scared this time. The people here were my friends—all of whom I trusted with my life. They wouldn’t hate me even if I failed to meet expectations occasionally. At most, they’d just think, “Well, even Veight messes up sometimes.” It was because I’d learned to trust them that I wasn’t worried about failing. So while I felt the pressure and a bit of nerves, I wasn’t

terrified anymore.

After collecting my thoughts, I looked at everyone and said, “Even Valkaan aren’t gods. They can’t overcome the second law of thermodynamics. Their kind lack the accumulated wisdom and knowledge we’ve built up. And unlike us, they’re all alone. So this is what we’re gonna do to beat them.”

Everyone nodded, waiting for me to lay out the plan.

## —The Greatest Deception of All Time—

Parker explained the details to Mao as they walked across the barren wasteland.

“Neptotes is a mage from an ancient era. Back then, there was a lot we still didn’t understand about magic. Furthermore, it seems he specializes in strengthening and destruction magic, so I doubt he has any grounding in epoch magic.”

“Okay?” Mao said, not quite following along. “More importantly, how are we supposed to negotiate with him if we can’t understand him? I know Kuwolese, but not a lick of ancient language.”

“That’s exactly why you’re best suited for the job,” Parker said, laughing. “Because you can’t speak the ancient tongue, you need an interpreter like me. That means Neptotes will have to be wary of whether you’re telling the truth and if I’m accurately translating your words. Keeping track of both at once would be pretty backbreaking work for him. You know, like *this*.”

Parker snapped one of his vertebrae, but Mao completely ignored the pun.

“What if he can use magic to read my mind?”

“Magic of that nature does exist, and based on what Veight said, he can use it to some extent. So you have to be careful about what you say, or he’ll kill you,” Parker said casually. “That’s another reason I’m coming as your interpreter. With two of us, Neptotes will have to try to read both our minds at once, and that’s not easy. Think of it like trying to parry swords from two directions simultaneously. Plus, I’m an immortal skeleton, so magic that affects humans is less likely to work on me.”

“I see.” Mao nodded in understanding, then grinned. “And if Neptotes figures out I’m lying and kills me, you can just say it was all my fault and that you were an ignorant translator and resume negotiations instead.”

“That’s true. But this really isn’t my forte, so try not to die, please. Besides, I’m rather fond of you.”

“Well, thank you.”

As they chatted, Friede suddenly shouted, “D-Don’t talk about dying so casually like that! I don’t want you to die, Mao!”

Mao and Parker turned to look at Friede.

“I mean, neither do I.”

“And like I just said, I certainly don’t want him dying either.” Parker placed his bony hands on Friede’s shoulders. “But we’re prepared to do whatever it takes to protect your future. Well, in my case, I can’t die anyway, so I guess it’s just Mao who has steeled himself.”

“You could’ve let me say that, you know? Sometimes I want to look cool too,” Mao said with a smile. But deep down, he was grateful to Parker.

In truth, he would have been too embarrassed to say it. Mao had spent most of his youth in exile, so he’d gotten far too accustomed to hiding his true thoughts as well.

Parker turned back to Friede and said, “Remember what Veight said. Your job is to maintain communications and escape if things go south. Until then, act like you’re one of our lackeys. I guess that’s probably not nice to say to the future Demon Lord, but it’s for your own safety.”

“Hold on, I’m not gonna be the next Demon Lord! I’m not good enough for that!” Friede exclaimed, waving her hands in front of her face.

“How about the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, then?” Parker said with a laugh.

“That...sounds more appealing.”

Parker nodded. “Then this is the perfect chance to practice being a vice-commander. Your job is to stay out of the limelight and support your

commander from the shadows, after all.”

“Wait, vice-commanders are supposed to stay out of the limelight?”

“Oh, definitely. I guess you kids wouldn’t know that since our resident vice-commander never stops being the center of attention.”

As he listened to them talk, Mao realized something.

*Even though I can’t speak the ancient language, Veight chose me to be our negotiator because he trusts me. I have to live up to that trust.*

In his younger years, Mao’s employer had forced him to smuggle banned drugs into Wa without telling him, and when he was found out, they pinned all the blame on him. He was forced to flee his homeland of Wa, and after many twists and turns, started a new life as a merchant in Meraldia. But thanks to the meddling of the Senate, his new business struggled. The viceroys weren’t interested in making big deals with him, and he was constantly plagued by bandits and demon attacks. Mao had to use underhanded means to protect his assets, his life, and the lives of his men from people with far more authority than his own.

But after meeting Veight, his entire life changed. Now he could run an honest business and make money while actually helping people instead of hurting them. At some point, he became the most influential person in Ryunheit’s new residential district, and fledgling merchants came to him for help.

*Like hell I’ll let these Valkaan take this life away from me.* Mao clenched his fists. *I know just how tyrannical the strong can be. They take from others without a care in the world and destroy everything in their wake. If Veight needs my silver tongue to take these Valkaan down, then I’ll do everything I can to make it happen.* The basic gist of Veight’s plan was to force the two Valkaan to fight each other, then take down whoever remained. It was a far bolder plan than anything Mao would have dared to propose, but Veight had just laughed and said it was such a simple plan that you even saw it in children’s fables.

*Sure, there are plenty of stories about clever people making others fight and reaping the rewards, but actually devising a concrete plan to make that happen in real life is much harder. You’re more brilliant than you give yourself credit for, Veight.* Unfortunately, it would probably take another thirty years for everyone

to convince Veight he was truly that amazing. *Which means I need to live a long life to make it happen.*

Mao chuckled to himself and turned to Parker. “So I’m the evil merchant who opposes Veight’s rule, and you’re the treasonous member of his army who wants to take him down, right?”

“Yep. I’m looking forward to your acting.”

Friede looked worriedly up at Mao and asked, “What about me?”

“We’ll decide your role based on how negotiations progress, so be ready to adapt to whatever we say.”

“Seriously?! Can’t you give me something more concrete?!”

Mao chuckled again and said, “It’s important to have our stories straight, but if we make them too detailed, we won’t be able to improvise if needed. I know it’ll be hard, but I’m sure you can do it.”

“I-I’ll try my best.”

## **—Neptotes’s Nightmare—**

During the ancient age of magic-centric civilizations, multiple empires fought for supremacy over the sprawling lands south of Mount Kayankaka. In one of those empires lived a mage named Neptotes. He was the fourth son of a farmer, and after learning some basic magic, he became an official in a small city not far from his home village. His job primarily involved copying documents and burning the originals. He wasn’t sure why this was necessary, but it was what he was paid for, so he did his job dutifully. He performed that same job for decades, but one day his humble life came crashing down.

“I’m afraid we can’t have this, Neptotes,” said a man wearing the official sash of a palace mage with a sigh.

As the two policemen the man had brought with him dragged Neptotes away, he shouted, “B-But why? I only did as I was told—”

“We have irrefutable evidence that you engaged in illegal experiments to



create a Valkaan, strengthening mage Neptotes,” the official said, cutting him off. “The documents we seized had your name on them.”

At that, Neptotes realized what was happening.

“Please, wait! I was hired to copy those documents! I was only following my employer’s orders!”

“I see.” The official nodded, and for a moment, Neptotes thought he might be saved. But then the official asked, “In that case, the original documents should be stored somewhere. If you could lead us to them, that would prove your innocence.”

“Th-They don’t exist! I was ordered to burn them all!”

“These were documents valuable enough to require copying, yet you claim the originals needed to be burned? How can that be?!” The official shouted angrily.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know! I was just doing what I was told to!”

At this point, Neptotes knew he’d been set up. He had been hired as a scapegoat so that those truly responsible wouldn’t be implicated. All of this had been arranged decades ago. The moment he realized his entire life’s work had been to make himself someone else’s fall guy, his head slumped.

“No... I didn’t do anything wrong... This isn’t...”

Seeing his despair, the official’s expression softened. “We will investigate your claim thoroughly, Neptotes. You don’t need to give up hope just yet. But I’m afraid you must be imprisoned until we can determine the truth.”

“O-Okay...” Neptotes nodded, willing to cling to any ray of hope, no matter how meager.

Neptotes spent his days in prison waiting for his name to be cleared, but when he was finally let out, it was for a very different reason.

“We’re about to go to war, so we’ve been ordered to turn all the prisoners into Valkaan. That includes you,” an official told him, and Neptotes paled. As a mage, he knew what that meant.

“W-Wait! Please! There’s no guaranteed method for turning a normal person into a Valkaan! I’ll die if you compress that much mana into me!”

“Spare me the waterworks. You’re the one who researched a better method for making Valkaan, remember?” the official said with a sneer. “Take them away. I’m sure at least one of them will be a success,” he said, turning to the guards he’d brought.

As the official had hoped, Neptotes was successfully transformed into a Valkaan. The years he’d spent practicing strengthening magic saved him, allowing him to absorb more mana than his fellow inmates. Everyone else exploded after being inundated with more mana than they could handle. However, the amount of mana swirling within Neptotes now was more than he could control, and he fell unconscious shortly after becoming a Valkaan.

When he next opened his eyes, Neptotes found himself in the middle of a barren wasteland. *What...happened? Did I...become a Valkaan? Where am I?* He got up and looked around. In every direction were corpses wearing rusted armor. The air was dry enough that the bodies had all been mummified instead of rotting. The armor worn by the dead bore the crest of either his own nation’s army or the adjacent nation’s army. To his surprise, Neptotes found he was also wearing a suit of armor emblazoned with his nation’s crest; his was also old and rusted.

*After turning me into a Valkaan, was I made to fight here? I guess I must be the only survivor.* Neptotes knew Valkaan could use their vast stores of mana to heal their wounds. Of course, Valkaan who weren’t mages wouldn’t be able to properly direct their mana, but Neptotes was a strengthening mage. Controlling the flow of mana within his body was his specialty. There was a huge hole in his armor, right next to his stomach. But as he gingerly touched the area, he found no wounds. Whatever injuries he’d sustained were fully healed.

*I must have instinctively used all my mana to heal myself after getting injured. Now, after months, or maybe years, I’m finally healed enough to wake up. It was likely a grave injury...* Neptotes had no memory of the battle he’d fought in. He suspected that after becoming a Valkaan, another mage had used mind control magic on him to make him fight for his country. But the mental control

hadn't been perfect, and when Neptotes had nearly died, the spell had broken. Unfortunately, Neptotes wasn't a skilled enough mage to know exactly what had happened.

*That aside... Where am I?* As he looked around, Neptotes noticed the mountains in the distance were the ones near his hometown. *That's Mount Yunai. And there's Mount Adone. This must be close to home...* Neptotes scanned the horizon, but he didn't see any villages. In fact, he didn't see the forest or river that should have been near his home village either. There certainly hadn't been a wasteland like this nearby.

*Wait...* A terrible thought entered his mind. Neptotes stripped away his rusted armor and started running forward.

"No... How can this be..." Neptotes's village and everything around it had been blasted away. There was not a trace of life in the burnt shells of the few buildings that remained standing. His home was now just a pile of rubble.

Neptotes staggered over to his destroyed house and sat on what remained of the foundations. While he was shocked, he wasn't tired. He couldn't be. He was a Valkaan now.

*That's right... I'm a Valkaan, and I've been freed from the mages who controlled me.* Neptotes knew very well what Valkaan were capable of. Only a Valkaan could take down another. And as far as he could tell, there were none nearby.

"Hmm..."

Neptotes slowly got to his feet. There was no need to lament what had been lost, considering what he'd gained.

"Let's see if the capital is still standing," Neptotes muttered, then dashed off.

It was normally a three-day journey on foot to reach the capital, but thanks to his newfound speed and stamina, Neptotes could make the trip in just a few hours. At top speed, he sprinted faster than a horse and never got tired.

"Hahaha, guess the capital fell too," Neptotes said, looking up at the palace.

The palace was horribly battered, with most of its walls crumbling. The whole structure looked like it could collapse at any second. All the nearby houses were gone, and the river that ran through the city's center was no more. In fact, aside from the remnants of the palace, there was no sign that a city had ever been here at all.

"This is what happens when Valkaan fight each other, huh? I wonder if there's anything left in these ruins."

The palace was littered with corpses that Neptotes assumed were Valkaan, but other than that, the area was truly deserted. Only the dead lived here now. As he searched deeper into the palace, Neptotes found corpses wearing serving clothes instead of armor, making it clear this had been a one-sided slaughter.

"Our enemies certainly were thorough. Hmm?" While sifting through a pile of dusty artifacts, Neptotes spotted something familiar—the ceremonial sash worn by the palace official who'd first arrested him. It was torn in half and stained dark brown with what he assumed was dried blood.

"Guess he bit the dust too. Hmph, you get what you deserve."

Humming cheerily to himself, Neptotes picked up the torn sash. Every mage dreamed of one day being appointed a palace mage and granted the honorary sash. Neptotes sewed the sash back together, cleaned the blood, and draped it across his shoulder.

"At this point, I'm likely the strongest mage left in this country, so it's only fitting that I wear this. Let's see how the throne room ended up."

As he'd expected, Neptotes found the king's remains sitting on the throne. It appeared he'd committed suicide along with his closest retainers, bedecked in their finest clothes, as their bodies lay next to his. Neptotes stepped over their corpses and grabbed the crown off the dead king's head.

"May as well take this too. I'm the new king of this nation. If anyone has any objections, speak up now or forever hold your peace," he said, glaring at the dead husks' empty eye sockets.

Naturally, none of them spoke.

"Hahahahahaha! I see you all accept me as your new king! Splendid!"

Cackling, Neptotes put the crown on his head. “This kingdom is mine!”

For a while, Neptotes lived in the ruined remains of the castle. He had no citizens to rule but still felt like a king. Though the battle that’d taken place here had rerouted the river out of the city, it was still easy for him to run to it each day for water and catch fish to eat. He had no idea whether the rest of the nation’s citizens had fled or been killed, nor did he know how the enemy nation was faring.

Occasionally, he’d sense another Valkaan in the distance and find somewhere to hide. As a mage, he had the ability to sense the flow of mana, so evading other Valkaan posed no problem. *Whenever people gain power, they always want to use it for themselves. It’s best not to interact with any of the other Valkaan—they could all be dangerous.*

As time passed, Neptotes sensed fewer and fewer Valkaan. Eventually, he left the castle, unable to bear his solitary life any longer. But no matter which direction he went, all he found were ruins and not a single living human. *If I could find some people, I could make them into my slaves—no, my retainers. But there’s no sign of life anywhere.*

Neptotes wandered the barren wasteland for what seemed like ages. Food and water were hard to come by, so he spent most of his trek parched and starving, but his desire to find other people kept him going.

Suddenly, Neptotes’s eyes snapped open. He strained his ears without moving, a trick he’d perfected over the years. He also concentrated on the nearby flow of mana to ensure there were no other Valkaan nearby. Once he was sure it was safe, Neptotes stood up and walked out of the shadow of the boulder he’d been sheltering behind. A strong gust blew sand over the blasted landscape, but other than that, the land was still. Neptotes took his crown off and held it in his hands. He’d spent so much time rubbing the metal that the delicate patterns carved into it had worn away; most of the jewels had fallen out too.

“Another dream about the past...” he muttered to himself.

He'd made a habit of talking to himself over his long years of solitude. But he wouldn't have to worry about being alone anymore. Yesterday, for the first time in a century, he'd had a proper conversation with another person. And he'd learned that a human kingdom still existed past the northern foothills of the mountain they called Mount Kayankaka. Valkaan used to roam that land, but according to what the visitor had told Neptotes, they were all gone now. In which case, it was only right that he should rule this kingdom. He was a Valkaan, after all.

But there was just one problem. Another dangerous Valkaan known as Burbelga had made the plains near the mountain his home. In truth, Neptotes wasn't certain he'd be able to beat Burbelga in a face-to-face confrontation. But he couldn't simply ignore Burbelga either, or he'd eventually threaten the kingdom he was to rule. If Neptotes wanted to become the undisputed king of Kuwol, he would need to kill Burbelga.

"That kingdom is *mine*. I won't let anyone else have it." Neptotes patted his crown and tightened the ceremonial sash draped over his shoulder.

A second later, he heard a voice off in the distance. "Oh great Valkaan, Neptotes, where are you?"

Once he reached the spot Fumino had indicated, Parker cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "I am a general in the Demon Army, Parker Pastier! Oh great Valkaan, Neptotes, where are you?"

Of course, Parker was saying this in the ancient tongue, so Mao couldn't parse the words. Still, he had a pretty good idea of what was being said because they'd gone over their lines ahead of time.

The wind carried Parker's words quite far, and after a few seconds, an old man wearing a tattered robe appeared in a swirl of dust. His sudden appearance startled Mao, but he did his best not to let his surprise and fear show on his face.

*"Angu yuitche uzdaat. Votu yuitche man narume?"*

The old man spoke words Mao couldn't make heads or tails of. Thankfully, Parker was able to translate for him.

“He says he knows we’re mages, and he’s asking where we learned his name.”

“Gotcha. Answer this one *honestly*,” Mao replied.

“Honestly” was a code word for something else, and they were using code just in case Neptotes did know Meraldian and was hiding it.

“As you wish.” Parker nodded, and the negotiations began.

“You’re a mage too. Where did you learn my name?” That was the complete translation of what Neptotes had just said.

“I heard the Black Werewolf King Veight’s report. However, you won’t be seeing that man again,” Parker said in a smooth voice.

Neptotes stared suspiciously at Parker for a few seconds, then turned to Mao.

“And who is that man?” he asked.

“My apologies, I forgot to introduce him. He is Mao, one of Meraldia’s most influential merchants. He happens to be one of my coconspirators. I’m afraid he can only speak the barbarians’ tongue, so I am here to interpret.”

“I see.” Neptotes glared at Mao, clearly unimpressed.

Mao ignored him and listened intently to Parker’s translation, trying to figure out what angle would best manipulate Neptotes into doing what they wanted. *From what Veight said, even though Neptotes is dressed like a monk, he has rather worldly ambitions. Not too different from me in that regard, but that should make things easier.* While Neptotes was a Valkaan who’d lived for centuries and was a practitioner of ancient magic, he was still a *human*. And that meant he could be manipulated just like any other person. At least, that’s what Mao believed.

“The Black Werewolf King Veight is hailed as a hero in Meraldia, but if you ask a merchant such as myself, he’s just a meddlesome nuisance. He is incorruptible and refuses to bend his policies for businessmen like me,” Mao said, putting as much vitriol in his tone as he could.

Even if Neptotes couldn’t understand his words, he could still parse Mao’s voice and expression. These negotiations relied on more than just Parker’s

interpretation. In truth, Mao liked Veight precisely because of how principled he was, but obviously, he wouldn't tell Neptotes that.

"Parker here from the Demon Army understands that good governance requires a more...lenient approach. And much like yourself, oh great Valkaan, he is immortal. Please forgive me for speaking out of turn, but in my humble opinion, I believe it is people like you and him who are truly fit to lead nations..." Mao paused to let Parker translate for Neptotes.

Neptotes's expression brightened slightly, and he said a single word in response.

*Is it working?* Mao thought.

Parker turned back to Mao and translated, "He said, 'Go on.'"

This was good news, but Mao knew he had to proceed carefully.

"Because of the Black Werewolf King's restrictive policies, we've been unable to reap the profits we rightfully deserve from our trade with Kuwol. I've come here because I wish to thank you for getting rid of that thorn in our side." Mao plastered on his most obsequious smile—the same one he'd used when he'd begged the Senate to let him trade in Meraldia.

*Now, then. How will you respond?* Neptotes frowned, seeing through Mao's fake smile. *Good, you're not a complete idiot. But I excel at deceiving people who think they're smarter than they really are.*

Neptotes spoke, and Parker translated for him. "He said, 'I can tell you're scheming something. What is your real purpose coming here?'"

*Perfect, he took the bait.* There was nothing stupider than asking someone who was being evasive what they were really thinking. After all, if they were trying to hide something, it was unlikely they'd come clean.

Mao gave Neptotes an apologetic bow and said, "I see you're quite perceptive, o' honorable Valkaan. The truth is, I wish to bring down Kuwol's royal family."

This was the script Veight had prepared for him. *Gehei always used to say you should put the worst merchandise in the fanciest boxes, and I guess he was right*



*after all.* Mao's former employer had been a traitorous scumbag, but he gave good advice on how to swindle people. And the plan to take down Kuwol's royalty was the perfect fancy box to hide their goods in.

Neptotes gave Mao a surprised look, his interest clearly piqued.

"He said, 'And for that, you wish to use me?'" Parker translated.

Mao nodded, and Neptotes thoughtfully rubbed his chin.

"I do indeed, Lord Neptotes. But I believe this proposal will be beneficial to you as well. I have no interest in ruling Kuwol myself, and the nation will need a new ruler once the royal family has been disposed of. I believe you would make for a fine king, *Your Majesty.*" Mao was laying the flattery on thick, but he'd surmised what kind of person Neptotes was now.

As expected, Neptotes's response was favorable.

"He said, 'I see, that does sound promising. But why would I need to join forces with you to do what I was already planning to?'"

*The classic arrogance of those in love with their own strength.* Of course, Mao didn't let his disdain show, and he said with a sincere smile, "Fear not, Lord Neptotes, I have no intention of interfering with your plans. I am simply offering to assist you in getting the people to recognize you as their legitimate ruler. You will require an interpreter as well, and I believe my friend Parker is perfectly suited to that task. Surely you wish to rule over a nation, not massacre its inhabitants and rule over a ruin, correct?"

Neptotes frowned and spoke a few words.

"He said, 'The shallow thinking of a common merchant. Very well. I suppose I will let you live so long as you are useful to me.'"

