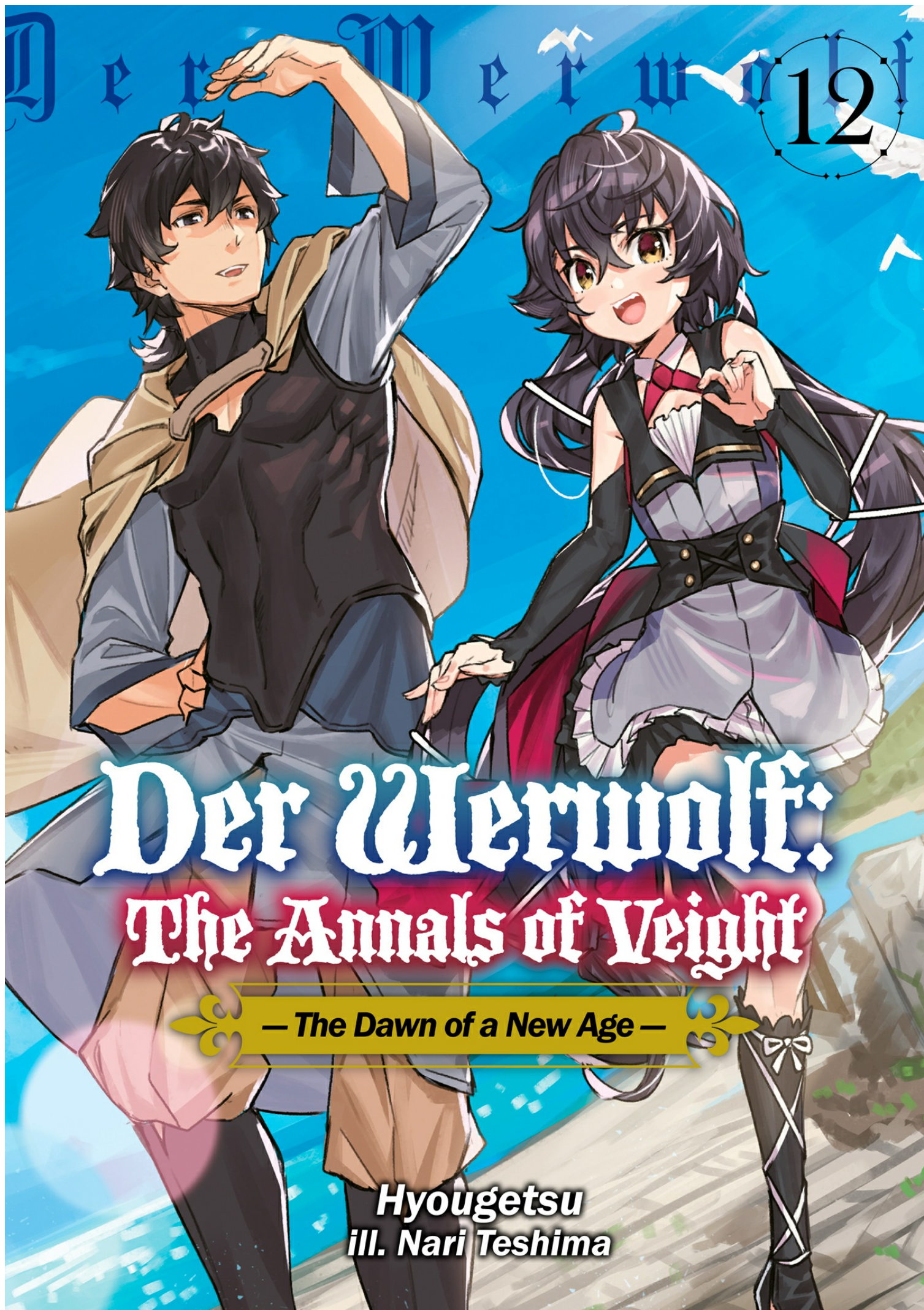


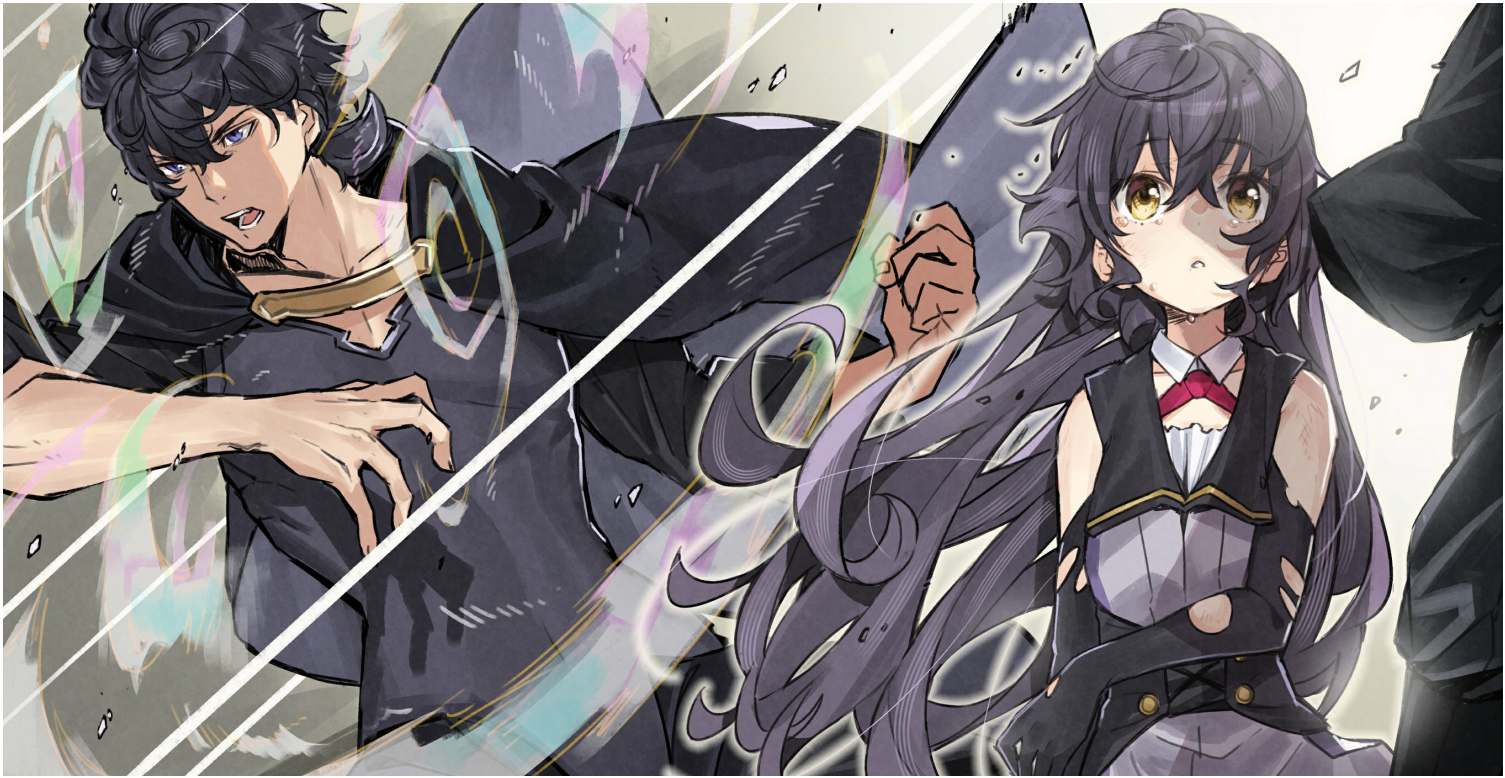
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