"Thank you... But I am concerned about the other Valkaan in the area, Burbelga. Being immortal, Parker doesn't need to worry about being killed by him, but he lacks the strength to defeat him."

Parker translated Mao's statement to Neptotes, then translated Neptotes's response.

"He said, 'So you want me to take care of him? How shameless. You truly are

a scoundrel.’”

*Like you’re one to talk.* Funnily enough, whenever Veight insulted him like that, Mao found it endearing. If anything, Mao enjoyed goading Veight into insulting him since he knew there was no real malice behind his words.

Mao bowed again to Neptotes and said, “Thank you for bringing this scoundrel into your fold, Lord Neptotes. Fear not, I understand how the world works. The weak serve the strong.”

“He said, ‘At least you know your place. I like you.’”

*I guess Valkaan aren’t that big of a deal after all. I hope this helps you out, Veight.* Mao gave Neptotes another ingratiating smile, but then Neptotes asked something he wasn’t expecting.

“He asked, ‘By the way, who is that girl behind you?’”

Neptotes was staring at Friede standing a few steps behind Parker and Mao. Now that negotiations had succeeded, he was paying more attention to the little details. However, Mao took the question in stride.

“Oh, she’s the Black Werewolf King Veight’s only daughter. Poor girl; she’s a mere half-werewolf, so she can’t transform. As a result, her father resents her.”

Friede’s eyes widened in surprise, but then she quickly realized the angle Mao was going for, and started speaking to Neptotes in the ancient tongue. Parker translated her words for Mao.

“She’s telling him how much she hates her dad.”

“I feel bad for going with this story now,” Mao muttered.

He knew how much Friede loved and respected her father, but at the same time, Kuwol’s fate depended on their success, so he had to use everything he could. *We’ve got a traitorous general, a corrupt merchant, and a bitter daughter. This lineup should be enough to convince Neptotes that we’re sincere.* If nothing else, it’d be enough to make Neptotes believe internal strife was brewing within the current regime.

Friede’s tirade went on for quite a long time, and eventually, Neptotes held up a hand and spoke.

“He said, ‘I understand you all have your grievances. You’re welcome to follow me—just don’t get in my way.’”

“Understood, my lord. Let us be off, then,” Mao said with a bow.

Once Parker and the others left to convince Neptotes, we engaged Burbelga in battle. Of course, we knew we couldn’t win by attacking him head-on, so we’d devised a plan first.

[Veight, dodge left.]

[Got it.] I dodged to the left, and after feinting, Burbelga threw out a right hook. Had I dodged to the right, that punch would’ve absolutely killed me.

[Attacking with his right leg next.] Jerrick was feeding me information with his howls.

You couldn’t speak complex sentences with werewolf howls. But years back, I’d worked out how to pack as much information as possible in the vocal range you had access to, and taught the new code language to all the werewolves in my squad. The good thing about communicating with howls was that a Valkaan’s immense mana pool wouldn’t disrupt communications.

Naturally, it was Fumino actually predicting all of Burbelga’s attacks. She could only see at most a minute or two into the future, but her predictions were highly accurate. In fact, she could predict a few seconds out in advance with perfect accuracy. Of course, even if we knew how Burbelga was going to swing, he had the immense speed of a Valkaan, so I needed to be transformed and using all the strengthening magic at my disposal to make the correct dodges in time. No one else would be able to manage this.

[Kite said watch your footing; the ground is soft. A Valkaan could crater soft ground like this.]

[Got it, thanks.]

Kite also supported me with epoch magic. He was unrivaled at quickly analyzing information. While he had no means of fighting, his vast knowledge and ability were more than a match for any Valkaan. With how much experience he’d accumulated over the past decade or so, Kite was probably the most knowledgeable person in the world right now. Meanwhile, it looked like

Burbelga wasn't thinking about much of anything while fighting, and he launched a kick with his right leg, just as Jerrick had said he would.

"You're a fast one, ain'tcha?! Let's see if you can dodge this!" Burbelga bellowed.

[He's tackling next,] came Jerrick's howl.

[Roger.]

Burbelga crouched down and charged at me, moving faster than an arrow. Even with my enhanced werewolf reflexes, I wouldn't have been able to react to it in time. Fortunately, I'd known it was coming a second in advance, so I could easily jump over Burbelga. As I flipped over him, I kicked the back of his neck as hard as I could.

"Whargh!" That kick was strong enough to behead a bear, but all it did to Burbelga was make him stumble a little. He was as tough as nails, but I wasn't really trying to hurt him, just provoke him.

[He'll swing with both fists.]

I took a half step back to avoid Burbelga's punches.

"You little—" Burbelga shouted as his fists passed through empty air.

There was no technique behind his attacks; he was just swinging blindly while relying entirely on his immense speed and destructive power. But that alone would be enough to hit me if I didn't have Fumino's predictions to rely on.

[Kite said he's concentrating mana in his feet.]

[I see.] That told me what Burbelga was attempting.

Burbelga raised his arms high and stomped on the ground with all his might.

"Diiiie!"

The ground around him shook so hard it was like a localized earthquake. Cracks spread through the surrounding stone beneath us, and I remembered that Kite had mentioned how soft the ground was. I'd correctly decided to jump before Burbelga had stomped on the ground, which kept me from being thrown off-balance.

There wasn't much for me to do while up in the air, so I told Jerrick, [He's barely gone through any of his mana.]

[Kite said the same thing. Will you be okay?]

[I can keep going for a while longer. Give me the next prediction.]

Though it hadn't cost him much of his mana, a move like this had physically tired Burbelga out enough that he stopped moving for a second. But then mana suffused his limbs, curing his exhaustion. It felt like I was trying to sumo wrestle a brick wall—I was basically making no progress.

As I lamented how little of his mana it took to get his energy back up, Jerrick howled, [He's using a mana-charged punch as you land!]

*Perfect.* I'd purposely jumped higher than necessary to bait Burbelga into pouring more power into his next attack. He probably thought I couldn't move freely in the air so I wouldn't be able to dodge his full-power punch.

"I've got you now!" Burbelga shouted, letting his punch fly. His fist was quite far away from me still, but mana shot out of it like a beam. He'd basically fired a mana bullet the same way our Blast Rifles did, just on a much larger scale.

"Sorry, but your mana's mine." I used the same vortex power that Master had to suck in all of the mana he shot forth. Pure mana attacks were completely ineffective against me; they just gave me more energy to keep going. I wasn't a Valkaan, but I did at least possess one of the same abilities they did.

Seeing that, Burbelga shouted, "I knew it! You're a Valkaan too! Why won't you fight me seriously?!"

"I already told you I'm not a Valkaan. And I still have no intention of showing my real strength to a coward like you. Besides, you're so weak you're not even worth killing."

"I am *not* weak!" Burbelga picked up a nearby boulder, flexing his needlessly large muscles. I didn't even need a prediction to know what he would do with that. He shouted, "Take this!"

If I knew how many tons that boulder weighed and the speed at which he threw it, I would have been able to calculate how much mana that attack had

cost him—not that I would’ve had the time to actually math that out in my head. Either way, a giant boulder was even less of a threat than his fists. Since the rock around here was all fragile, I concentrated mana into my fist and shattered the boulder with a punch. Fragments of rock pelted my fur, but they were all too tiny to leave even small scrapes.

“This isn’t a kid’s fight, Burbelga. Can’t you at least pull out a real weapon?”

“Look at these sculpted muscles! My body *is* my weapon!”

[Roundhouse kick to your left shoulder next. Watch when he steps in.]

Following Jerrick’s advice, I cleanly dodged Burbelga’s kick. The kick itself was too fast for my eyes to follow, but as always, dodging ahead of time wasn’t an issue.

“Haha, I knew it. You’re a Valkaan!”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not?”

Burbelga still hadn’t figured out how I was dodging him so easily. If he did, it would put Fumino in danger, so I was grateful he was such a moron. This definitely wouldn’t work on Neptotes. That old man was a mage, so he might actually realize someone was using prediction magic.

I continued dodging Burbelga’s assault for the next few minutes. Each of his attacks was unbelievably fast and strong enough to kill me in a single hit, so I couldn’t afford to lose concentration. With each missed hit, his exhaustion mounted, and now its effects were becoming apparent.

“You...damned...werewolf...” His breathing was labored, and I could smell the sweat on him.

[Think you can get him now, Veight?]

[Yeah. We’ve finally tired our prey out.]

Valkaan attacks were such big threats because they were powered by mana. Mana was a mystical energy that could be converted into any other form of energy, including kinetic energy or heat. However, therein lay its weakness.

[Mana can be converted into any form of energy, but once it is, it’s just energy. And that energy eventually dissipates, following the natural laws of

physics.]

[I have no clue what you're saying, boss,] said Jerrick.

Throwing a punch faster than human muscles could muster meant using mana as kinetic energy to propel that punch. And the mana expended on that punch wasn't coming back unless you could absorb more from somewhere else.

[What I'm saying is let him keep swinging. Eventually, he'll burn through all of his mana.] As I dodged another one of Burbelga's kicks, I added, [He may be a Valkaan, but his brain is the same as a regular human's. He can get impatient and make mistakes just like anyone else. And the more impatient he gets, the sloppier his attacks become.]

No matter how much strength a human obtained, they were still human. If their faith in their strength was shaken, they'd start to be overcome with fear. Still, Burbelga didn't look very shaken as he charged at me once more.

"Wahaha! I love fighting against strong guys! Strength is everything, you know!" Burbelga shouted.

But he couldn't fool a werewolf's nose.

"You're starting to panic. I can smell it," I said calmly.

It wasn't even a lie. I could indeed smell the fear in Burbelga's sweat. Despite the tough front he put up, he was shaking in his boots.

In a cold and condescending voice, I spat, "What's wrong, Valkaan? Can't even beat a single werewolf? You're the weakest Valkaan I've ever met. If you keep boring me, I'll tear out your throat."

"I'm just enjoying the match!" Burbelga protested, but he reflexively rubbed his throat with his hand.

A werewolf's fangs were unbelievably powerful, but even they couldn't scratch a Valkaan unless they were severely weakened. I thought back to my battle with Arshes. He'd been mortally wounded in his battle with Friedensrichter, and that was the only reason my fangs were able to reach him. Looking back, I'd only made it this far thanks to the help of all the people around me, Friedensrichter included.

[You're amazing, Veight. You're leading a Valkaan by the nose,] Jerrick said, awed.

As I dodged yet another attack, I replied, [It's not me. It's because all of us—humans and demons—are working together that we can beat this guy. We're all amazing.]

Outwitting Burbelga required human magic and werewolf communication techniques. It was only thanks to the cooperation between two races that had historically been at odds that I stood a chance here. Before, I'd been the only person aside from Friedensrichter who understood both humans and demons, and how to make the most of their respective strengths. There had been a limit to what I could accomplish alone though. But now, I had a cadre of companions I could count on to have my back.

[There's no way I'm losing this.]

[You're something else, Veight, beating a Valkaan one-on-one.]

*Except I'm not alone. I have all of you backing me up.* On the other hand, Burbelga, who truly was alone, was gradually succumbing to his exhaustion.

"Take! This! Hraaah!"

"You've got some nice battle cries for a rookie." I continued provoking Burbelga as I danced around him. It wasn't as if my attacks could hurt him, so my only effective weapon was my words. Fortunately, they seemed to slowly chip away at Burbelga's mental fortitude.

"Did you win all your past fights with surprise attacks? No wonder you're so weak," I gloated. "You're just a coward."

"I did not!" Burbelga tried to backhand me, but he misjudged the distance between us. I didn't even have to move to avoid the blow. He was completely falling apart now.

"What's wrong? Your punches are getting slower. Even if you have the strength of a Valkaan, your technique is sloppy. I've never seen such a poor martial artist in my life."

"Wh-What did you say?!"



I wasn't even lying. While it seemed Burbelga did have some basic training in hand-to-hand combat and knew a little about how to effectively channel his overwhelming might as a Valkaan, half of his attacks were just wild blows with no form or technique behind them. A far cry from Friedensrichter. Not only had Friedensrichter possessed a Demon Lord's might, but he'd also clearly studied kendo in his past life. His movements had always been sharp and precise.

Granted, a dragonkin's build and musculature was completely different from a human's, so he hadn't been able to use all those techniques perfectly. Had he been reincarnated as a human or a werewolf, he might have survived his battle with Arshes and still been alive today. But there was no telling what would've happened to Kuwol's history if he hadn't reincarnated into the past. Burbelga's assault had grown so weak that I had the time to think idle thoughts like these. *Oh, whoops. I'm supposed to be taunting him.*

"Valkaan, if you claim to be strong, surely there's more to you than this. If you don't get serious soon, my patience will run dry. And you won't like me when I'm angry."

"Y-You bastard!" Burbelga once again charged forward and threw a sloppy punch. While I called it sloppy, it was still moving at the speed of sound, so if I didn't dodge it'd blow my head clean off.

Barely sidestepping out of the way, I said in a calm voice, "That'll never hit me."

"Grrraaaaaagh!" Burbelga started swinging his arms like windmills. At this point, he was acting more like a child throwing a tantrum than a fighter. And what few combat techniques he did know were nowhere to be seen.

At the start of the battle, I'd occasionally seen him use footwork and combination moves that spoke to some amount of martial arts training. Granted, it was also clear he hadn't used those techniques in so long that he'd forgotten most of what he'd learned. He'd been relying so much on his raw strength as a Valkaan that he'd neglected his training. He wouldn't have needed them against other humans, and it was clear from how he was reacting to my barbs that he'd killed all the Valkaan he'd beaten with surprise attacks. If he actually started using more feints and proper footwork, he'd be able to corner

me eventually, but he was too riled up to even realize that. And so, my taunts continued.

“You’re the weakest Valkaan I’ve ever met.”

“I’m not weak! I’m strong! The strongest Valkaan to ever live!”

“Hah! What a joke.”

I carefully avoided his wild swings using practiced footwork and careful sidesteps. Thanks to the Gusokujutsu I’d learned in Wa, I could maintain dodging while conserving energy. All of those techniques had been developed to help fighters in full suits of armor, so they focused on achieving as much as possible with minimal movement.

Eventually, I stopped one of Burbelga’s punches with an open palm. In truth, I’d just held my hand out right where his fist would come to a stop, but to Burbelga, it probably felt like I’d stopped him cold.

“Wha—”

“None of your attacks can touch me. Valkaan aren’t as strong as you think, Burbelga. The strongest people are those nameless humans and demons you belittled.”

“You speak lies!”

The magic and martial arts I was using were all techniques that’d culminated over centuries by nameless people working tirelessly to hone their craft and create a better tomorrow. That was how humanity had advanced as far as it had. Thanks to the blood, sweat, and tears of all of those predecessors, I could fight on even footing with the Valkaan in front of me.

“If you can’t even understand that simple fact, then there’s no saving you. This sunset is the last sunset you will ever see.” I purposely chose those words to make Burbelga glance over the setting sun to the west. The moment he did, I threw a punch at his face.

“Gwah?!” he grunted.

It landed, and this time, blood spurted from his nose. *Wait, a nosebleed? That’s it? I put everything I had into that!* I knew I couldn’t lose this fight, but I

was starting to think I wouldn't win it either. Just then, Monza let out a howl, and I knew victory was mine.

[Boss! Hey, boss!]

[How many times do I have to tell you to call me elder now?!]

[Aha, my bad. Anyway, the Garneys said that Neptotes is coming.] She said it so casually like she was inviting a friend over to come drink.

*You know humanity's future rests on the outcome of this battle, right?*

Through a relay system of werewolf howls, we could communicate over long distances nearly instantly. The Garney brothers had been itching to fight, but I saddled them with relay duty instead. They were too old to be getting into all-out brawls.

I planned to have Burbelga and Neptotes fight it out after weakening Burbelga, and then take out Neptotes once he was tired out from fighting Burbelga. After all, I could at least beat a Valkaan who was on the verge of death. I'd done it before. And like a true scientist, I only trusted what was proved to be true. I wouldn't risk humanity's future on a plan I wasn't sure would work.

I'd chosen to weaken Burbelga rather than Neptotes because Burbelga seemed like he had more mana. Now that he was mentally cornered and drained of at least a good chunk of his mana, he and Neptotes should be close in strength. Ideally, the two of them would kill each other, but if either of them barely survived, I'd be able to take them. Of course, Neptotes already saw me as an enemy. I couldn't be here when he arrived, so it was time for this boring vice-commander to make his grand exit.

I recalled one of the Black Werewolf King plays I'd watched, and putting on my best acting voice, I said, "What a boring man. You're not even worth killing. I'll let someone else have you." With that, I leapt away.

Burbelga didn't even chase after me. I glanced back as I was running and saw him staring at me, confused. Though he pretended to love fighting, I could tell he didn't really. The reason he'd killed all his foes with surprise attacks was because he was scared of real combat. Aggression was one way prey creatures tried to defend themselves from predators, and that was basically what

Burbelga had done. He acted as tough as he did because at heart he was a coward. And due to his cowardice, he didn't chase me.

I crested a sand dune and leapt down to where Kite, Fumino, and Ryucco were hiding.

"I'm back," I announced.

"Nice going, Veight!" Kite said with a grin. It was a relief to be back among friends.

Ryucco thumped the ground irritably and said, "I can't believe you did something so dangerous, ya blasted lunkhead! Quit making me worry!"

"I became Master's disciple before you, so it's my job to protect you."

"Does that make it my job to protect you?" Parker said, cackling. He was walking over from the other side of the sand dune with Mao and Friede in tow. It seemed they'd successfully managed to give Neptotes the slip. Elmersia was with them too, but she looked peeved.

"What's wrong, Elmersia?"

"I just wish I'd had a chance to go out there." Her job had been to take over for me if I got knocked out or was too tired to keep going, so if anything, it was a good thing she hadn't needed to fight. She should be happy that everything was going according to plan.

Friede ran up to me, smiling. "Dad, we got Neptotes really riled up. He's raring to go!"

"Perfect. Guess we'll see quite a spectacle. He's more skilled at martial arts and magic than Burbelga, but he seemed extremely averse to fighting when we first met. Good work, Friede."

"Ehehe."

I was amazed at how reliable my daughter had become. She could probably take over as head of the Aindorf family at this point. *Maybe I'll discuss it with Airia when I get back.*

Just then, Nibert ran over and shouted, "Guys, it's starting!"

“Wow, we get to see a fight between Valkaan!”

“I hope they both lose!”

Everyone took out their telescopes to watch the battle. *This isn't a picnic, guys.* That being said, I was curious how the battle would go, so I took out my telescope as well.

“You weren't kidding when you said Neptotes was raring to go...”

Burbelga was just standing there, but Neptotes was actively rushing at him.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” Burbelga shouted as he looked up.

Neptotes said nothing in response and simply launched himself at his opponent. Burbelga stuck to using thrusts and kicks, while Neptotes fought with grapples and pins. Seeing that Neptotes was trying to get a hold of him, Burbelga stuck to low kicks and short punches to keep his limbs close.

“Man, he really is a coward.” Garbert sighed as he watched Burbelga.

I was starting to think I might have damaged Burbelga's pride a little too much. He still had the upper hand in power and mana, but wasn't taking advantage of it. Meanwhile, Neptotes was full of vigor and utilized a combination of martial arts and magic to overwhelm Burbelga. Occasionally, he'd whip up little dust devils with magic, forcing Burbelga on the back foot. Even a Valkaan would reflexively close their eyes if sand got into them.

As she watched the battle, Friede muttered, “Isn't this kind of bad?”

“Yeah, I'm getting a little worried too. At this rate...”

Just as I said that, Neptotes conjured a massive dust storm, obscuring the two of them for a few seconds. *I've got a bad feeling about this.* Indeed, as the dust cleared, I saw Burbelga lying on the ground, his neck clearly broken. Mana could heal his wounds, but a broken neck took a lot of mana to fix. Burbelga desperately tried to gather his mana and repair his neck, but Neptotes wasn't going to give him the time to recover.

Kite muttered, “He's used paralysis magic on Burbelga's throat.”

*He's trying to suffocate him.* Valkaan needed oxygen to live, just like all other living creatures. Without oxygen, their brains would starve.

I let out a long sigh. “It’s over. Burbelga’s done for...”

Though it was hard to make out at this distance, I could tell that Burbelga’s face was turning purple. Neptotes had succeeded in suffocating him. A pretty pathetic way to go, all things considered. While I did feel a little bad for Burbelga, I needed to deal with Neptotes before I could mourn the fallen Valkaan. Unfortunately, Neptotes had used almost none of his mana in that fight. *I can’t believe I thought this plan would actually exhaust both of them.* I was once again reminded of the fact that I wasn’t suited to being a tactician. Either way, Neptotes remained standing and still in perfect shape.

“What now, Veight?” Fahn asked, worried.

I turned to her, trying to look as confident as possible. If I didn’t act like I had things under control, everyone would panic.

“Our goal hasn’t changed. Remember the plan we came up with in case Burbelga was the one who won?”

“Th-That’s what we’re going with?”

While I was a failure of a tactician, I’d still come up with contingencies in case the main plan failed. If nothing else, I knew the importance of having multiple backups. The problem was we now needed to lure Neptotes to the right spot. The only person who could do that was me. *As long as Fumino and Kite are backing me up, I should be fine.*

“We’ll use *that*, just on Neptotes instead. Sorry, but it looks like we’re all working overtime tonight. You all remember the plan, right?”

“Yes,” Everyone replied with nervous nods.

I sprinted down the sand dune towards Neptotes. He would head for Kuwol if I didn’t reach him quickly, and there was no telling how much death and destruction he would cause before we could catch up. Neptotes seemed to be inspecting Burbelga’s lifeless body but looked up as soon as he spotted me approaching.

“Neptotes!” I shouted.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the werewolf I thought I had killed. Poor man, betrayed by your own daughter.”

*Sorry, but Airia and I raised Friede properly. She would never betray anyone.* I wanted to tell Neptotes that he’d fallen for our ruse, but just in case our plan failed, it was better for him to believe Friede, Mao, and Parker were still on his side. Protecting Friede’s life was more important than protecting her honor.

I heard Jerrick’s distant howl. [Think you can do this, Veight?]

[I should be able to. Keep feeding me predictions,] I responded. Turning back to Neptotes, I said, “I figured I could defeat now that you’re exhausted.”

“You think I’m exhausted?” Neptotes sneered.

In reality, it was clear to me that he’d barely broken a sweat in his battle with Burbelga. But I needed to play the fool; otherwise our plan would fall apart. If he didn’t think I was fighting alone after being betrayed by everyone, things would become difficult. Once he started to suspect that I still had allies and a plan, he might flee or try to target my friends instead of me. Ideally, I could maintain the illusion until the very last moment.

“Bluff all you want, but you won’t fool me. After I beat you, all those traitors will fall in line. No one would dare raise their swords against the werewolf who defeated a Valkaan.”

“Know your place, whelp,” Neptotes said, raising his hand. He seemed entirely convinced he had the advantage. I expected him to be more cautious, but Mao’s deception worked better than expected. He truly thought he held all the cards while I remained the oblivious fool.

*Perfect.* It frustrated me how much he underestimated me, but it was exactly what I needed. For centuries, Neptotes had been wary of Burbelga, yet now he’d managed to defeat him handily in a direct confrontation. Moreover, based on what I’d told him before, he knew that no other Valkaan remained, making him believe that no one posed a threat. Cowards like him always wanted to prove their strength to themselves. If he struggled against me, it would force him to question that strength. After all, in his eyes, I was nothing more than a

weakling.

[He'll attempt to grab you with his right hand, Veight. If he grapples you, it's over,] Jerrick howled, and I quickly prepared to dodge.

"Die, fool!" Neptotes concentrated mana in his fingers and lunged towards me. He was combining some kind of spell with the grab, and while I couldn't fully grasp what it was, I knew that being touched would spell my end.

He was a skilled grappler, but I managed to leap away at the last second. Compared to Burbelga's wild punches, Neptotes's attacks were noticeably slower. When making more precise movements, such as grabbing someone, it was natural to lower your speed. Thankfully, this meant that with strengthening magic, I could keep dodging as long as I stayed transformed.

[He's shooting fire magic next!]

*Which one?! There are a lot of fire spells!* Considering Neptotes used destruction magic from the ancient age, it was likely Fumino didn't recognize it. *Ah well, what can you do?* I quickly chanted a spell to raise my heat resistance. If I hadn't known it was coming beforehand, I definitely couldn't have finished the incantation in time.

Neptotes chanted a few words, and a second later, a fireball erupted from his palm. *Oh, I can't block this.* I immediately changed course and jumped out of the way.

"Whoa!" I barely dodged the scalding fireball in time; a few of my hairs were singed as it flew past and exploded on the ground behind me. *That was close...*

The intense flames showed no sign of dying down. Neptotes's fireball had been filled with a combustive substance that would've clung to my body had it hit. While a heat resistance spell might be enough to fend off a temporary burst of fire, there was no way I could survive a continual burn. Fumino's prediction magic gave me the heads-up I needed to apply my own knowledge of magic and react in time.

"Oho, so you managed to dodge that." Neptotes sounded unconcerned, but I could smell his irritation. Much like Burbelga, he was in love with his own power, which made him predictable. But unlike Burbelga, I couldn't afford to



rile him up with petty taunts. If Neptotes felt he was at a disadvantage, he'd run. I needed him to believe he held the upper hand.

I pretended to stagger, then started running away. *Is he gonna chase?*

"Hahahaha, you won't get away that easily!"

*Good.* I howled to my comrades, [The prey is entering the cage. Is everyone ready?!]

[We're ready!] Fahn howled back.

*I knew I could count on you, Fahn.*

"Stop running, you coward!" Neptotes shouted from a good distance behind me.

It seemed he wasn't accustomed to running; rather, he ran with the grace of a toddler. However, the fact that he could keep up with a werewolf using strengthening magic showed just how much innate power the mana of a Valkaan granted. Had I focused all my mana purely on boosting my speed, I probably could've outrun him, but that wasn't the goal.

Once I reached the designated spot, I pretended to lose my footing on a sand dune and came to a halt. Though I wasn't tired, I panted to make it seem like I was. The actors in the Black Werewolf King plays would've laughed at my pathetic acting, but it was good enough to convince a Valkaan drunk on his own sense of superiority.

"There is no escape from me. This desert will be your grave." Neptotes spread his arms wide and began chanting. Fireballs appeared in both of his palms. They looked identical to the fireball he'd thrown at me before, but something seemed different about these.

[Kite said those will track you,] Jerrick howled, confirming my suspicions.

"What a pain..." There was a spell that let you keep objects floating in the air, and Neptotes was probably combining that with a spell that allowed him to move objects remotely. That meant he'd have to control the fireballs manually.

"You're mine!"

He launched both fireballs at me. They moved slowly, about the speed of a

baseball thrown by an amateur pitcher. Definitely slow enough for a werewolf to react. I assumed Neptotes had summoned two of them to try and pincer me, and as I suspected, one circled around to my rear. I pretended not to notice.

“You’re mine!”

*You said that like five seconds ago.* I slid underneath both fireballs just before they crashed where I was standing, causing them to collide with each other instead.

“Tch!” Neptotes clicked his tongue as he watched the combustive liquid in the fireballs fall to the sandy ground. He didn’t seem very skilled at using destruction magic. Strengthening magic was clearly his forte, which made it easier to read his moves. A battle between mages was similar to a battle between swordsmen. As the fight progressed, the skill gap between the fighters became increasingly clear.

[He has many spells in his arsenal, but doesn’t know how to fully utilize a Valkaan’s vast mana pool. I can take him,] I howled to Jerrick.

[Kite, Fumino, and Parker all said the same thing too,] Jerrick replied.

*Makes sense.* The three of them were masters in their respective fields, so they could tell when a mage was skilled or not. It didn’t seem like Neptotes had the knowledge to wipe out everyone with a large-scale destruction magic spell, so I gave the signal to Fahn.

[It’s time to begin the hunt!]

[Got it!]

A second later, werewolves and werecats emerged from behind nearby sand dunes. Fahn, Monza, Garbert, Nibert, and Elmersia were all present. Elmersia had used strengthening magic to enhance everyone’s reflexes and physical strength, making them all as capable as I was. Neptotes’s eyes nearly popped out of his skull as he looked around.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” he gasped.

“These are my comrades. You should know, werewolves never hunt alone.”

Neptotes glanced around worriedly but then relaxed a little as he realized

none of them had a Valkaan's mana pool. He was still a mage, even if he wasn't a skilled one.

"Bwahahaha! Bring all the friends you want. You're all worthless before the might of a Valkaan—the might of a god!"

*Valkaan aren't gods.* In fact, even though I'd reincarnated into a different world, I'd never met a single "god." Regardless, it seemed Neptotes was willing to keep fighting, much to my relief. It was easier to hunt prey that fought back than prey that ran away. That also meant I could safely taunt him now.

"Both you and I are just specks of dust in the grand cosmos, Neptotes. You say you're a god, but you're as insignificant as the grains of sand you're standing on."

"How dare you?! I am a *god*!"

He lunged forward, attempting to grab me again, but his movements were far too obvious. Valkaan primarily fought against weaker opponents, which made them complacent. Neptotes, in particular, had avoided fighting other Valkaan as much as possible. As a result, he didn't bother with feints or leading attacks, which he should have done against someone of equal skill. Of course, he still had the speed of a Valkaan on his side, which was why I needed Fumino's prediction magic and my own bag of tricks to stay out of reach.

"Scatter! Six Flower Formation!" I shouted, using my regular voice because Elmersia wouldn't be able to parse howling. Fahn and the others spread out into a hexagonal formation around me and Neptotes. The Garney Brothers advanced slightly, serving as the vanguard. "Let's do this! Blood Moon!"

Blood Moon was the full-body strengthening magic spell I'd devised, and I cast it on everyone. Normally, it was difficult to use magic in the vicinity of a Valkaan, but I had a large enough mana pool to manage.

"All right! Don't worry about the spell effects running out. I can recast this anytime! Get him!"

"Got it!" My werewolves closed in on Neptotes from all sides.

"Nrrrgh?!" Neptotes was taken aback; he hadn't expected regular werewolves to rush a Valkaan.

His only combat experience was tormenting and slaughtering those weaker than him. This was his first time being on the defensive, and it made him scared. Fear dulled his senses and delayed his reactions. No matter how strong he was, if he couldn't effectively use that strength, it was worthless.

"You mongrels!" Neptotes turned to Monza and attempted to grab her. However, Monza effortlessly sidestepped his grasp.

"Aha, too bad." Monza kicked up a cloud of sand, targeting Neptotes's vulnerable eyes. Just like Burbelga, Neptotes's eyes were susceptible. It was the perfect tactic to harass a Valkaan.

"Hrgh! Blegh! Ack!" Sand got into Neptotes's mouth as well, interrupting his casting and causing him to cough uncontrollably.

As Monza leapt away, Garbert stepped in. "I've always wanted to try punching a Valkaan! Can I?!"

*You don't need his permission, you know? Besides, he can't understand you anyway.* However, Neptotes easily evaded Garbert's punch.

"You little—" Neptotes then tried to grab Garbert's outstretched arm, but Fumino predicted it and Jerrick let him know.

"Whoa, there." Garbert swiftly pulled his arm back. Despite frequently acting foolishly, Garbert had survived numerous battles and was a veteran fighter.

"Hey, Veight, is this good enough?"

"Yeah, keep it up," I said. "If we give him a chance to catch his breath and calm down, we won't stand a chance."

Neptotes wasn't like Burbelga. He could use strengthening magic and had refined grappling techniques. Since those were my two strengths as well, it became challenging to strike any of his weak points. But on the plus side, I wasn't fighting alone.

"Yeah! Then I guess I'm up next!" As Garbert fell back, Nibert dashed forward from Neptotes's blind spot. "'Sup, old man!"

"Wha?!"

The Garney Brothers both had red fur and looked similar enough while

transformed, making it difficult for Neptotes to differentiate between them. To Neptotes, it seemed as though Garbert had suddenly cloned himself, delaying his reaction just enough for Nibert's punch to connect.

"Nngh!" Nibert's fist made a resounding impact, although Neptotes remained unharmed.

"You insolent cretins! *Hegem tou iyoru...*" Incensed, Neptotes started making hand signs as he chanted another spell. However, Garbert promptly jumped back in and kicked sand in his face.

"Not so fast, geezer!"

"Bwah?!" Once again, Neptotes was forced to stop casting as sand found its way into his mouth.

The only reason he fell for the same trick twice was his unwavering confidence in victory, neglecting to change tactics. By the time Neptotes rubbed the sand out of his eyes and tried to grab Garbert, the Garney brothers had already leapt away. As always, the two were in perfect sync.

"H-How dare you..." Neptotes glared at us, his ears burning red. I felt a twinge of guilt, as if we were ganging up on and bullying an elderly man, but defeating a Valkaan required such measures.

I smirked at Neptotes and said, "You'd better abandon your dreams of conquering Kuwol if you can't even defeat a few werewolves. They'll simply outmaneuver you there too. No one will accept you as king. Give it up and return to the south where you belong."

"It matters not what you puny beings think! I am a king—no, a god! I will kill anyone who refuses to bow to me!"

A true leader earned respect and trust, but it seemed Neptotes didn't understand even that simple fact. Strength alone accomplished nothing. It was almost pitiable. But that didn't stop me from taunting him.

"Well, we're not bowing to you, and you haven't managed to kill any of us. You sure you have the bite to match your bark, old man?"

"Cease your prattling!"

Suddenly, Jerrick howled, [He's gathering mana inside himself! It's strengthening magic!]

Kite was using epoch magic to constantly monitor the mana in and around Neptotes, while Fumino was using prediction magic to see what he would do in the next few seconds. As a result, we were fully aware of his every action *and* the magic he was using. Elmersia couldn't parse Jerrick's howls, but as a mage, she could sense the change in mana without help.

Neptotes jumped back, putting enough space between us to ensure we wouldn't interrupt his casting with another mouthful of sand. "*Ressa demu kaneeji!*"

While I'd studied the ancient tongue, this particular incantation was esoteric enough that I didn't understand it.

[Jerrick, what's he casting?!]

[Kite said he's increasing his speed! Fumino said Elmersia's his first target!] It hadn't escaped Neptotes's attention that she was the only non-werewolf here as well as the only mage aside from me. He wanted to cull the number of mages to reduce our overall magical strength.

"Elmersia, watch out!"

"R-Right!" Elmersia exclaimed as she jumped back, just as Neptotes dashed forward. He was now faster than a fully strengthened werewolf at top speed.

"You can't escape me!" Neptotes bellowed.

"Ahh!" His fingers grazed Elmersia's clothes, ripping them to shreds. Even the tips of his fingers were deadly weapons. If he'd succeeded in grabbing Elmersia, he could've easily crushed her sturdy werecat bones.

"Hahaha! Too slow!" Neptotes leapt forward again, determined to catch Elmersia this time. We were too far away to stop him, but fortunately, we still had an ace up our sleeve.

"Activate teleportation panel three!" And instantly, Elmersia vanished.

"What?!"

She reappeared a hundred meters away, far enough that even a Valkaan

couldn't cover that distance immediately. We had actually hidden Ryucco's teleportation panels all around the area. There were six in total, paired in a one-way chain. That meant panel one teleported you to panel two, panel two teleported you to panel three, and so on. Panel six teleported you back to panel one, completing the loop. The panels were coded to recognize individuals based on mana density so they only teleported life-forms and not sand or air. They also had safety features built in so you couldn't accidentally trip onto one and have only your upper half teleported or anything. Right now, their main issue was that they sometimes failed to teleport a person's clothes or anything they were carrying.

[They work, Veight!] Jerrick howled in triumph.

[Perfect! Let's keep using them. Everyone remembers their positions, right?]

[Yep!]

Now that Elmersia had been teleported away, Neptotes would have to get through all the werewolves to reach her again. She couldn't understand our howling, so it was best for her to stay in the rear for now anyway. That would let her focus solely on casting strengthening magic on us as well. Everyone else found a teleportation panel to stand on and waited for Jerrick to tell them they were being targeted. If they were, they teleported away immediately.

"Over here, old maaan," Monza sang as she teleported out of Neptotes's reach. She seemed to be enjoying herself, but if we didn't switch to going on the offensive eventually, this game of tag would never end.

"Running really isn't my style..." Fahn muttered, dodging Neptotes's next attack.

"Hey! Hey!" Garbert and Nibert shouted in unison, running circles around Neptotes.

As red-furred werewolves, the brothers were faster and stronger than regular werewolves, and they could keep up with Neptotes's increased speed with ease. Meanwhile, I was just an average werewolf, so I needed to use Gusokujutsu to keep Neptotes at arm's length. Thankfully, this martial art was designed to deal with grapplers, making it perfect against him. *Oh, whoops, I almost forgot to keep taunting him.*

“You can’t even land a single blow. Are you sure you’re not going senile?” I remarked.

“Nnnrrrgh!”

My comment had clearly wounded his pride, making him act recklessly. Instead of ignoring us and charging straight for Kuwol, he was now incapable of making rational decisions. *Perfect*. Throughout the fight, I’d gained a better understanding of Neptotes’s character. He was prideful but also a cautious coward. Though he liked to believe he was strong, wise, and godlike, deep down, he knew it wasn’t true. That was why he was so susceptible to my taunts. Since I couldn’t break Neptotes’s body, I had to shatter his spirit instead.

“Are you *truly* a Valkaan? You’re so weak I’m starting to wonder if you’re a fraud,” I taunted.

“You insolent cur! You can’t even scratch me! How dare you presume to be my superior!” Neptotes spat.

*Well, it’s true we can’t hurt you, but we’re still gonna win*, I thought. “We’re merely showing you mercy. If we wanted to, we could rip you apart at any moment.”

“Liar! I can see right through you!” he declared.

“Am I really lying? Care to find out?” I challenged.

“Go ahead and try, if you truly think you can kill me!” Neptotes unleashed a punch enhanced with strengthening magic, aimed at my face. Like Burbelga, his punches were faster than sound, making it impossible for me to react in time. Thankfully, Fumino warned me in advance, allowing me to easily dodge out of the way.

Pretending to be at a disadvantage, I leapt back to one of the teleportation panels. Ryucco activated it, and within a second, I found myself dozens of meters behind Neptotes. The sudden shift in my vision was disorienting, but thanks to my enhanced werewolf senses, I managed to keep my balance.

“Hey, Veight, aren’t you enjoying this a little too much?”

“I’m not really enjoying this at all. If anything, I’d like to end this as soon as



possible.”

We still had our final trump card, but if it failed, we’d be forced to run. So, I needed to create a situation where success was *guaranteed*. Unfortunately, I’d devised the teleportation panel strategy assuming we’d be fighting Burbelga. Neptotes, being a mage, might figure out the true purpose behind our use of these panels.

While we fought, I’d observed Neptotes’s every action. He hadn’t noticed the buried teleportation panel, indicating he couldn’t use epoch magic or prediction magic. Furthermore, he wasn’t an artificer like Ryucco, so he couldn’t analyze the function of a magic tool based on its structure. The fact that he wasn’t teleporting himself meant he couldn’t use teleportation magic either. However, he was able to use destruction magic, strengthening magic, and at least some level of mind magic to read people’s intentions. It was possible he’d studied a few other fields of magic as well. *Should I take the risk or not?* Despite using the teleportation panels, we were slowly being overwhelmed.

“I’m sorry, I can’t keep it up anymore!” Elmersia shouted, leaping away. Unlike werewolves, werecats hunted alone. They also couldn’t understand our howling, which made it harder for Elmersia to coordinate with us. She’d been carrying the largest burden, so it was understandable that she’d tap out first.

“Okay, just focus on using whatever magic you still can!” Even if she retreated far enough to be completely out of the battlefield, she could use strengthening magic to increase our speed and power and heal any minor wounds. However, with one less person fighting Neptotes, the rest of us would have to work even harder to keep him at bay.

“Th-This is starting to get dangerous!” Fahn shouted, barely avoiding another one of Neptotes’s grabs. She was a close quarters fighter through and through, so she was much worse at running and hiding than Monza or even the Garneys. “At this rate, I won’t be able to maintain my transformation much longer!”

“Yeah, I’m gettin’ hungry too!” The Garney Brothers were being worn down as well.

When transformed, a werewolf was as nimble and strong as they had been in their prime, but the amount of time they could spend transformed decreased

with age. *Come to think of it, we're all pretty old now...* But while we were getting worn down, Neptotes's impatience was growing.

"Enough! Your flitting stops now!"

Neptotes still hadn't noticed the teleportation panels, from what I could tell. The way he was chasing us made me think he believed we could all teleport at will. The problem was, every now and then, I smelled a lie in his statements. Undoubtedly, he was getting frustrated, but he seemed to have one last trick up his sleeve. Unfortunately, we didn't have the strength left to force him to use it.

"Guess we can't keep going like this..." Neptotes hadn't cast any spells without an incantation so far, so I suspected he simply couldn't. In that case, if his trump card was a spell of some kind, we'd be able to interrupt it. And if it wasn't, that would mean we could handle it. Hopefully.

"All right." My mind was made up. "Everyone, do you trust me?"

"With our lives," Garbert said with a nod.

Monza grinned and said, "We entrusted our lives to you the moment you became the leader of the werewolf squad."

[Hey, I've trusted you since we were kids!] Jerrick howled.

*This isn't a competition guys.* Still, their unwavering confidence in me made the burden of carrying their lives feel just a bit lighter. "Fine, then. Let's show today's youngsters that us veterans still got it!"

"You just wanna show off to your daughter, Veight!" Nibert said with a laugh.

*Oh, shut up.*

Incensed, Neptotes once again charged at us. "What are you mongrels laughing about?! Insulting me in that barbaric tongue?!"

*Actually, no. But if that's what you want to believe, go ahead.* I jumped in front of Neptotes while everyone else jumped back. It was time to use our trump card. [Begin Operation Paradox,] I howled.

*It's a pretty cool operation name, if I do say so myself. Really gets the blood pumping.*

In response Jerrick howled, [Roger! Ryucco ain't happy about it though. He's swearing up and down!]

[Tell him I'll cut him some rabbit-shaped apples later!] I mentally apologized to Ryucco for what I was about to do to his invention, then turned to Neptotes.

"Hrngh!" He launched a punch right at my face, which I dodged with a backstep. I didn't need to jump back as far as I did, but I wanted the extra leeway. A single misstep could mean death after all.

"Don't worry, Veight!"

"We're all watching, just like you asked!"

Indeed, everyone was standing back and watching, but that was helping me more than they realized.

"Veight, go a bit to the right!" I dodged Neptotes's grab and shuffled to the right as Fahn asked.

*How many more steps do I need to take?* I slowly retreated, pretending to be cornered. In truth, I was actually being cornered, but fortunately, I had a trump card in that corner. Neptotes possessed physical abilities far above my own and could enhance himself with magic just like I could. My only saving grace was that I was much better at martial arts. Neptotes's attacks were simplistic, making them easier to read and dodge. Though they were too fast to see, I could rely on prediction magic to deal with them.

"Veight, you're too far to the right! Scoot back to the left a little!"

*Please be more specific, Fahn. How much is "a little"? I'm not trying to break a piñata here; I need precise instructions or we're all dead.* Well, that was an exaggeration; a slight discrepancy wouldn't kill me or anyone else. It was crucial to accurately calculate my backwards distance, but I could be a bit off to the left or right. Thankfully, Monza was carefully keeping track of that.

"Another three lunges back," she calmly instructed.

"Got it." We'd fought alongside each other for so long that Monza had come to measure distance based on the number of lunges it would take for me to reach a location. In the midst of a fight, that unit of measure was actually quite

convenient.

“Stop muttering in that barbaric tongue of yours and speak a civilized language!” Neptotes clasped his hands together and began chanting a spell, so I retaliated by kicking sand into his face. “Bwah?!”

*How many times do we have to teach you this lesson, old man?*

“You bastard!” He launched a roundhouse kick at me, which I easily dodged. It was a sloppy kick, but as always, the power of a Valkaan made it deadly. A single blow from him could shatter every bone in my body.

I managed to lunge backwards, leaving me with two lunges left. I glanced down and noticed a familiar jacket, confirming I was indeed just two lunges away.

“Very well, how about this?!” Neptotes picked up a nearby pebble and hurled it at me. It was traveling faster than the speed of sound, but it was still as fragile as any other rock here.

“As if that would hurt a werewolf.” The rock shattered before it even reached me, and I casually swatted away the bit of gravel it had become. *Come on, just two more lunges to go. Try to grapple me again.* I needed Neptotes to close the distance, so I taunted him once more. “Are you really that scared of me?”

“Silence!”

*There we go.* As Neptotes charged forward, I swiftly backstepped. Everyone shouted words of encouragement.

“Veight, just one more lunge!”

“Be careful!”

“You’re right on target; no need to go left or right!”

Neptotes charged at me again, his face contorted with rage. This particular attack was one I absolutely had to dodge with the right amount of space.

“Die, werewolf!” He drew his arm back for a punch.

*Perfect. Now I—*

“Did you honestly believe I would fall for that trick?” Neptotes declared,

suddenly appearing behind me.

“Ngh?!” I focused all my mana into reinforcing my body, and not a moment too soon, as I felt a crushing impact on my back.

“I warned you of your doom, werewolf.” I faintly heard Neptotes’s voice in the distance as my consciousness began to fade.

In truth, I had considered the possibility that Neptotes might try to circle behind me. Given how carefully I was retreating, it wouldn’t be surprising if he caught on that I was luring him somewhere. I’d even prepared for that scenario. The problem was, I’d misjudged the timing of when he’d launch his surprise attack. You could call it simple bad luck. Indeed, most fights were decided by chance. Still, I couldn’t believe this was how my second life was going to end.

To be fair, I’d done a pretty good job so far, if I do say so myself. In my past life, I’d just been an ordinary person with no redeeming qualities. But in this life, I’d become a mighty werewolf. If nothing else, I’d won big in the species lottery. Not only that, but I’d been blessed with a wonderful teacher and had become the first werewolf mage in the world. Best of all, my boss turned out to be another guy who’d reincarnated from Japan, someone I could genuinely respect. My wife and daughter were both wonderful people I cherished. When all was said and done, I’d been more fortunate than most in this life.

*Wait a second.*

*There’s no way I’m dying here. I refuse. This is not how my story is going to end.*

If I died here, Friede, Fahn, Jerrick—everyone I cared about—would be in danger. The worldwide peace I’d worked so hard to build would shatter as well. There was no way I was letting this fossil of a bygone era ruin everything. I’d fought plenty of strong enemies before, and there were dozens of times I was sure I was going to die. Every foe had their own burdens and reasons to oppose me. Some even became friends afterwards. Compared to them, Neptotes was

nothing. There wasn't a single reason to respect him. He was a dirty coward who just happened to be a Valkaan. I wasn't going to let *him* of all people take everything away from me. If he overtook Kuwol, it'd be just like my past life in Japan, where those with power and influence got to do whatever they pleased while those beneath them suffered.

*Not on my damn watch. I can still fight. If I can still think, that means I'm still alive. Where's my body? If I can find out where my body is, then we're on for another round.*

I wasn't going to lose here. I couldn't afford to.

As my fighting spirit reignited, I regained consciousness and returned to reality.

"Hah?!" I opened my eyes and found that I was flying through the air. It hadn't even been a second since I was punched.

Thanks to my strengthening magic, I'd avoided instant death. I could tell several of my bones were broken, but the damage was light enough for me to heal myself with magic. I poured all of my mana into recovery and trusted my bones would be knitted back together by the time I landed. Looking down, I saw Neptotes glaring angrily at me.

"You tough little insect! To think you'd survive a Valkaan's blow!"

While I was still alive, I'd be flat out of mana after healing myself. I'd used the majority of my 1,000 kites of mana to strengthen my body. This meant a single punch from a Valkaan would be enough to incapacitate a werewolf who had used the equivalent of that. It was insane. However, I was still *alive*, so the battle wasn't over yet. I could still fight, and I could still win.

"Neptotes, you'll never be able to kill me!" I shouted as I touched the ground.

Neptotes looked visibly shaken. Usually, only a Valkaan could survive the attacks of another Valkaan. The fact that I was still alive defied common sense. Moreover, from Neptotes's scent, I could tell he was no longer trying to deceive

us. He had realized but kept hidden that he'd spotted our trap. However, that meant he had no other cards left to play. Neither did I, but there was still a chance to salvage this situation. I was out of mana, but not out of ideas.

I unsheathed the blade at my waist. It was the katana I'd discovered in the ruined castle—Friedensrichter's katana. At first glance, it resembled a Kuwolese scimitar, but anyone who had lived in Japan would recognize it as a bona fide katana.

Gathering my strength, I unleashed a Soul Shaker. "AWOOOOOOOOOO!"

This was a spell that only werewolf mages could use; a technique that siphoned nearby mana through sound. It was something that not even a Valkaan could replicate. Mana began flowing from the katana into me. There was an immense amount stored within it. Not enough to turn me into a Valkaan, but still a solid 10,000 kites' worth. However, as I drew mana from the blade, it started to rust and chip. Mana had protected it from the ravages of time, but now that mana was gone. This katana had been my only connection to Friedensrichter—the only means by which I might be able to find out where he'd been reincarnated next.

*I'm sorry...* I'd wanted to bring this back to Meraldia as a keepsake, but it seemed that wouldn't be possible. However, thanks to the mana Friedensrichter had poured into this sword, I would be able to protect the future.

"Neptotes!" I dropped into a fighting stance once more and sneered at him.

"So you had that hidden away. But you won't be able to defeat me with that paltry amount of mana. Only a Valkaan can kill a Valkaan."

I said nothing. Neptotes was certain he'd won, much like I had been a few seconds ago. Regardless of one's skill as a warrior, they always let their guard down the moment they thought they were the victor, just as I had. But Neptotes wasn't even a skilled warrior; not only was he letting his guard down, he was wide open.

Neptotes quickly turned his head behind him.

"You've set a trap for me back there, haven't you? I assume it's related to the

teleportation techniques you were using.”

Instead of answering, I asked him, “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to quietly return to the castle? We could put an end to this pointless fight if so.”

“Ahahahaha! Begging for your life now? It’s too late for that!”

*Actually, I was hoping you’d surrender.* I couldn’t afford to hold back now, after all.

Neptotes grinned and rushed at me. “Too bad, your petty tricks won’t work on me! What now, werewolf?!”

I had planned on luring him near the panel and using Gusokujutsu to trip him onto it, or circling back around so he’d step on it of his own accord. If he’d done so, we could’ve killed him in one attack. But now the panel was behind Neptotes, which meant I needed to push him back onto it somehow. Fortunately, I knew a way to do that. I’d have only one chance, and if I messed up, I’d really be out of ideas. But it wasn’t over yet.

“Veight, are you really going to keep going?!” Fahn shouted, sounding worried.

“Take care of the rest, guys,” I said.

“Wha— I don’t like the sound of that!”

“Hey, what are you about to do?!”

Ignoring everyone’s questions, I charged at Neptotes. I could tell from his confident expression that he thought I was out of ideas. He lazily stretched out his hand, planning to grab my face and crush it once I got too close.

I used strengthening magic to significantly enhance my kinetic vision. With 10,000 kites of mana, I could boost my sight enough to keep up with his movements. But I didn’t even try to dodge. I kept charging forward, directly into the Valkaan’s reach.

“What?!”

As I did so, I canceled my transformation, shifting from a bulky werewolf to a much smaller human. This allowed me to dodge Neptotes’s grab without



slowing down. Volka, the leader of Rolmund's werewolves, had shown me this technique. None of Meraldia's werewolves had thought to tactically cancel their transformation in battle, so it came as quite a surprise when Volka demonstrated its effectiveness. Furthermore, since I was back in my smaller human body, I had a wider array of Gusokujutsu techniques at my disposal.

"Y-You little—" he grunted.

Once I was next to Neptotes, I turned my back to him and grabbed his arm. Normally, it was suicide to turn your back to an enemy in close quarters, but this was the only plan I could come up with. Thankfully, Neptotes didn't have enough martial arts training to properly punish my decision. Once I was in position, I used a significant amount of my newfound mana to make myself heavier. Increasing the effect of gravity on one's body was the simplest of all strengthening magic techniques, and I didn't even need an incantation.

"Nnnrgh?!"

Neptotes was no longer able to stop me. There wasn't enough time to chant a spell, and he didn't know any grappling techniques that could help him quickly escape this hold. Not even a Valkaan's strength could move me when I was this heavy.

I used all the muscles in my lower body to lift Neptotes up and throw him over my shoulder. It was funny to think that an ancient Japanese martial arts technique would be what saved me in this fantasy world. Even with my increased mana, throwing a Valkaan was no easy feat. Not that throwing him would hurt in any way; he'd just leave a crater in the ground where he landed. However, Neptotes reflexively braced himself to avoid being thrown.

"Arrrgh!"

In order to keep himself grounded, he had to shift his center of gravity backwards. And that was the moment I'd been waiting for. Once he was straining hard enough, I let go and circled behind him. I'd done what I could with Gusokujutsu; now it was time for some Meraldian werewolf wrestling techniques. I transformed once more and used all my remaining mana to increase my physical strength. Then I grabbed Neptotes by the waist and threw him backwards.

“Rrrrrrah!” A simple throw wouldn’t be enough to get Neptotes all the way to the teleportation panel, so I jumped backwards while I threw him.

“Veight?!”

“Don’t be stupid!”

*Don’t worry, guys. I don’t plan on dying with him.* I didn’t have time to explain my full plan, so I just prayed someone would tell me the exact distance I had left to the panel. I needed to get the timing of when I threw Neptotes perfectly.

Just then, I heard Friede shout, “Now!”

*That’s my daughter.* Though I hadn’t told her my plan, she figured it out immediately.

“Take thiiiis!” Using the last of my strength, I tossed Neptotes onto the panel.



“Haaah... Haaah...” As the world around me went quiet, I carefully got to my feet. I needed to make sure not to accidentally touch the teleportation panel as I stood up. Neptotes was nowhere to be seen, which meant I’d safely deposited him on the panel. The sand that had been covering it had been blown away when I slammed him down.

“Is it...over?” Someone muttered, and Parker stepped forward to examine the panel.

“It’s certainly over. He won’t be coming back,” he replied.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, including me.

“But I must say, Veight, that was quite a terrifying plan—linking two teleportation panels to create an infinite teleportation loop,” Parker said as I patted the dust off my clothes.

“I just re-created an incident that happened in the future.”

“An incident? What do you mean? How can something from the future have happened in the past?”

“Don’t worry about it. The important thing is that we now know Valkaan can’t match the power of science.”

I had instructed Ryucco to stick panels five and six together and adjust them so that six teleported to five and vice versa. Panel four still led to panel five, so anyone who stepped on panel four would become stuck in an infinite teleport loop between five and six, which were now glued together. There wasn’t enough space for a human body to properly materialize between them, but even if there had been, the loop would persist, so it hardly mattered. I’d discovered in my past life how dangerous infinite loops could be in programming, and it seemed they were just as perilous when it came to magic. If we weren’t careful about the teleportation magic tools we made, things would spiral out of control quickly. At the very least, it was probably too dangerous to allow regular people to use the teleportation panels.

“How are the teleportation panels holding up?” I asked, turning to Ryucco.

Ryucco sighed and pointed to Kite, who was hauling the two panels on a

portable cart. “They’re powered by the person using them, so that old man’s gonna keep getting bounced back and forth until he’s completely out of mana,” Ryucco explained.

“How long will it take for Neptotes’s mana reserves to dry up?”

“Hell, if I know. But once he runs out, he won’t be a Valkaan anymore. And if a regular human gets stuck between those two panels, they’ll be crushed to death by the pressure.”

Just then, I saw red liquid start to seep from the tiny gap between the two panels. It wasn’t exactly blood—more like human flesh that had been run through a blender. Not that I’d ever seen that happen before, but I assumed that was what it looked like.

“Ugh...” Friede murmured as she stared at the panels.

Ryucco seemed unfazed and started munching on a carrot stick. “Wow, he sure lasted a while. Hey, Kite, how many loops did he do?”

“More than a billion. But if you want an accurate count, clean these panels up first. I don’t want to touch them right now.”

“Why not? Don’t you humans touch raw meat all the time when you’re cooking?”

“Not human meat!”

*You’re starting to scare me, Ryucco.*

Jerrick folded his arms behind his head and let out a long sigh. “You always surprise me, Veight. I never thought you’d beat a Valkaan one-on-one.”

“Well, if I was actually alone, I definitely would’ve lost,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s only thanks to you guys that I was able to get him onto that panel. And I wasn’t even the one who invented these things; that was all Ryucco. Plus, all the magic and techniques I used during the fight were learned from others.”

That was how progress worked. Countless centuries of unsung heroes labored tirelessly to develop new methods and techniques, improve on old ones, and pass them down to future generations. Most of these heroes were regular people. Sure, they were likely intelligent if they managed to create new

knowledge, but they probably weren't super geniuses or anything. Prodigies of that caliber only appeared once every few generations, after all.

"The efforts of millions of regular people have finally built a foundation that can match a Valkaan, that's all. I didn't do anything special."

"As always, I have no idea what you're talking about," Jerrick said with a shake of his head.

Friede gave Jerrick a curious look and said, "Really? I feel like I understand it well enough."

*I knew I could count on you, Friede.*

"I do too," someone called out.

"Ah, Shirin. Welcome back," Friede said, turning to him.

"Thank you. I've safely delivered Prince Shumar to the werecats. I rushed back because I wanted to see if everyone was okay."

The older generation of demons lived in an era where strength ruled and people followed the strong, so it made sense that they didn't get it. But the new generation had grown alongside humans and had a better grasp of how they worked. The youth understood that a thriving society was built not on the accomplishments of celebrated heroes but on the efforts of countless ordinary people. Since they understood that, I had faith that demons would be able to mingle just fine with humans.

Suddenly, I sensed a change in the flow of the surrounding mana. With both Valkaan gone, it was no longer being drawn to Neptotes and Burbelga. If I were to compare it to wind, it was as if a typhoon had finally passed and a gentle breeze was blowing in its wake. Valkaan drained the mana of their surroundings just by existing, and now that they were gone, this barren wasteland could finally start to heal.

The other mages noticed the shift in mana as well, and Kite said, "Looks like we managed to survive another crisis."

"It was all thanks to everyone's efforts," I replied with a smile.

I certainly wouldn't have been able to stop Neptotes and Burbelga alone.

“Now then, we can’t sit around and celebrate just because we took care of some Valkaan. There’s still a mountain of things to address. For starters, we need to secure the region and make sure there are no other threats around. Then we should probably restart our investigation, but...” I trailed off.

“I’m pretty sure we just took care of the problem, didn’t we?” she asked, giving me an exasperated smile.

“Fair enough. I suppose taking new readings of the mana in the regions we already explored should suffice.” With the Valkaan gone, the mana density should be going back up, and if it is, then we wouldn’t need to do anything else. Though, honestly, I wasn’t looking forward to doing even more work. I turned back to my old friend and self-proclaimed vice-commander and said, “Hey, Kite, do you mind taking care of the rest?”

“You want me to do all this fieldwork without you? Absolutely not!”

*Thought so.*

## **—Welcome Home, Black Werewolf King—**

“I see. So you haven’t heard anything new,” Airia said with a sad sigh.

“I’m sorry, Demon Lord. But don’t worry, I’ll rush over if anything happens,” Firnir responded, impatience clear in her voice.

Firnir was waiting in Lotz’s harbor along with a contingent of Demon Army elites. If the situation took a turn for the worse, she’d gallop to Kuwol at top speed. The kentauros soldiers of the Demon Army had been outfitted with horseshoes that let them walk on water, allowing them to cross the ocean much faster than a ship could.

“Thank you. I’ll be counting on you if it comes to that...” Airia turned off the transceiver and placed it on her desk. She understood she was abusing her power by mobilizing Firnir here considering how many responsibilities Firnir had as the viceroy of Thuvan. Despite how strong Firnir was, Airia knew full well that she wouldn’t be able to accomplish much against a Valkaan.

“I’ve gotten much worse at waiting over the years...” she mused.

Back when Veight had gone to Rolmund or Wa, Airia had been able to wait patiently for his return. Even when she'd been pregnant and he'd had to go to Kuwol, she'd managed to keep her cool and focus on her work as Demon Lord. But this time, she felt like she had to do *something*. After all, it wasn't just her husband who was out there now; her daughter was too. She couldn't bear to lose both of them.

Airia looked out of the window facing south. This was the same window Veight had broken through when he'd attacked Rynheit as one of the Demon Army's generals. Thanks to the Black Werewolf King plays, most of the continent knew this was how the romance between Airia and Veight had blossomed.

"You can break all the windows you want... Please just come home safely, both of you..." Airia muttered softly.

Just then, she heard a creaking noise above her.

"Huh?!" Airia jumped to her feet, grabbed the sheaf of documents she'd been working on and leapt away from her desk. A second later, the ceiling above her desk caved in.

"I can't do iiiiiit!"

"F-Friede?!" Airia exclaimed, surprised to hear her daughter's voice.

"I told you I was going to stop using my levitation magic! Why'd you stop using yours too?!"

"I can't control my mana as well as you can, Dad! This is supposed to be the hardest strengthening magic spell, isn't it?!"

"Fine, I guess I'll have to give you some supplementary lessons starting tomorrow."

"Nooooooo! Not more lessons!"

Veight gently lowered Friede to the ground, then turned to look at Airia. He glanced up at the broken ceiling and scratched his head awkwardly. He was a decorated general, a master of strengthening magic, and Meraldia's werewolves' elder, but he was still scared of angering his wife.



“Sorry, Master teleported us back here, but...since this was such a long distance, she needed to factor in the curvature of the planet to get accurate coordinates, and it seems she made a small mistake.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay.” Airia beamed as she brushed the dust off Veight’s shoulders. “The first time we met you came through a window, remember?”

“And this time we came through the roof. So, uh, how much is it going to cost to fix that?”

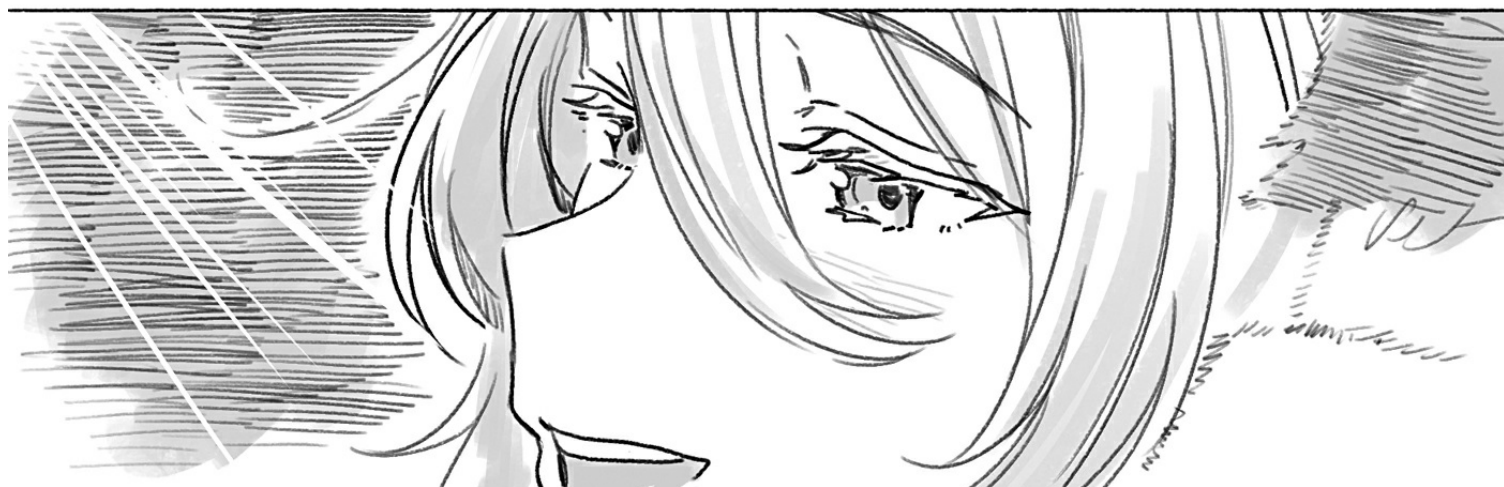
“You’re not going to like the number, but since this is the Demon Lord’s office, we can ask the Demon Army to fix it. Look, some of them are already on their way.” Airia pointed to the intact window. Peering through, Veight saw a platoon of Demon Knights running towards the manor in a panic, accompanied by Ryunheit’s regular guards.

Veight gave Airia an awkward smile and said, “They must think a Valkaan is attacking.”

“It’ll be easy enough to clear up the misunderstanding. But more importantly...” Airia hugged Friede and Veight.

“Welcome home. Thank goodness you’re both safe.”

“That’s right. We made it back safe and sound,” Veight said, hugging Airia back.



With the remaining Valkaan taken care of, peace returned to Kuwol.

Apparently, we were going to send a few researchers to conduct a joint investigation with Kuwol to survey the area south of Mount Kayankaka. However, the whole process would take two years, so there was no rush to start immediately.

In the meantime, my friends and I graduated from Meraldia University, but right now, I have a new problem.

“Congrats on getting accepted into the Demon Army, Shirin and Joshua!”

We were holding a graduation party at my house today. *Hopefully, future historians won't write about this. It'd be embarrassing to read, "And then Friede and her friends held a party at the Demon Lord's mansion."* The dropout grimalkin ninjas I'd befriended in Wa were serving the food and cleaning up for us.

“Here's your tea.”

“Here are your snacks.”

“Enjoy, meow.”

Officially, they were servants of the Aindorf family, but in reality, they were just freeloaders. Worst of all, they knew they could get away with it by acting cute and making cat noises. Anyway, the stars of today's party were Shirin and Joshua, since they'd been accepted into the departments they'd applied to.

As Yuhette sipped her tea, she turned to Shirin and asked, “You're starting out as a platoon leader in the Azure Knights, right, Shirin? I'm not that familiar with military ranks. How high of a position is that?”

“It's the starting position for commissioned officers. I'll have twenty dragonkin knights under my command, along with a few field medics and a group of gunners. It's a unit of fifty members altogether. It's kind of awkward since they're all older than me,” Shirin said with a small frown.

I turned to Joshua, who was wearing his sharp new black uniform, and asked, “I guess you've got the same problem, huh, Joshua?”

“Yeah. Being a werewolf squad leader is cool, but the other three members of

my unit are all older than me. Their criticisms have ramped up from when I was a trainee, so I feel like I've been demoted rather than promoted."

The werewolf corps was a small unit of handpicked elites, so even being a four-man squad leader was a heavy responsibility. It certainly wasn't the kind of job I'd want, at least.

I gently patted both my friends' shoulders. "Your promotions are going to keep coming, guys, so you better get used to it now. I'm looking forward to seeing how far you get in a few years. You've both got a lot of potential, after all."

"Th-Thanks," Shirin said awkwardly and looked away.

"If you say so..." Joshua said, blushing slightly.

*Wait, did I say something bad? For some reason, Yuhette's grinning at me too. What's going on?*

As I turned to her, Yuhette said, "You're still an officer cadet, right, Friede?"

"Oh...yeah." This time, I looked away awkwardly as Joshua and Shirin looked up at me.

"You got an invitation to join the werewolf squad, didn't you? Why'd you refuse?" Joshua asked.

"I heard from uncle that you were also offered a diplomatic position by the Commonwealth Council. You don't want to take it?"

*Dang it, Dad, why'd you have to run your mouth...* I smiled wanly and said, "I don't think I could handle such a difficult job."

My friends exchanged glances.

"Even though you graduated at the top of your class from the magic department?"

"There were only eight of us," I clarified, "so that doesn't count for much..."

The magic track at Meraldia University was geared towards teaching people how to research new spells and magic items, so not many pursued it. I didn't consider myself adept at inventing things, and my grades were only good

because Granny Movi was a great teacher.

Just then, lori walked in with a silver tray piled high with Wa sweets.

“Your graduating class only has eight people because the other eleven couldn’t pass the final exam. Too much humility will make you seem insincere,” lori said.

“I guess that’s true.” Our final exam had a practical section, coupled with a written section on the history of magic and mathematics, so it was pretty hard. Honestly, I was lucky to have passed at all.

“I bet you’re thinking something silly, like you were lucky to pass at all,” Yuhette said as she poked me in the cheek. “lori’s right, you know? Toxic humility isn’t any different from pure arrogance. Stop pretending like your accomplishments don’t mean much.” Yuhette let out a long sigh and added, “Where did all your self-confidence go?”

Shirin put a hand on his chin and mused, “Are you worried because you can’t decide what to do now that you’ve graduated?”

“Yeah...maybe that’s it?” I scratched my head. “I’ve experienced a bunch of different things, but I feel like people are overestimating me. Also, dad’s so famous that I’m worried people are trying to recruit me just because of that.”

“And that’s added extra pressure to perform?” Yuhette asked worriedly, and I nodded.

“I mean, I’m not that great, but people still call me the Black Werewolf King’s daughter or the Demon Lord’s daughter. And now, people even came up with a new nickname for me, ‘the Black Werewolf Princess.’ I’m just not sure I can live up to those expectations...”

Shirin started munching on a dango skewer and said, “You solved the mystery of the Windswept Dunes, helped take down the dragon, and participated in the battle against the Valkaan.”

“Yeah, but everyone helped with those things. I didn’t do any of them alone.”

“Well, you’ve definitely accomplished more than I have.” Joshua sighed. “You keep showing me how much room for improvement I still have every time we

go somewhere. And at this rate, I'll never be able to catch up to— You know what? Never mind."

*What were you gonna say?* I sighed and replied, "If another person had been dad's kid, I'm sure they could have done way better than I did."

Joshua and the others exchanged glances.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Yeah, I don't see your point."

"Me neither..."

I hurriedly explained, "Look, I was born into the Aindorf family and I got dad—the Black Werewolf King—and Demon Empress Gomoviroa to personally teach me. It's also thanks to them that I met so many influential people. So, like, it's not because I'm special that I got this far; it's because of the environment I was born into."

"Oh, I see now," Shirin said, finishing off his dango skewer. "Your social class...and I guess the luck of who you're born to matter, I suppose. But that's true for everyone. I'm the son of the famous general Baltze, and he was able to give me the greatest training a knight could hope for. In that regard, I'm also fortunate to have had such an opportunity." Shirin pointed the now empty dango skewer at me and added, "But you know, that privilege carries an equal amount of responsibility with it. It's my duty to become a skilled knight *because* I had the opportunity to receive such a gifted education. I need to work my way up to becoming a trusted general, just like my father. But I'm not even close right now, and that definitely bothers me."

Iori nodded in response. "Ever since I was adopted by the Mihoshi family, I've borne the same responsibility as Shirin. We all received such an excellent education to help us fulfill that responsibility, so there's no need to feel bad about it."

"That's...true, I guess."

The problem was, I'd heard all about dad's old home, Japan, from him. Apparently, everyone there got nine years of education for free. Every child in the country could attend school and study at the government's expense until

they were fifteen. It was honestly hard to believe. Furthermore, from what dad said, most kids spent another three years attending an institution called “high school.” And they only entered universities like Meraldia University after completing those twelve years of education. In other words, commoners there got to study as much as nobles did in this world. On the flip side, in this world, people with a formal education were extremely rare and valuable.

I hung my head and asked, “Do you think I’ll manage to be a proper successor to the Black Werewolf King?”

“Of course! I bet you’ll even manage to *surpass* Lord Veight!” Iori shouted, bringing her face right next to mine.

“Iori, you’re too close!” I scooted back a few inches. “A-Anyway we’re all still young, so there’s no need to rush.”

“You say that, but we’re seventeen now.”

In Meraldia, Rolmund, and Wa, you were considered an adult at fifteen. According to dad, in his world, you weren’t officially an adult until you were twenty, and most university students still got to study and act like kids for a few years after that. *If only I’d gotten to live in Japan and be a regular high school girl... Anyway, this is supposed to be Shirin and Joshua’s celebration party. I can’t keep making this about me.*

“For now, I think I’ll keep helping Granny Movi with her research. Studying magic is pretty fun,” I said, and Yuhette smiled at me.

“Thinking of becoming a professor?” she asked. “That’s a perfectly respectable career path.”

“Maybe. But if I do, it’ll be a while off, at least.”

For now, I was just an assistant helping Granny Movi with her lectures and preparing study materials. I wasn’t getting paid for it, but it meant I had continued access to the university library and lab rooms, so I could study as much as I wanted. If I wrote an impressive enough thesis, I could become a professor. But considering how hard it was to write a thesis that met Granny Movi’s standards, I probably wouldn’t get that far.

I smiled and added, “Besides, things are going to get busy at home, so it’s

probably best that I don't take on too much responsibility for now."

"Why's that?" Shirin asked.

"Well, you see..."

The legendary Black Werewolf King, Veight Von Aindorf, served as vice-commander to three generations of Demon Lords over twenty years, starting with Friedensrichter. He was a living legend whose name was known across the continent. Right now, he was sitting across from a former imperial prince of Rolmund, Ryuunie. After being exiled from Rolmund, Ryuunie had built up the Battleball City of Doneiks with his uncle Woroy and was now the city's viceroy.

In a firm voice Ryuunie said, "I'm not going to become Demon Lord."

After a brief silence, Veight said, "Please, I'm begging you. Airia's held the position for far too long. Leading the Demon Army through these turbulent twenty years has taken its toll on her. People will start to complain if power remains concentrated in the Aindorf family's hands. Surely you understand that?"

"I do, but..."

Veight had saved Ryuunie's life and taught him a great deal. He didn't want to let his teacher and savior down.

He frowned and said, "I'm not confident I can do a good job as Demon Lord. At the very least, if you were willing to stay on as my vice-commander, I might consider it."

"I'm afraid not." Veight shook his head. "As I said, we can't have the same people monopolizing power forever. I'm an amateur when it comes to politics, and I'm getting old. It's about time I retire."

"Then I'm afraid I can't take the job," Ryuunie said, puffing his cheeks out like a small child. "Besides, why're you asking me to take over all of a sudden? Is there a secret motive you're keeping from me?"

Veight smiled awkwardly and said, "See, you have the insight needed to be Demon Lord. The truth is there's a reason Airia needs to retire now."

"And that is?" Veight grinned.



“You sure you want to know?”

“Of course.”

Blushing a little, Veight proudly said, “She’s pregnant.”

I listened to mom and dad’s conversation as we drank tea in the parlor.

“I wish I could’ve shown you Ryuunie’s surprised face,” dad said excitedly.

“You didn’t call him here to shock him, dear,” mom said with a smile. “But in the end, he refused to take over, right?”

“Yeah. Well, not quite. He said he understands the situation, but that becoming Demon Lord is a heavy responsibility that will impact his entire family, so he went back to Doneiks to discuss it with Woroy.”

Woroy had stepped back from active leadership and was enjoying his retirement, but his idea of a fun retirement generally meant leaving his mark on history in novel ways. He was a lot like my father in that regard.

Dad took a sip of his tea and let out a sigh. “Ryuunie really wants me to stay on as vice-commander...but I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

I grabbed a cookie and asked, “Is it an authority issue?”

“More or less. If I stay on as vice-commander, people will still think the Aindorf family controls the Demon Army. I don’t want people assuming Ryuunie is our puppet,” dad explained.

When I was younger, dad sometimes told me not to butt in on adult conversations, but now he was taking me seriously. I guess that meant I was an adult. Well, barely, but still.

Dad folded his arms and stroked his graying beard.

“The people of northern Meraldia and southern Meraldia have different origins, and the Aindorf family is from the south. It’ll look like the south is trying to monopolize power if we keep letting southern families become Demon Lords.”

“And that’s why you want Ryuunie to succeed you? Because he has stronger ties to the north?” I asked.

“Exactly. Most people think Ryuunie was banished from Rolmund after losing the political struggle with Eleora. While the northern viceroys are worried that granting him asylum might give Rolmund an excuse to invade again, they also have high hopes for him as one of the rising stars of the north.”

The northern viceroys saw their southern counterparts as rivals, but their relationship with Rolmund was far worse. It was mostly the current empress Eleora’s fault, but that had all happened before I was born, so it was ancient history to me.

I nodded in understanding and said, “But because Ryuunie’s one of your students, you think he’ll be fair to the southern viceroys too? After all, you can grill him if he starts showing favoritism.”

“I don’t plan on interfering with his policies, and honestly, I don’t think I’ll have to. But, you’re absolutely right. Both the northern and southern viceroys trust Ryuunie. He’s best friends with Myurei too.”

I also thought Ryuunie was the best candidate to bridge the gap between the north and the south.

“What do the demons think of him?” I asked.

“The Demon Empress technically ranks above the Demon Lord. If Master Gomoviroa approves of Ryuunie, then no one will dare complain.”

*Good point.*

Dad trusted Ryuunie, which meant all the other demons would too. Even the more belligerent demons trusted dad with their lives. They believed in strength above everything, and dad had taken down three Valkaan. Killing even a single Valkaan is a legendary feat, but dad had beaten three. Even if he retired from being the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, everyone would still look up to him. If he gave the word, thousands of demons would line up to fight for his cause—probably tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands.

I gave dad a stern look and asked, “Hey, Dad. You know even if you try to make yourself unimportant, everyone’s still going to come to you for advice, right?”

“Maybe, but I think it’s about time I faded from the public eye.”

“That’s not gonna happen...” Even if dad wanted to just be a normal person, he was too famous for that now. I could tell he was tired of the hero treatment everywhere he went.

Mom smiled sadly and said, “The people best suited to be Demon Lord are the ones who don’t want the job. You don’t want to be Demon Lord either, right, Friede?”

“There’s no way I’d do a good job, and dad always says making important positions hereditary is a bad thing. Even if I was the best choice, it would set a bad precedent.”

I remembered from my lectures that the northern viceroys were worried the Aindorf family would monopolize the Demon Lord’s seat. At the time, it felt like a silly thing to worry about, but now that I was older, I could see it from their perspective. That’s why I definitely couldn’t be the next Demon Lord, no matter what. Honestly, the biggest contribution I could make to society was to avoid ever becoming Demon Lord.

“I have a few other candidates in mind for vice-commander, but the problem is Ryuunie wants me specifically. He won’t agree to becoming Demon Lord for anyone else, even though all the people I picked are more than capable of doing the job...” Dad folded his arms and lapsed into thought. He really didn’t want to keep working. “I enjoyed my time as vice-commander, but I think it’s time I retired. I’ve served under three different Demon Lords, you know?”

“It’s true. Everyone associates the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander position with the Black Werewolf King,” I said.

No matter who became Demon Lord, as long as dad was their vice-commander, everyone was happy. They trusted him to lead the demons down the right path, as he had so far. Unfortunately, that made it even harder for him to retire.

“Either way, we definitely need a new Demon Lord. Mom had a really hard time giving birth to you, and I don’t want her to deal with the stress of work on top of everything.”

“You had to cut her stomach open to get me out, right?”

Dad had told me that they called that a C-section, or cesarean section, in his old world. Here, the procedure was dubbed D-section for Demon Lord, with mom being the first person in history to undergo it. Normally, cutting open a person's stomach would kill them, but the medical ward at Meraldia University had managed to standardize the procedure. Now people from Rolmund and Kuwol came all the way here to get a D-section if they were worried about having a difficult delivery. It was a very expensive procedure with only a few people qualified to perform it, so unfortunately, only nobles and wealthy merchants could afford it right now. Currently, it was impossible to save all pregnant women from dying in childbirth, but it still saddened me that we couldn't help everyone who needed it.

"Do people who get a D-section need them for all of their deliveries?"

"That's how it was in your dad's old world, at least. So I'm expecting to need a D-section this time too. But don't worry, medical technology has advanced a lot since then. I'll be fine."

I didn't even know it used to be a dangerous procedure. *I guess that even with advances in medicine, giving birth is still risky.*

Mom gently rubbed her belly and said, "If anything, I'm more worried about dealing with morning sickness again. I was out of commission for quite a while when I was pregnant with you."

"You told me that story before, but was it really that bad?"

"For a few weeks Wa's mochi was the only thing I could stand to eat. Having it now brings back memories of those days. I don't think I can handle Demon Lord duties while going through that again."

"I see..." That did sound pretty bad. *Sorry I'm such an unreliable daughter after you went through all that trouble to give birth to me.*

Dad nodded and said, "We need to lessen your burden, but it'll be better for both Friede and our new child if they're freed from the expectations of living up to our accomplishments, so I really want to get a replacement as soon as possible." Dad turned to me with a grin and said, "Once we're freed from the trappings of power, both you and your new sibling will be free to choose whatever path you want in life. Seeing you both enjoy your lives matters more

to us than fame or power.”

“Ahaha...” I murmured.

While I was happy about that, I still felt a lot of pressure. After all, I hadn’t decided what I wanted to do with my life. I didn’t even know what I *enjoyed* doing. *Maybe this will make dad happy though.*

“Well, right now I want to go to Lotz. Is there any council or Demon Army work I can do for you while I’m there?”

“I guess you could deliver the new salt pump Lotz asked us to design since it’ll be finished today... But why do you want to go to Lotz?”

“Ehehe, you’ll see,” I said with a grin.

At dad’s request, I brought the salt pump over to Lotz, but the real reason I came here lay elsewhere.

“I didn’t expect you to come,” Myurei said with a confused look when he saw me.

“Dad said it’d be fastest to let a werewolf or a kentauros deliver this,” I said hurriedly.

“I’m grateful you went out of your way to bring this as quickly as possible. My grandfather ordered the very first salt pump from the Demon Army’s engineers decades ago, and this is supposed to be the improved version. It seems to work much better. I’m amazed by what the Demon Army engineers can accomplish.”

Myurei oohed and aahed over the pump as I showed him how it worked. I then handed it over to let him tinker with it. As he poked and prodded at it, he asked, “So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“You knew I came here for a different reason?”

“Obviously. Sure, this machine is important, but there’s no way the Demon Army would send the famous Friede just to deliver it. One of the delivery kentauros working for Mao’s company would do just fine.” Myurei placed the pump on his desk and turned to me with a serious expression. “I’m guessing it has something to do with Ryuunie, am I right?”

“How could you tell?”

“Heh.” Myurei grinned and said, “I know you think I’m basically Ryuunie’s mom.”

“I do not!”

Myurei was usually very perceptive, but he had a bad habit of jumping to odd conclusions, especially when it came to Ryuunie.

I cleared my throat and said, “I just know you and Ryuunie have been good friends since your school days.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“Oh, also everyone at university thought you two were an item because you were always hanging out together.”

“I don’t know who told you that, but they’re lying. Never utter those words again,” Myurei said with a grimace.

*Maybe I shouldn’t tell him the girls had heated debates about who was the top and who was the bottom, then...* The debates were so famous even I’d heard about them, and I went to school ten years after they did.

“Don’t the kids these days talk about how you, Yuhette, and Iori are secretly in a three-way relationship?”

“Please pretend you never heard that,” I retorted. *Now that’s just not fair. I guess I did the same thing though. Sorry.*

I cleared my throat and said, “We’ll get nowhere like this so I’ll just get straight to the point. I want to know more about Ryuunie.”

“Well, you picked the right guy to ask, Friede Aindorf! So, what do you want to know? His favorite foods? His favorite color?”

“Why would I come all the way here just for that?!” I exclaimed. *He’s hopeless.*

When it came to Ryuunie, Myurei acted just like Jerrick and Professor Kite whenever the topic of dad came up. I started racking my brain for how to effectively get the information I wanted from him.

“For starters, you’ve already heard the news about my mom, right?”

“Yes, I heard she’s pregnant. Congratulations, you’re going to be a big sister, Friede. Wait...” Myurei suddenly frowned. “The only reason you’d come to me asking about Ryuunie now is... Does your father intend to have him inherit...”

*Oh, wow. He’s sharp! Is this why everyone respects him so much?!*

Myurei looked me in the eyes and finished asking, “...the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander position?”

*Okay, well, you were close.* It seemed like Myurei was so enamored with the vice-commander position that he hadn’t considered anything bigger.

“Not quite. He wants Ryuunie to be the next Demon Lord, not a vice-commander.”

“Ah, I guess that’s fine. He’d be a perfect fit for the job.”

*Is it just me, or were you more excited about him becoming a vice-commander instead?* It was hard to grasp what Myurei was thinking.

He grinned and said, “Let me guess, he’s reluctant to take the job?”

“How could you tell?”

“I can read him like the back of my hand. Half of the time, anyway...”

*Why the sudden humility?* I thought, then asked, “Even half of the time is better than nothing, so can you tell me why you think he’s so reluctant?”

“You sure are determined to get him to take the job, huh? Did Professor Veight put you up to this?”

“No, I came here of my own accord. That’s why I needed an official excuse to come see you.”

Myurei was Lotz’s viceroy, which meant that someone like me, with no official title, couldn’t just meet him whenever I wanted. Technically, I could have used dad’s name to set up a meeting, but I felt bad about doing that.

Myurei nodded in understanding and said, “You’ve got initiative, I like that. In fact, you might be a perfect fit for Ryuunie’s vice-commander.”

“Where the heck did that come from?!”

“Of course, by all rights, *I* should be his vice-commander.”

*Come on... This is getting nowhere.* Myurei was a little too obsessed with the position of Ryuunie's vice-commander. Thankfully, he got back on topic quickly.

"I'm kidding. Anyway, I suspect the reason Ryuunie is reluctant to take the position is that he's worried."

"About what?"

"It's a long story, so I hope you have time." As he said that, Myurei sat down in his chair. "He went through many painful experiences as a kid in Rolmund. I was blessed with a happy childhood, so I can't even imagine how much he must have suffered. Those experiences humbled him, but they also instilled a deep sense of responsibility in him."

Myurei spoke briskly, his expression dead serious.

"He lost his father and grandfather, and the only reason he survived was thanks to the efforts of Barnack and Professor Veight. Not only that, his political rival Eleora took pity on him and allowed him to live in exile in Meraldia instead of executing him. After that, Ryuunie and Sir Woroy lived under the protection of the Demon Lord, so Ryuunie doesn't feel as though he's truly accomplished anything on his own."

*I get what you're saying, but can you slow down a little? You're starting to scare me.*

"If you ask me or any of Meraldia's students from that era, he's a hero, of course. He's done so much to improve our Commonwealth. But the thing is, unless he believes himself capable, it doesn't matter how much he accomplishes." Myurei let out a long sigh, then smiled gently at me. "But I really do think Ryuunie is one of the smartest and strongest leaders of our generation. When I first met him, I thought he was a stuck-up royal brat, but he proved himself time and time again. And seeing how much he suffered in the past, I just wanted to do everything I could to help him."

*So that's why you became Lotz's viceroy...* Half the reason Ryuunie had accomplished so much was because Myurei and the Fikartze family were backing him. Lotz had become one of the biggest cities in Meraldia thanks to the increase in trade, and its support was one of the main reasons why Ryuunie was such an influential figure.



Myurei looked wistfully out the window and said, “No matter how amazing a person is, there’s a limit to what they can accomplish alone. It’s only when average folks like me come together to support the real heroes that they can leave their mark on history. You get what I’m saying, right? Thanks to people like Yuhette and Shirin by your side, you were able to do all those great deeds as well.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, but I’m far from amazing. If anything, I’m one of those average folks, not a hero.” I’d only come this far thanks to everyone’s help. They were the truly amazing ones, not me. I was just lucky to have them all as friends.

Myurei sighed and said, “Anyone who can strangle a dragon with their bare hands can’t be called ‘average.’”

“I didn’t strangle it; I just crushed its windpipe.”

“That’s even more impressive!” He let out another sigh. “You came here of your own volition, correct? That means you also believe Ryuunie is fit to be the next Demon Lord. Would you mind telling me why?”

“Huh?” I yelped, caught off guard by the question. *Crap, I hadn’t thought that far ahead.*

I was just supporting Ryuunie as the next Demon Lord because that was what dad wanted. *In the end, I’m still far from being independent...* That said, I had considered the prospect of Ryuunie as Demon Lord enough to come up with a few reasons.

“From my perspective, Ryuunie is incredibly resilient, managing to dive into his studies even after all the hardships he faced in Rolmund. People still talk about how he was one of the greatest students to pass through the halls of Meraldia University.”

“Hehe, as they should. Not only did he graduate at the top of his class, but there was a huge gap between him and the salutarian.” Myurei puffed out his chest proudly.

*Why are you so happy about that? Weren’t you the salutarian?* I worried he’d start praising Ryuunie again, so I quickly got back on topic. “Meraldia is a

very multicultural nation. We have people with roots in Kuwol and Rolmund, Mondstrahl believers, Sonnenlicht adherents, humans, and demons all living together. Whoever becomes Demon Lord needs to be able to weigh these various interests and mediate disputes. I believe Ryuunie has that ability, and his life in exile has given him the resilience to handle the stress of the position.”

Eyes sparkling with excitement, Myurei nodded repeatedly. “Yes, exactly! You really understand him! He isn’t just intelligent; he’s more experienced than most people his age! That’s why he has such a broad perspective on life and can make tough decisions!”

“I know, right? There’s no one else who has experienced as much... Well, actually, I guess Shatina has, but I still think Ryuunie is in a class of his own.”

“Oh yeah, the Senate killed Shatina’s father, didn’t they? She’s certainly an admirable viceroy, but she’s so devoted to her hometown that she rarely sees the bigger picture outside of Zaria. Granted, I love Lotz myself, so I can understand.” Myurei nodded in satisfaction and smiled at me. “Good job, you pass with flying colors. You’re not just a crazy strong tomboy who beats up dragons.”

“Is that how you saw me?”

“Hahaha, come on, don’t pout. Anyway, just leave the rest to me.”

Myurei pulled out a piece of parchment and started writing. I wanted to trust him, but he had the scent of someone up to something. Once he finished writing, Myurei placed the letter in an envelope and pressed his family seal onto it, making it an official document.

“Here, take this. It’s confirmation that I received the salt pump from you. Would you mind passing it on to the Demon Lord or Professor Veight?”

*Uhhh...what’s with that smile? What are you plotting?* I didn’t know, but I had no choice but to take the letter.

“Um, thank you, I guess?”

“Anytime. Oh, by the way, if you see Ryuunie, tell him to come visit with his wife sometime. My wife’s been bugging me that we haven’t seen each other in ages. The four of us were all together in our school days.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.” Ryuunie and Myurei had both gotten married not long ago. Marriage was basically a requirement for important political figures, though mom and dad hadn’t been pressuring me to get married.

“By the way...does your wife ever get jealous about how much you talk about Ryuunie?” I asked.

“Not at all. In fact, she said watching me gush about Ryuunie gives her the will to keep living.”

*Your wife sure is something...*

Afterwards, I traveled to Doneiks. I could have just called via transceiver, but it was better to have important conversations in person. However, I was here to meet Woroy, not Ryuunie. While Woroy had retired from both his position on the Commonwealth Council and as Doneiks’s viceroy, his fame and influence hadn’t waned in the slightest. He’d accomplished too much during his tenure for the world to forget him. Besides, he was Empress Eleora’s cousin. Officially, she’d exiled him and Ryuunie, but the two cousins apparently still wrote letters to each other all the time. Dad had told me Woroy was essential for maintaining strong diplomatic ties to Rolmund. I’d thought it would be hard to get a meeting with someone so important, but it turned out to be extremely easy.

“Hey, Friede! You’re starting to look even more like your dad! Of course, you inherited your mom’s beauty. Pretty soon, you’ll be the most beautiful woman on the continent!”

When I asked to set up a meeting, he agreed immediately.

“I-It’s been far too long, Lord Woroy. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to see me.”

“Hahaha, no need to stand on formality. How’s your dad doing? Knowing him, probably great.”

“He’s as lively as ever, but...” At this rate, I’d end up spending the whole time talking about dad, so I quickly jumped into the main topic. “The Demon Lord is pregnant, and she’s been trying to find a successor.”

“Mmm, I heard about that. I can imagine she’s having a tough time.” Woroy nodded seriously, but it was hard to tell if he was genuinely concerned. Like

Mao and Professor Kite, Woroy got excited whenever dad's name came up.

Honestly, it felt like mentioning dad was enough to get any adult to listen. It was useful, but I felt guilty about taking advantage of his fame. *Well, I can worry about that later.*

"Dad wants Ryuunie to take over as Demon Lord, but Ryuunie seems reluctant," I said.

"I can't blame him. He lost most of his family to a political power struggle, so he's very cautious about accepting positions of power. Frankly, I'm not sure what to tell him either."

*Uh-oh, does this mean he won't be able to help?*

Woroy looked me in the eyes and said calmly, "Friede, before I hear you out, there's something I want to ask."

"Wh-What is it?"

"Are you here as the daughter of Veight, the Black Werewolf King, or just as Friede Aindorf?" Before I could reply, Woroy added, "If you're here on Veight's behalf, then I'm afraid I can't help you. I have no intention of persuading my nephew for him. I'm sorry, but I care too much about his well-being and happiness to force him into a role he doesn't want."

"I understand." I nodded, and Woroy smiled gently at me.

"But if this is a request from *Friede Aindorf*, then I might consider it."

"Wait, what?! Why?"

"You defeated the dragon that threatened Doneiks. The reason we can sit here in this office right now is thanks to you. You're the savior of the city, thus I have an obligation to at least hear out your request."

*Oh, is that how it works? Is that why I was able to meet with you so easily?*

"That's not all. You also rescued Micha from kidnappers, solved the mystery of the Windswept Dunes, and helped Veight defeat the Valkaan. You're a far greater hero than I could ever hope to be."

"That's not true! Everyone's heard about your exploits, Mister Woroy!" I

shook my head, and Woroy chuckled.

“Everyone’s heard about *your* exploits as well. In fact, I’m sure they’ll still be talking about them a century later.”

“Maybe, but...” I trailed off. *Was I really a hero?* Collecting myself, I said, “I always thought heroes were people like you, Mister Woroy.”

“I got wrapped up in a pointless war for the throne, lost without accomplishing anything, and had my life spared by your dad. I’m hardly someone worthy of being called a hero. But, I guess my life after that was pretty interesting. I get to live how I please now, so it’s not all bad.” As he said that, Woroy let out a long sigh. “If anything, it’s my father and brother who deserve to be called heroes. They were far smarter than I am, and unlike me, they were resolved to protect their people no matter the cost. I don’t deserve to be called a hero until I’ve managed to restore their reputation.”

I remembered from my history lessons that Woroy’s dad had been one of Rolmund’s greatest strategists. His older brother was Prince Ivan, the man who’d assassinated Woroy’s father and started a rebellion. Both were considered traitors in Rolmund, and the Doneiks family had been officially removed as a branch of the imperial family. Despite that, Woroy still claimed his father and brother had been heroes.

“I see...”

“But, well, that’s all in the past now,” Woroy said with a sad smile.

As someone who hadn’t been alive during those events, I didn’t know what to say. However, I could at least answer his question honestly.

“I’m here as Friede Aindorf today. Of course, I’m still Veight and Airia’s daughter, but that’s not important right now.”

“Good.” Woroy’s expression brightened as he nodded. “So, what does the savior of Doneiks wish to ask me?”

“The truth is, I didn’t come here to ask you to persuade Ryuunie.” It would have been simple if Woroy had been willing to persuade Ryuunie for me. But I knew that wasn’t something to hope for. “Besides, if Ryuunie were the kind of person who’d change his mind just because you asked him to, he wouldn’t be fit

to be Demon Lord. People would think he was too easily influenced by his family.”

“Hahaha, true that! The leader of a nation can’t afford to base his opinions on what his family says, after all. Or they’ll end up like my uncle.” Woroy’s uncle had been the previous emperor of Rolmund, Bahazoff the Fourth. He was known as the most mediocre emperor in Rolmund’s history. During his reign, the Doneiks family had held most of the real power in the country.

Feeling a little nervous, I said, “In truth, I did come to see you about Ryuunie, Mister Woroy.”

“Oho. Well, ask away, and if it’s something I can do, I’ll do it,” Woroy said with a nod.

“Do you know what would help Ryuunie steel his resolve and agree to become the next Demon Lord?” I asked.

“I see, so that’s the angle you’re coming at.” Grinning, Woroy folded his arms. “As his uncle, I don’t really want to push another heavy burden onto my nephew, but at the same time, I want to see how far the Doneiks family can rise. Very well, I will share what wisdom I can.”

*Thank goodness I didn’t have to convince him.* If anything, Woroy seemed eager to discuss Ryuunie.

“Th-Thank you very much.”

“Sorry for rambling earlier. When you get to my age, you just like to talk. Anyway, there are a couple of things Ryuunie’s worried about. How many of them do you know about?”

I held up my fingers and started listing, “Um, for starters, he’s concerned he doesn’t have enough influence as a non-native of Meraldia. He also lost his family to a power struggle, so he’s scared of accepting a position of power. I’m sure there are others, but those are the main two, right?”

“Correct. He’s also worried he won’t be able to live up to his predecessor’s reputation. When he first came here, Airia was like a mother to him.”

*I didn’t know that... At the time, Mom must have just turned twenty or so,*

*while Ryuunie would have been...twelve?*

“Frankly, I don’t think there’s any point in worrying about measuring up to those who came before you. I want to convince him of that, so you can leave that part to me. But I have no intention of addressing his other two worries. After all, I went through the same thing in Rolmund, so I understand how he feels. And it’s a fact that he has fewer connections with the other viceroys than the leaders of all the other cities.”

By the time I was a kid, Doneiks had already become an established city, so it didn’t seem like a newcomer to Meraldia. To me, Meraldia had always been a commonwealth of eighteen cities.

But I didn’t doubt Woroy either, so I nodded and said, “That’s why Ryuunie really wants dad to stay on as vice-commander.”

“Exactly. If he has the Black Werewolf King backing him, he’ll be able to draw on all the support Veight has. Besides, Veight’s the one who beat Eleora in battle, captured her, and then set her up as the next Empress of Rolmund. Everyone knows that while Veight may not be a king, he is definitely the kingmaker.”

*Dang, that’s such a cool title for dad—the Kingmaker.* Unfortunately, this wasn’t helping because I completely understood where Ryuunie was coming from now. If I were in his shoes, I’d ask Dad for the same thing.

“I see. I think Ryuunie might have a point.”

“Hahaha, so you agree with him, then?” Woroy looked me in the eyes and said, “So, Friede, what do you think we should do?”

*Hmm, I might have an idea...* I realized there was one way out of this conundrum. It was a scary path to take, but I couldn’t back out now.

With my mind made up, I said, “Dad wants to retire, so I can’t accept a solution where he stays as vice-commander. So...” —I met Woroy’s gaze—“what if I become the Aindorf family head and then Ryuunie’s vice-commander?”

“Good answer,” Woroy said with a grin.

“Oh maaaaaan, why?! I acted on my own without consulting anyone! Again!”

I cried to myself as I rode the carriage home.

In a soothing voice, lori, who was sitting next to me, said, “Calm down, Friede. I think it’s a good idea as well.”

“But I haven’t even talked to my parents about inheriting the family name! Mom’s gonna be so mad!”

“You were likely going to be the successor anyway. Or were you planning to pass the title down to your unborn sibling?”

“I mean, you’ve got a point, but... Aaagh! If we do things this way, people will think the Aindorf family is monopolizing authority within the Demon Army after all!”

lori shook her head and said, “If everyone in your family suddenly removed themselves from positions of power, that would make people uneasy as well. I think this is an acceptable compromise.”

“Stop arguing and just let me complain...” I grumbled. *Man, I know you’re enjoying this. I can smell it on you.*

lori gently patted my head with a small chuckle. “I’m sure Ryuunie will be happy to have you as vice-commander. You’re the current vice-commander’s daughter and the Aindorf family’s successor. Besides, everyone trusts you after you solved the mystery of the Windswept Dunes and slew that dragon. Plus, you graduated top of your class from Meraldia University.”

“You can’t just list my successes and ignore all the times I failed! Sure, if you lay it out like that, it makes me look like some kind of hero, but I’m not that amazing!”

To be honest, lori sounded so convincing that I was starting to believe her... *Maybe I really am the best person for this job.*

I poked the fingers lori held up while pointing out my achievements and said, “I guess I do know a lot of people in the Commonwealth Council since I’ve been helping them out with odd jobs. And I spent some time as a trainee officer in the Demon Army, so I could probably mediate between the two of them pretty easily.”



“Exactly. You’re friends with influential people from all the neighboring nations, so you make the perfect diplomat. And right now, you’re free since you have no other job. Who else meets all these conditions?”

“No one, I guess...”

Between all my friends, they fulfilled all those conditions, but I was the only one who fulfilled all the criteria on their own. I was also the only one without some sort of job already. *No way... How did things end up like this...*

Iori grinned and said, “Don’t worry, Friede, I’ll be there to help you out. I can be *your* vice-commander.”

“If you say that, I’ll really start counting on you, you know?”

With Iori’s help, I might actually be able to handle this role. All my other friends would probably help too if I asked. *Dang it, now I have even less reason to refuse. This is a conspiracy! It has to be! Everyone conspired to make me a vice-commander! I hate you, Mom! I hate you, Dad!* I pressed my forehead against the carriage window and rubbed it against the glass.

“How did it end up like this...?”

After Friede left, Ryuunie visited Woroy in his office.

“Uncle, did Friede come to see you?”

“Yep, just as Myurei’s letter said. She already left though. What an interesting girl, eh? Just like her old man, she really doesn’t want to be seen as a hero.” Woroy looked out the window. “No one will blame you if you choose not to become the next Demon Lord, Ryuunie. You’ll regret it only if you force yourself into a position you don’t think you can handle. Remember, even Veight refused to become Demon Lord. He certainly won’t fault you for saying no.”

“Are you sure about that? Hmm...” Ryuunie folded his arms and lapsed into thought.

Woroy turned back to him and said, “I still intend to respect your decision whatever it is, but I must say, Friede’s determination convinced me. So I have a proposal for you, if you’re willing to hear it.”

“Gladly, Uncle.”

As I expected, I got in trouble with my mom when I got back home.

“You can’t just decide to be the next successor of the Aindorf family without consulting anyone!” she scolded.

“I’m sorry...”

“Many of my relatives have a legitimate claim to the family headship. We’ll have to discuss this with all of them first, you know.”

“Yes, I’m sorry...”

Mom let out a sigh, but then she smiled and said, “But I doubt any of them will be against it. Everyone has high hopes for you, after all.”

“They do?”

“Everyone on the continent has heard about your achievements,” mom said with another sigh. “No one wants to become the family head over you because they’re worried it would make them look arrogant. That’s why no one has stepped up to try and become my successor.”

“Oh...” I murmured. “Then...I guess I’ll just have to take over as the next family head?”

“I’ll speak to everyone for you. I’ll be around to help, so you don’t need to force yourself to learn everything at once.”

“Okay!”

Honestly, I didn’t want to deal with family head responsibilities, but I was the one who proposed this plan, so I had to follow through.

“By the way, where’s dad?”

“He went to Rolmund in secret to visit Empress Eleora to inform her that you and Ryuunie will be the next vice-commander and Demon Lord.”

“How did he know I was going to take his place before I even told him?”

“Myurei’s letter mentioned that you might offer to become the next vice-commander. Your dad wants to get everything taken care of as soon as possible so I don’t have to worry during my pregnancy.”

“Hwuh?!” I gasped. *Myurei figured out that I’d offer to be vice-commander?!*

*He really is way sharper than he looks!*

“Lotz is a scary place...” I said.

“Just so you know, the viceroys of all the other cities are just as terrifying. And unlike Myurei, they won’t be looking out for you.”

“Geh...”

Numerous skilled craftsmen and chefs had set up shops or stalls around the grand palace where Rolmund’s emperor lived. Among them was a pastry chef considered to be the greatest baker in Originia.

“No one will expect the empress to be hanging out here,” Eleora said with a smile, waving a man over to her table. She picked up one of the pastries from the table and took a bite. “Everyone thinks I don’t like sweets. I can’t imagine what gave them that impression.”

“I admit it doesn’t really fit your image...” Veight the Black Werewolf King said, sitting across from her. In Rolmund, he was also known as the Astral Fencer. “So, how are you liking Wa’s best sweets?”

“They’re delectable. We import some Wa sweets ourselves, but only dried items that keep well for the long journey.”

“Then I guess it was worth pulling some strings to convince a few Wa bakers to open up shop here. I hear they’ve even taken on local apprentices within Rolmund so the craft won’t die out,” Veight said with a smile.

“You always do this when you’re trying to sweet-talk someone.”

Eleora pouted and picked up another pastry. This one was called ‘spring flower’ and vaguely resembled a pale violet flower blooming in early spring snow. The flower adorning the top of the pastry was made from pounded rice flour and was exceptionally delicate. Most people wouldn’t even realize it was edible. Eleora took a bite and savored the perfectly sweet pastry.

“I didn’t think I’d see you again so soon,” she said.

“I heard you’ll be handing the throne over to Micha, so I figured it was a good time. I realize that given my infamy in Rolmund, it’s dangerous for me to come here, but there’s something I wanted to discuss.”

“I know. That’s why I went out of my way to meet you in person, in secret.”

Indeed, the room where Eleora and Veight were sitting was closed off from the rest of the shop, with no windows looking outside. Few people even knew this room existed, including the bakers who worked here.

“But to think you’d make Ryuunie the next Demon Lord. Is this your way of getting revenge against the empire, Astral Fencer?”

“I’m sure that’s how the public will see it, but Ryuunie doesn’t hold a grudge against you or Rolmund. If anything, he’ll probably try to improve relations between our countries. Woroy’s happy to help with that too.”

Eleora gave Veight a thoughtful look. “I see. It’s precisely because our countries are seemingly at odds that it will create a compelling narrative when Empress Micha and Demon Lord Ryuunie overcome their troubled pasts and work to unite our nations. No one would buy it under normal circumstances, but since we live in a peaceful era, it’ll work.”

“Yes, and it’ll be a significant achievement for both of them, which will help solidify their respective support bases.”

“Heh, you never stop scheming, do you?” Eleora chuckled and picked up yet another pastry. “All you ever care about is making others look good, Veight. Ever thought about yourself?”

“I don’t want fame. I’m just an ordinary vice-commander, after all.”

“Yeah, right.”

Finishing her third pastry, Eleora reached out for a fourth.

“At any rate, this will be a good start for Micha. It helps that she doesn’t have my baggage weighing her down either—she hadn’t even been born during the coup. I wouldn’t be able to make amends with Meraldia even if I spent another decade on the throne, so it’s definitely time to retire.” Eleora smiled happily as she said that. “As a show of sincerity, I’ll tell Micha to restore the Doneiks family honor once our countries become friends again. We can’t have the head of a friendly nation exiled from ours, after all. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“That would be much appreciated. With that gesture, I’ll finally be able to

make up for all the damage I caused when I came here.” Veight let out a long sigh and pointed to the nearly empty tray. “By the way, how many of these are you planning to eat?”

“All of them, obviously?”

Dad came back a few days later, and things got really busy from there. We had to visit all of our relatives, the key members of both churches in Meraldia, and the influential merchants in Ryunheit to inform them that I’d be succeeding the Aindorf family. It was exhausting. Succeeding as the head of the Aindorf family meant I also became Ryunheit’s viceroy, which required me to handle city affairs and advocate for its interests at Commonwealth Council meetings. The problem was, I wasn’t sure if Ryuunie would be willing to take the Demon Lord position even if I offered to become his vice-commander. I worried he might say I couldn’t compare to my dad, and I wouldn’t be able to argue since it was true.

As the days passed, mom’s stomach grew steadily bigger. When she was bedridden with morning sickness, dad and I looked after her, but I messed up even then. Dad was used to dealing with mom’s mood swings, so he was able to support her without making her mad. He left her alone when she wanted to be alone and kept her company when she was lonely. Meanwhile, I got yelled at more than a few times. But dad smiled at me and said he only knew what to do because it was his second time dealing with this.

“I was learning on the go when you were in Airia’s belly, Friede.”

“I see...”

Anyway, the baby had grown enough that we knew it would be a girl, thanks to Mitty’s prediction magic. Kite used his epoch magic to double-check and confirmed it, so I was definitely going to have a little sister. Soon we’d be holding a family meeting to decide on her name.

“There are several traditional names fitting for an Aindorf daughter,” Isabella, the chief maid, told me.

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Indeed, Lady Airia’s name has a long and storied history as well.”

“Wow...”

I decided to do a bit of my own research after that. Thankfully, there were a ton of books relating to the Aindorf family in the study. So many in fact that it took a while before I found one that might be helpful.

“Should I look through the family tree or a directory of old Aindorf names?” I muttered to myself as I walked between the shelves that went all the way up to the ceiling.

“...de,” came a voice.

“Hmm? Is someone here?” I asked aloud. *There shouldn’t be; I don’t smell anyone. Maybe it’s a ghost? But I learned the basics of necromancy, so if it’s a spirit, I would sense it too...*

I didn’t know who was nearby, but I had definitely heard someone call out to me. I walked over to one of the shelves with cabinet doors, climbed the ladder to the top shelf, and opened the door.

“Is this what I’m looking for?”

I picked up an old handwritten book. Remembering my lessons at Meraldia University on how to treat old tomes, I put on gloves and carefully turned the pages to avoid damaging them. The book appeared to be someone’s memos on mathematics and medicine. I recognized most of these topics; they were taught at Meraldia University too. *Were these someone’s lecture notes?* As I flipped through the pages, I spotted one that had a list of words.

“Hmm... Fulbert... Verda...? What is this?” The words weren’t Meraldian, Rolmundian, or Kuwolese. They didn’t look like Wa either. Written at the very end of the list was “Friedensrichter,” with a big circle drawn around it. “Wasn’t Friedensrichter the name of the first Demon Lord?”

I looked around the room, but I still didn’t sense anyone. Among the words on the list there, one had been double underlined—Othilie. Whoever had written this list seemed to like this word. Written next to it in small print was the word “happiness.”

“Happiness, huh?”

Well, I definitely wanted my little sister to live a happy life. I didn’t know what language this was written in, but dad or Granny Movi could probably tell me.

“Thank you for the suggestion.”

I placed a bookmark on that page, bowed to the shelf, and walked out of the study.

That evening, mom, dad, and I gathered to discuss my little sister’s name.

Dad sipped his black tea and said, “When we were choosing your name, we just took the first half of Friedensrichter’s name in his honor.”

“So do you want to use the second half for my sister’s name?” I asked, and Dad frowned.

“If I remember correctly, ‘richter’ means ‘judge’ in German—or a person who makes things right.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. What does Friede mean?”

“Peace. So Friedensrichter roughly translates to ‘person who brings peace’...I think.”

*Wow, that’s a really cool name! I’d never cared much about the origin of my name, so I hadn’t known that. Wait, so that means I’m named ‘peace,’ right? That’s a nice name too.*

Mom gently rubbed her belly and said with a smile, “Since your big sister’s named ‘peace,’ what would you like to be called? Peace brings prosperity and happiness, so maybe something along those lines?”

*Oh yeah, I almost forgot!* I hurriedly pulled out the book I’d taken from the study.

“How about Othilie, then? Apparently that means happiness.”

My parents exchanged glances.

“Othilie?” mom asked.

“What language is that from?” dad asked.

*Dang, even you don't know, Dad?* I opened the book to the bookmarked page and pointed to the list.

“See, it’s written in this book right here. I found it in the study, so it’s gotta be from an actual language, right?”

As he read through the list, dad’s eyes widened.

“I don’t believe it... But wait, how were you able to read it?!”

“I mean it was written here in plain... Wait...what?” As I looked down at the page, I realized I couldn’t understand the text anymore. “I can’t read it now...”

“It’d be weirder if you could. This is written in *Japanese*. While some of the Japanese language exists in modern Wa, they’re trying to keep it a secret that they used to call people over from Japan. Also, while Wa resembles Japanese, it uses a totally different alphabet, so not even the people there could read this.”

Dad looked fondly at the characters on the page.

“These are Friedensrichter’s notes... I remember he wrote a bunch of notebooks in the hopes that his past life’s knowledge would help the people of this world. He really knew a lot—way more than I do.”

It was then I realized why the notes seemed so similar to what was taught at university. “Does that mean our curriculum at Meraldia University is based on...”

“Yep, all the notes he left behind. This notebook has historical value.” As he said that, dad folded his arms and gave me a quizzical look. “But how were you able to read it before? This does say Othilie, and it definitely says here that it means happiness. Knowing Friedensrichter, it’s probably Old German.”

“Do you not know Old...German either?”

“Not one bit. I didn’t even study it in school.” Dad smiled and patted my head like he used to when I was younger. “The night you were born, people said they thought they saw Friedensrichter’s spirit. I’m sure he was watching over you when he led you to this book too.”

“Th-That’s good, I think.”

I looked around, trying to find Friedensrichter’s spirit so I could thank him.



Everyone talked about the first Demon Lord like he'd been some kind of god, so I didn't know how to feel about the fact that he was watching over me. Just then, mom let out a small gasp.

"Ah."

"What's wrong?"

Mom smiled and said, "Your little sister just kicked my stomach. That's the first time she's done that."

"Guess she really likes the name her big sister found for her," dad said with a smile, and mom nodded.

"Shall we call you Othilie, then?"

The baby kicked mom's stomach again.

*Yep, you definitely like it!* The three of us exchanged glances and smiled.

"I suppose that settles it. Your name will be Othilie."

"It has a nice ring to it."

And so, it was decided that my sister would be Othilie Aindorf. I promised to make her happy just like her namesake.

*Now let's get to work!*

"I'm so tired..." I groaned as I watered the plants in Meraldia University's greenhouse. I was wearing a white lab coat, supposedly the traditional research attire from dad's old world. "Viceroys have way too many responsibilities... Are you all doing okay? Need any more water? Okay, coming right up."

It was oddly relaxing to talk to the plants as I watered them.

"Here you go, special water filled with Granny Movi's mana. Tasty, right?"

I made sure to give a specific amount of water to each plant. After all, these were all part of an experiment. Once I finished watering, I walked over to a corner of the greenhouse where a potted plant was covered by a black hood.

“Sorry about this.” I lifted the hood a little to pour in some water and then covered the plant back up.

I then turned around and said, “Oh, I didn’t think you’d be here, Ryuunie.”

“Hey. Sorry to interrupt your work.” Ryuunie smiled and waved at me.

He wore a light tunic fashionable in the south, with a white lab coat over it. Most students dressed similarly at school. *If he’s dressed like this, I guess he hasn’t come on official business as Doneiks’s viceroy?*

“You’re as perceptive as your father; I’m impressed you noticed me.”

“Well, I am half-werewolf, so I can sense when people are nearby...” With my senses, it was easy to smell or hear someone trying to be stealthy. That said, I hadn’t expected Ryuunie to come here. *He didn’t hear me talking to the plants, did he?*

Ryuunie glanced around the greenhouse, examining the plants. “That’s dragonweed, isn’t it? Also known as the magician’s flower.”

“Oh yeah. You probably already know, but it stores a lot of mana in its roots, and the more mana you give it, the bigger it grows.” I pointed to the hooded plant in the corner. “Over there, we’ve covered one to completely cut it off from sunlight, but we’re giving it the same amount of water and mana, and it’s growing in the same soil and temperature as the plant here.”

“I see, so this is a controlled experiment. I used to do those back in the day. I guess these will be used in elementary lectures?”

“Yep. Those kids aren’t old enough to keep track of everything, so I’m managing the plants for them. Granny Movi’s the one teaching the class though. We tried a control experiment earlier where we gave the different plants different amounts of mana, so now we’re testing the effects of sunlight.”

“For most plants, sunlight matters much more than mana,” he explained. “Even with dragonweed, people think it can grow in the shade as long as it has mana, but that’s not true.”

“Exactly. Everyone makes that mistake at first, so they’re always surprised after we conduct this experiment,” I replied. *Surely he didn’t come here just to*

*comment on the experiments I'm running.*

I doubted he had any business with the greenhouse itself, so he probably wanted to talk to me.

But instead of broaching whatever topic he'd come to discuss, Ryuunie looked over at the covered plant and said, "You apologized to that covered plant earlier. Would you mind telling me why?"

"Huh? Oh, that's because it's my fault it's so withered." I lifted the hood just a little to show Ryuunie how badly the plant was doing.

He looked at it and muttered, "It's in even worse shape than when I did this experiment... The leaves are dried and crumbling, and it's so tiny. You're still giving it plenty of mana and water, right?"

"The same as all the other plants. We even took the seeds from the same parent plant. The only difference is it's been in the darkness ever since it grew past being a seedling." I put the hood back down and sighed. "This poor plant won't ever produce any flowers, which means it won't make any seeds to leave behind descendants either. If not for this experiment, it would have bloomed just like the others."

"In other words, because it was chosen to be the control plant, its fate was dramatically altered"—Ryuunie looked sadly at the covered plant—"just like mine."

"But you've bloomed so brightly, Ryuunie, haven't you?" I gave him a confused look.

"The only reason I'm here right now is that I was born as the eldest son of the Doneiks family. Had I been a farmer's child in Rolmund, I probably would be looking up at the cold Rolmund sky while tending my wheat fields right about now."

"Oh, I see. So that's what you meant." I nodded in understanding, and Ryuunie gave me a surprised look.

"Wait, you get what I'm talking about?"

"I do. You're saying you're lucky you weren't chosen to be one of the covered

plants, and got to grow big and strong. And that's why it's nothing to be proud of, right?"

Ryuunie scratched his head awkwardly. "And here I thought I'd need to explain it to you. You're definitely as perceptive as your father."

Dad and I could both smell humans' emotions, so it was easy for us to figure out what they were thinking. Besides, I'd already talked to Myurei and Woroy, so I knew what was bothering Ryuunie.

Ryuunie ran his hand over the black hood and said quietly, "I was just a child when the Originia and Doneiks families fought over the imperial throne. I lost my father and my grandfather to a political struggle I didn't even understand, and was hounded by Bolshevik assassins. Then, still completely clueless about the situation at large, I was saved by Barnack and Veight and started living my new life as a Meraldian noble." Ryuunie turned back to me. "Do you really think someone like me is fit to become Demon Lord and rule over Meraldia's eighteen cities?"

"I get what you're trying to say, but I still think you're the best choice for Demon Lord, Ryuunie," I said with a smile as I put the watering can back on its shelf. "At the very least, the younger generation's impression of you is quite different from how you see yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Despite losing your family and homeland to war, you're still a kind leader who doesn't let the past define you. You also possess the mental fortitude that only those who have overcome great hardship and sorrow do. Plus, you're smart."

"I-Is that really how everyone else sees me?" Ryuunie folded his arms, clearly unaccustomed to praise. "It's true that none of you have seen war since we've been at peace for the past few decades."

"And right now, we need a Demon Lord who can *maintain* that peace. From my perspective, you're the best choice for that."

Ryuunie nodded slowly. "When you put it that way, you have a point. Most of the people who helped my uncle build up Doneiks are former soldiers or

bandits. They're all wonderful people, but they don't have much to do in these peaceful times. It wouldn't be a bad idea to give them new tasks." But then Ryuunie frowned and asked, "However...won't relations with Rolmund worsen if I become Demon Lord? Should we go to war again, I'd just be a hindrance since I've never fought in a battle."

"The only people who have in either country are all old now, aren't they? If everyone's just as inexperienced, you don't have to worry. I'd never been on a battlefield either, so I probably couldn't fight as well as my dad. Sure, I took some military courses, but those aren't the same thing."

"We're all part of a generation that hasn't fought in a war. I don't want to kill people, and I'd really rather not invade or be invaded. But I'm not sure the older folk understand that, which is why we need younger people in charge."

"The old soldiers from Rolmund love talking about how many people they killed on the battlefield. I suppose, as someone who witnessed the wars they fought in but is still young enough to hate war, I'd be the perfect bridge."

I could tell from Ryuunie's scent that he'd steeled his resolve.

He looked me in the eyes and said, "I think I understand why everyone has such high hopes for me now. But there's something I need to ask you."

"What is it?" I nervously straightened my back as Ryuunie turned back to the covered plant.

"You understood why I feel guilty about the circumstances of my birth. Is that because you have some misgivings about your own station as well?" he asked.

"I mean, everyone calls me the Black Werewolf King's daughter and all..."

"It's certainly hard when your parents are such famous people."

I scratched my head awkwardly and said, "There's that too, but I feel the same way as you, Ryuunie. If I hadn't been born the Black Werewolf King's daughter, I wouldn't have accomplished any of the things I have."

"That's...probably true." It was because I had Dad's werewolf blood that I was so strong, and it was because Mom was the head of the Aindorf family that I could easily gain positions of power.

“If I’d been born a serf in Rolmund, I’d probably be tending the wheat fields with serf Ryuunie right about now.”

“You could say that’s true of everyone though, couldn’t you?” I asked.

“I guess you— Oh!”

As I nodded, I suddenly realized something. Ryuunie seemed to have realized it too.

“Ah, so that’s how it is,” he said with a smile. “In the end, no one is born a hero.”

“Pretty much. I can’t believe we were worried about this for so long,” I said, blushing. “Even if I don’t think I’m a hero now, as long as I keep working hard, I’ll eventually become one.”

“Exactly. I’m sure all the people we consider heroes today were thinking the same things when they were our age.” We turned to each other and chuckled.

“Even dad says he wouldn’t have been able to accomplish so much on the battlefield if he hadn’t been born a werewolf.”

“And Uncle Woroy told me that if he hadn’t been born into the Doneiks family, he would never have accomplished anything. At least now I understand why the two of them always try to act so humble.”

“A person’s birth and environment shape them.” I turned to look at the flowers in the greenhouse. “If you’re born into a family of knights, you’ll learn military tactics and horsemanship. If you’re born into a merchant family, you’ll get to learn mathematics and negotiation skills. None of those are things you earned on your own merit, so they’re nothing to be proud of. But...”

Ryuunie nodded and finished my thought. “...But they’re also not things you should feel guilty about. What’s important is using what you’re given to accomplish your goals in life. That’s how you can create things you can truly be proud of from the bottom of your heart.”

“You should use that line in a speech,” I said jokingly, mostly to hide my embarrassment. Hesitantly, I asked, “So, are you willing to become the Demon Lord, then?”

“I suppose so. At least, if someone as understanding as you is willing to help me out. You’ll be bringing your cadre of advisers along too, right?”

I gave Ryuunie a confused look and asked, “My...cadre of advisers?”

“I’m referring to Shirin, Yuhette, and your other friends. They can stay in their current roles, but we’ll need their strength and wisdom from time to time. Oh, and their connections too.”

“Err, I’ll ask. They’ll probably say yes though,” I replied. *I probably shouldn’t have agreed so easily, but dad does it all the time, so I guess it’s fine.*

Ryuunie looked up at the sunlight pouring through the glass wall. “I think about Rolmund whenever I come in here. There’s a large greenhouse in the imperial palace too. It used to hold Ashley’s medicinal herb garden. Well, I guess this greenhouse was designed by Ashley as well, so it makes sense that it looks the same.”

“Does it feel nostalgic?”

“Not really. Most of the plants Ashley was cultivating were poisonous, so you had to be careful around them. I was still young and wasn’t even allowed in. There’s more freedom in Meraldia than there is in Rolmund.” Ryuunie smiled and added, “You know, I actually came here today intending to tell you I wouldn’t become the next Demon Lord since I didn’t think an average guy like me was fit for the position.”

*Wow, that was close. Oh, that’s why he was avoiding the subject when he first walked in here.* Ryuunie was kind, so he was probably trying to find a way to let me down gently.

“Sorry for conning you into becoming the Demon Lord in the end,” I said apologetically.

“It’s fine. I feel like I’m finally thinking clearly for the first time in a while. Thank you, Friede.” Ryuunie grinned and added, “I’ll be counting on you, Vice-Commander.”

“I-I’ll do my best,” I asserted. *Guess there’s even more work waiting for me. I’ll just have to take things one step at a time.*

The coronation ceremony took place in the large battleball stadium in Doneiks.

Mom stepped in front of a kneeling Ryuunie and said, “On this day, I, Airia Lutt Aindorf, cede my seat as Demon Lord. With the blessings of the Demon Empress Gomoviroa and the Meraldian Commonwealth Council, I hereby appoint Ryuunie Bolshevik Doneiks as the fourth Demon Lord.”

As part of the imperial family, Ryuunie’s full name was technically Ryuunie Bolshevik *Rolmund* Doneiks, but he’d dropped the Rolmund since his exile.

Mom took the ceremonial crown off her head and placed it on Ryuunie’s.

“The crown suits you, Ryuunie,” she said. “You have the air of a true king.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Lady Airia. I will do my best to live up to your expectations.”

Mom smiled gently at Ryuunie, causing him to blush and look away. *Huh, she really is kind of like a mom to him.* Mom didn’t really look that old though, so if you didn’t know her age, you might think she was younger than Ryuunie. Apparently, her aging had slowed because she’d temporarily become a Valkaan when she was younger.

All the important members of the Demon Army and the Commonwealth Council were seated in the stadium’s stands. There were guests from Rolmund and Kuwol as well, so security was tight. Normally, I would have been part of the security detail, but right now I was Othilie Aindorf’s bodyguard. In other words, I was babysitting my newborn sister. *Man, your cheeks are so puffy and cute.* Unfortunately, she pooped a lot, so no matter how many diapers we brought, it was never enough.

Ryuunie got to his feet, turned to dad, and bowed.

“Lord Veight, thank you for allowing me to appoint Lady Friede as my vice-commander.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Your Majesty. It was what Friede wanted after all.”

Ryuunie frowned. “Your Majesty, is it? I never thought I’d be called by that



title...”

As an exiled prince, Ryuunie probably expected never to wear a foreign nation’s crown. And now I was that exiled-prince-turned-Demon-Lord’s Vice-Commander. You really couldn’t predict where life would take you.

As I nodded to myself, someone poked me in the back.

“Friede, now’s not the time to be spacing out. You remember what’s supposed to happen next in this ceremony, right?”

I turned around to see Micha looking at me with a worried expression, though she also appeared to be pouting a little.

“Long time no see, Micha. Thanks for coming!” I said.

“There’s no way I’d miss seeing you become the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander— Uh, I mean, I just came here to congratulate the new Demon Lord. I’m only here as an official ambassador. Don’t get the wrong idea!”

“What are you getting mad for?”

“Because a certain *someone* spent the last few weeks cooped up at home or in the greenhouse messing with plants!”

*Oh, she was worried about me*, I thought. “Sorry for making you worry. Ehehe.”

“Just so you know, I’ll be crowned empress next year! As the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, you better come to deliver a speech!”

“Sure! I bet everyone will be happy to have you as empress, Micha!”

“You really can’t read the mood at all, can you? But thank you.” Micha grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight. “We’ll both have our counties’ affairs to deal with after this, so this might be the last time we can have an open conversation. Just remember, no matter what happens, I’m your friend. I’ll love you forever, Friede.”

“Me too, Micha. If you get ousted in a rebellion, I’ll come save you no matter what.”

“Why do you assume a rebellion is going to happen at all...”

*Aren't rebellions like an everyday thing in Rolmund?*

Micha smiled at Othilie and said, "It's nice to meet you, Othilie. I'm your big sister's best friend. You can think of me like your big sister too. Here, don't you want a hug?"

"Don't blame me if she vomits on your dress..."

Thankfully, Othilie seemed to enjoy being in Micha's arms, and she behaved herself. If anything, she looked even happier than when I was holding her. *Does this mean I'm a failure as an older sister? Mrgrgr... Oh wait, Ryuunie's speech is about to start.*

"Sorry, Micha, can you look after Othilie for a bit?" I asked.

"Sure, just leave her to me. Look, it's your big sister Micha-Wicha."

*So that's how she acts with babies...* It was funny seeing this new side of her.

I then walked over to the new Demon Lord and said loudly, "Demon Lord, a few words, if you please."

"Of course." Ryuunie looked over at the gathered crowd and said, "On this sunny and peaceful day, I can distinctly feel the weight of the crown Lady Airia has bestowed upon me."

*Are you emphasizing peace here as a way of getting back at Rolmund?* I'd heard that until Eleora took the throne, there was constant fighting between the imperial families for the crown. Knowing Ryuunie, I could see him taking this once in a lifetime moment and turning it into an opportunity to make digs at Rolmund.

"It's an honor to know I was chosen not because of my lineage or my deeds, but because of the faith you have in my leadership. I swear to serve Meraldia until my dying breath. I will dedicate my life to ensuring everyone can live happily and in peace, regardless of their race, religion, or creed."

*That's a good speech.* At the same time, you could tell from his words that he'd gone through many hardships in the past. Unsurprisingly, everyone broke out into applause.

In the months leading up to Ryuunie's coronation, he'd gradually taken over

all of mom's duties and responsibilities. Everyone approved of how he had been handling things, and he truly seemed like the perfect fit to lead Meraldia into an era of peace. It also helped that everyone liked Ryuunie as a person. Of course, I suspected part of the reason everyone was clapping so loudly was to curry favor with him.

After Ryuunie's speech, dad stepped up to give his own.

Normally, a vice-commander wouldn't be deemed important enough to make a speech. However, dad had single-handedly elevated the role of vice-commander, making it almost more significant than that of the Demon Lord. I understood why everyone wanted him to speak.

Dad approached the podium and said in his usual calm voice, "I've had the utmost pleasure of serving under three Demon Lords, but today, I can finally free myself from the burden of being vice-commander. I'd like to thank Ryuunie and everyone for allowing me to retire. I am truly grateful."

My dad had loved being a vice-commander, but I also knew he was tired from working so hard for so long.

He turned to me and said, "As you all know, the new Demon Lord's Vice-Commander will be my daughter, Friede Aindorf. I realize she's still inexperienced...very inexperienced, but I have faith that she will become a great vice-commander in time. It is my hope that if I go down in history, it will not be as Veight the Black Werewolf King, but as the father of the greatest vice-commander Meraldia has ever known, Friede."

*Hold on, that's way too much pressure!* Dad smiled at me and raised a hand to quiet the cheering.

"Thank you. Meraldia is a nation of differences. We have humans, demons, people from Rolmund and Kuwol, old veterans who've survived countless wars, and youth who've never seen battle. The peace we enjoy is more tenuous than anyone realizes, but at the same time, more powerful than you can imagine."

Dad turned back to the crowd.

"I'm truly glad that I was able to help steer this nation towards lasting peace during my tenure as vice-commander. But I could not have done it alone. It was

thanks to the efforts of each and every one of you here, as well as so many who aren't, that we made it this far. I ask that you offer Demon Lord Ryuunie the same support you gave me and Airia. He's the light of hope for Meraldia that I risked my life to save. I promise you he will guide you all towards a brighter future." As he said this, dad wiped a tear from his eye. "Finally...at long last...I can see a Meraldia that doesn't need me. This sight means more to me than anything else. Thank you, everyone."

There were probably many people in the audience who didn't understand what dad was trying to say. His main concern was creating a nation that could function effectively without relying on a single exceptional leader. After all, if that leader fell, the country would falter. A truly strong nation can thrive regardless of who leads it. That's what dad spent decades building a foundation for. It was also why he established Meraldia University; he knew we needed many educated people to run things effectively. *Good for you, Dad. You finally did it.*

I stared at dad's back as he walked off the stage, and he glanced over his shoulder at me.

"He's smiling..." I murmured.

It was the kind of satisfied smile that said, "I've done everything I wanted to." I'd never seen him smile like that before. Mom was also smiling brighter than ever.

Dad then walked over to me, took my hand, and bowed quietly. It was the ceremonial passing of the vice-commander position from one person to another. *At least I think that's what this is.* Dad finally recognized me as a fully fledged adult. I was so that happy tears started pouring down my cheeks, and I bowed back to dad as he left.

"Well, even after retiring, it's not like I'll be *completely* free," dad said to me in the Doneiks manor after the ceremony was over.

He wasn't wrong. Even though he wasn't the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander anymore, he was still the legendary Black Werewolf King. Everyone loved and respected him, and now that he didn't have official duties, they could more

freely seek his help. There was already a line of people waiting to see him for advice on all sorts of matters. He'd had to weave his way past them to get to this room and take a break. But still, he'd be less busy than before.

"Dad, what are you gonna do now?"

As he played with Othilie, he said, "Once your mom recovers, I was thinking of surveying the forest with her. Not only is it a vital source of lumber, but it's also crucial to our national defense strategy. We need to determine how far it stretches and map out the entire region. There's also the investigation of the area south of Kuwol that we need to conduct, but since we'll be busy looking after Othilie, I can't go that far for a while."

"You were planning on doing that yourself?" I asked. *No wonder mom keeps trying to tie him down. He heads off whenever he feels like it.*

Dad scratched his graying beard and smiled. "All of the famous heroes in my past life failed to raise competent successors, and that's why their empires fell. I'm not a hero, but I at least managed to ensure there would be capable people to take over after I'm gone. So in that sense, I accomplished more than the heroes of the past."

"By competent successor...do you mean me?"

Dad gave me a pensive look and said, "Who else? Othilie's still in diapers. Of course, many of my other students are skilled at what they do, but you're the only one who could be the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander."

"Ehehe, thank you." Blushing, I bowed my head. I knew dad finally felt free since his greatest worry had been addressed. He no longer had to fear what would happen once he was gone. "I know I'm inexperienced, but I'll do my best to help Ryuunie. So don't worry and go enjoy the rest of your life, Dad."

"You sure have become reliable. Thanks. But you know, there's so much I want to do, I don't even know where to start. I want to spend as much time with Othilie as I did with you, so I might be even busier these next fifteen years than I was before. Hahahaha."

I straightened my back and said, "Really, thank you so much for everything, Dad. I know you don't think you're a hero, but you're the greatest hero in the

world to me.”

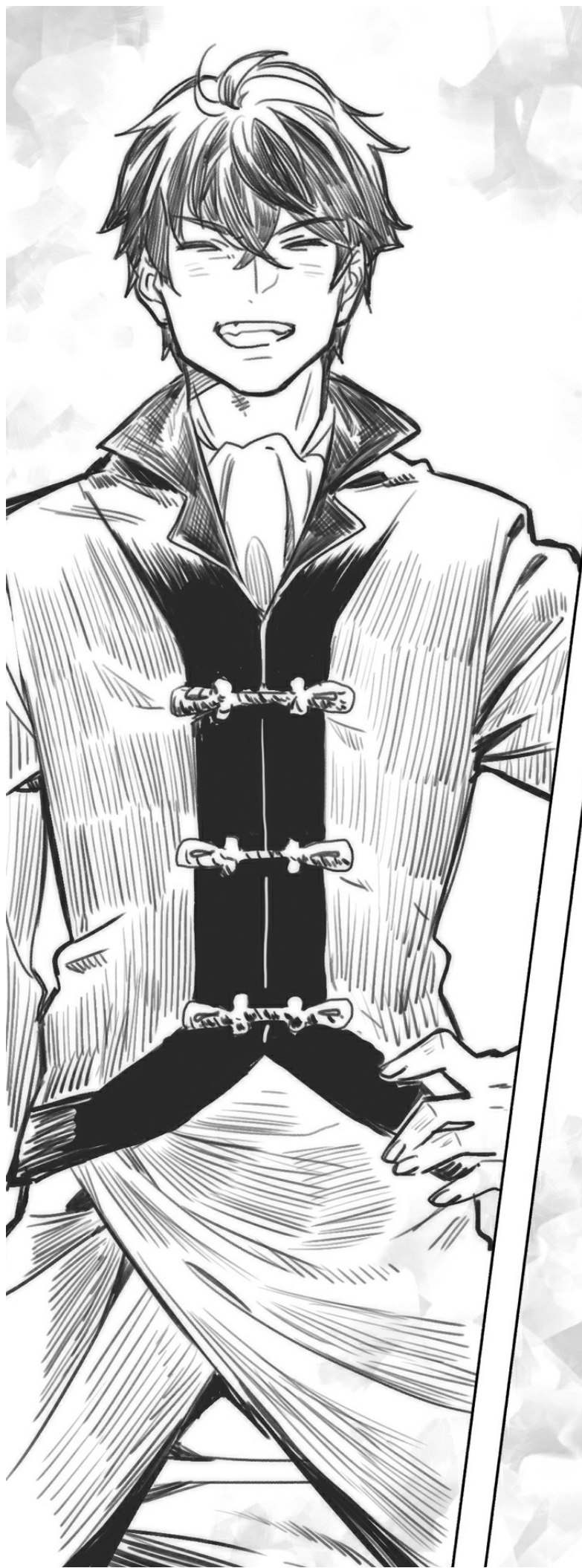
“Oh...” Dad smiled, blushing, and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you, Friede. Can I leave the rest in your capable hands?”

“Of course!”

I needed to do my best so that Meraldia’s future continued to be bright and prosperous.

*Thank you for everything, our beloved Black Werewolf King. You can finally rest now.*



# Epilogue

I finished reading and returned to the future...or rather the present.

“Phew...”

I, Elainya Originia, glanced up from the book I’d been reading and looked around the library. I didn’t see any sign of that nosy boy who’d talked to me earlier. *Good, I can finally focus on my research.*

Or so I thought, but a second later, that boy returned and dumped a pile of old books on my desk.

“These are all the books on Lord Veight that I could find! Oh, I see you’ve already finished reading his biography! It’s aimed primarily at children, so it’s not a rigorous account of his life, but it’s well written. I quite like it myself.”

The young Meraldian man smiled at me. He was handsome, but he kept getting in the way of my studies. He also talked way too much.

I adjusted my glasses and frowned at him. “By Veight, you mean Veight Von Aindorf, correct?”

“That’s right.” The young man’s smile widened as I said Veight’s full name.

*If you’re trying to flirt with me, at least expand your knowledge base first.*

I adjusted my glasses again and told the handsome but annoying young man, “I’ve come all the way from Rolmund to study Veight Gerun Friedensrichter, not Veight Von Aindorf. I’ve heard that Veight Gerun Friedensrichter was the *real* brains behind the rise of the Originia dynasty. He’s supposed to have been from Meraldia, but apparently, he was a man of many mysteries and not much is known about him.”

“I know which Veight you’re looking for,” he replied.

*Then why did you bring me books on the wrong person?* I sighed and said, “The other problem is that there are too many people named ‘Veight’ in Meraldia.”



“Well, everyone wanted to name their son after him. There were also a bunch of girls named Airia, Friede, and Othilie too! Hahaha.”

*By “him,” which Veight are you talking about? I guess it’s probably the Aindorf one, I thought. “I am aware that Veight Von Aindorf is a legendary figure in Meraldian history.”*

Apparently, he was a werewolf who left his mark on military tactics, politics, diplomacy, economics, education, magic, medicine, and even art. He served as the vice-commander of multiple Demon Lords—although that title wasn’t used anymore. These days, the leader of Meraldia was called the Commonwealth Chief. Without Veight, the Meraldian Commonwealth wouldn’t have come into being, and it was likely the corrupt Meraldian Senate would have exterminated all the werewolves in Meraldia. The history books claimed he laid the foundations for the three hundred years of peace we’d had since his death. He was as famous in Meraldia as Eleora was in Rolmund. Granted, there was no telling how truthful the history books were since facts tended to get exaggerated.

“People have heard of Veight Von Aindorf even in Rolmund, but don’t you think his accomplishments are a bit exaggerated? There’s no way a single human—or I suppose werewolf—could have achieved all that.”

The young man scratched his head awkwardly. “You say that, but this is what’s left after we took out a bunch of his deeds. He always was too humble for his own good. In all the joint research projects he did, he kept his name out of them and pushed the credit onto others.”

*You talk about him like you knew him personally...* I mentally quipped, then said, “Anyway, you’re getting in the way of my research. Tuition isn’t cheap, so I want to finish my research as quickly as possible and go home.”

“Aren’t you a member of the imperial family? Shouldn’t you be loaded?”

*How do you know that? Also, if you do know that, why are you being so casual with me? Do you have nerves of steel or what?*

I sighed and said, “My family name is Originia, and I am a distant descendant of Empress Micha, but we’re a tiny branch family. We’re so far removed from the main imperial line that we’re not even allowed access to the library in the

imperial palace.”

Micha had given birth to many children, which led to the creation of numerous branch family offshoots. Furthermore, she’d reigned a full three hundred years ago. At this point, there were hundreds of people who could trace their lineage back to Empress Micha.

“Now go away. I’m trying to get as much research done as possible before I meet Professor Pastier.”

Professor Parker Pastier was Meraldia University’s foremost historian and an immortal skeleton who had mastered necromancy. I planned to study under him during my stay at Meraldia University and was extremely glad he agreed to tutor me after I sent him a letter. However, because my family was poor, I initially entered a different department and took advantage of the discount students received for changing majors. This meant I arrived a few days before the history classes were set to begin, and from what I’d heard, Professor Pastier was on vacation. As a result, I had yet to meet him.

“Um... So...”

“What?”

The young man seemed to want to say something, but after I glared at him, he sighed and gave up.

*Finally, I can study in peace.* Unfortunately, I still hadn’t been able to find any documents on Veight Gerun Friedensrichter. *It’s strange. He’d been a noble and a member of the Commonwealth Council. You’d think someone who’d caused such a ruckus in Rolmund would have more written about him, at least in his home country.* If I couldn’t find anything on him in Meraldia University’s vast library, the only other place left to look would be the Demon Army’s public records. The problem was, I’d already asked the Demon Army clerk, and they’d told me there were no public records available on Veight Gerun Friedensrichter. *What a pickle...*

After another fruitless search through the shelves, I returned to my desk and idly picked up one of the books on the Black Werewolf King that the young man had left behind.

“Oh, this is about the Aindorf family...”

Airia Lutt Aindorf had been Meraldia’s third Demon Lord and her husband, Veight Von Aindorf, had been her vice-commander. This particular book appeared to be a collection of letters written by various members of the Aindorf family. Many of them hadn’t been published publicly, as far as I knew.

“Wait... Are these all primary sources and not copies?!”

I flipped back to the beginning of the book to see who the author and publisher were. It had been published by Meraldia University, and the author—or rather, the person who’d written commentary on all the letters—was none other than Parker Pastier, the professor I was planning on meeting in a few days. Not only that, but the publication date was just a *few days ago*. This was a brand-new book! Additionally, it had been edited by a member of the Aindorf family. This was a supremely valuable book. *I’ve gotta read this!*

I started reading through the letters and began to learn about a completely new side of the famous Black Werewolf King.

Surprisingly, for someone who’d been famous for slaying Valkaan and destroying castles, it appeared the Black Werewolf King had been quite the family man. The letters he’d sent his wife and children while he’d been away attested to that. He was an honest and straightforward man, but he’d also had a soft spot for his family—basically, like one of the stay-at-home dads that had become popular in recent years.

“Hehe...”

It was heartwarming to read all the letters he’d sent. Honestly, it was hard to imagine he’d lived in the past with how modern his sensibilities were. It seemed he’d received many letters from nobles and generals in Wa, Rolmund, and Kuwol too. From the looks of it, he’d been personally acquainted with all the important people in every nation. It was impressive to think that so many people cared to send him letters in an era where magic communication was limited and there wasn’t an international postal system dedicated to delivering correspondence.

Furthermore, it appeared both Empress Micha and King Shumar had called

him “Professor.” Meraldia University had always been the premier educational institution on the continent, but I hadn’t expected even foreign kings and empresses to have studied here. While I knew Veight Von Aindorf had been famous, I hadn’t realized he’d personally known so many important people. If he’d wanted to, he could have controlled every nation on the continent from the shadows.

“What do you think? Pretty interesting, right?” said a voice.

I came back to my senses with a start. I’d been so engrossed in my reading that I hadn’t noticed the noisy young man walking over again. He had a can of black tea from a nearby vending machine in his hands.

He held it out to me and said, “But don’t forget to take breaks, or you’ll strain your eyes. Here, drink this.”

“Um, I appreciate the concern, but we’re not allowed to bring food and drink into the library.” I pointed to the sign behind me, and the boy cocked his head.

“Oh, you’re right. I don’t have to worry about eating or drinking, so I never realized.”

*What’s that supposed to mean?*

Confused, I nevertheless took the canned tea. “Thank you, I’ll drink it later.”

“You’re welcome,” the young man said with a smile.



“While you’re here, why not read up on Veight Von Aindorf as well? You might make some interesting discoveries.”

“I admit he does seem like an interesting individual, but...all of the Black Werewolf King plays have made him feel larger than life. There are too many exaggerations in the books written about him, so it’s hard to tell fact from fiction.”

“The books only contain the truth, actually. Even the plays are mostly truthful, though they’ve dramatized some sections.”

*Everyone in Meraldia says the same thing, which is why I can’t take them seriously.* Granted, these letters at least prove Veight had wielded an enormous amount of influence among all the nations on the continent, as well as Kuwol. Empress Micha and her father, Duke Lekomya, had written to Veight as if they were good friends. King Shumar had even wanted to name his first son Veight, and apparently only stopped after Veight begged him not to. He had also asked Veight about national secrets that definitely should not have left the royal family and sought his advice on confidential matters. Veight’s advice had been pretty good, but it was insane to me that anyone would ask a foreign official for help on such matters.

If all of these letters were indeed truthful primary sources, it meant this Veight was responsible for the slow death of Rolmund’s outdated slavery system, helping Rolmund mend relations with the Sternenfeuer cult, and for aiding Kuwol in building friendly relations with the neighboring nomadic tribes. Not to mention, it seemed Veight had secretly gone to Rolmund and Kuwol to directly influence events. He’d taken his elite Werewolf Unit with him to suppress rebellions in Rolmund and assist Empress Micha and Empress Eleora with covert activities.

*Wait... He’d helped Empress Eleora, was a member of the Commonwealth Council, and was a strategist skilled at covert operations, as well as a master negotiator and diplomat. Isn’t that exactly what people say about Veight Gerun Friedensrichter?*

“Don’t tell me...”

I looked up to ask the handsome young man if my suspicions were correct,

but he was nowhere to be found. I picked up the can of tea he'd left for me, warming my hands. *Who was that guy, anyway?* While I was a little curious about him, I was far more interested in the books before me.

This wasn't strictly related to my original goal, but scholarship was all about discovering new branches to study. The straightforward path wasn't always the correct one, so I might as well take a detour for now.

"This Veight sure seems like an interesting figure, huh..."

I took out my magic-powered writing tablet and started writing bullet points on Veight Von Aindorf as I read more about him.

*Just who was this strange yet captivating man?*

## Afterword

As a kid, I always wondered why authors took forever to release the final books in their series, but now that I've had to write a final volume myself, I finally understand: It's way more effort to wrap up a story than it is to continue one. Sorry it took so long, everyone, but it's finally out.

Hyougetsu here, one book older and wiser. Thank you so much for waiting patiently for the finale. I'd started these last few volumes thinking that it would just be an after story of sorts, telling the rest of Veight's life and the people who take over after him. But I also wanted to showcase Friede's growth, so the arc dragged on for quite a while. Then I decided I wanted to keep going until Veight's retirement, and I figured the best capstone scene for that would be Veight passing the torch to Friede. But in order to make that happen, I needed to let Friede experience various adventures and grow into someone capable of taking over.

By the time I realized it, I'd gotten all the way to volume 16. I also had to swap publishers during that time, making *Der Werwolf* both my longest and most hectic series from an administrative perspective. Honestly, I expected the series to get canceled halfway through, so I'm very glad I was able to write all the way to the end of Veight's story. It's all thanks to the support of the publishers and the support of you readers.

Thank you all so much.

When I first started writing this story on Narou, my eldest daughter was just one year old. Now she's ten, and my younger daughter's six. I actually was only able to have a second child because this series did well enough to give my family a bit of extra leeway in our finances, so in a sense, it's thanks to all of you that there's another life in this world. Again, thank you so very much.

Thankfully, my two daughters get along great, and seeing them play together was what made me start thinking, "It'd be nice if Friede had a sister too..." I hadn't planned on giving Friede any siblings when I first started writing the final



volume, but by the end, I realized that was exactly where the story was heading. And so, Friede's sister, Othilie, was born. Thank you so much to my editor Saitou-sama for coming up with her name. I'd come up with the names of all of my characters until then, but I felt I needed something special for Friede's sister, so I begged my editor to name her. (I'm so sorry for making you always handle things that aren't part of your job description!) Othilie was born too late to see her dad's golden age, but knowing Veight, he probably did enough cool things after she got older that she thinks he's a hero too. I'm sure by Elainya's time, there are over a hundred Black Werewolf King plays.

Anyway, I once again would like to thank everyone who has supported me all this time and allowed me to complete this series. A big thank you to all of the editors, proofreaders, designers, publicists, and printers at Earth Star Entertainment and Square Enix for your wonderful work. I'd also like to thank my illustrators Nishi(E)da-sama and Teshima Nari-sama for your amazing drawings; all of your character art was truly exceptional! Special thanks as well to Kosumi Yuuichi-sama and the manga department for making a manga that surpasses the original.

A big thank you to chief editor Itagaki-sama as well, who first offered me a publishing deal. Thank you for always putting the work first, and making sure I could write to my heart's content. I don't think I'll ever meet an editing chief as wonderful as you. Thank you for also introducing me to all those great sweets shops—how do you know about all of them?

Of course, I'm also eternally indebted to Saitou-sama, who has stuck with me as my editor from start to finish. He's basically a coauthor at this point. Without his passion for the work and deep understanding of the characters, I'm not sure I would have made it to the final volume. Thank you so much. (And I'm sorry my daughters kept barging in on our video calls. They love you too.)

Last but not least, I'd like to thank all of you who read from volume 1 all the way to volume 16. It's thanks to you that I can continue being an author, and I will be eternally grateful for that. Veight's story ends here, but his life goes on even if we're not reading about it. I hope you enjoy imagining what kind of antics he's getting up to now that he's a free man. Whatever your headcanon is, that's now canon. May we meet again in another story.



Thank you  
so much!





Congrats on the release of the final volume!

I'm praying for your continued success  
in future ventures!

小住 龍一  
Kosumi Yuichi

小住 龍一





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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 16

by Hyougetsu

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JINRO E NO TENSEI, MAO NO FUKUKAN vol.16

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First published in Japan in 2024 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2025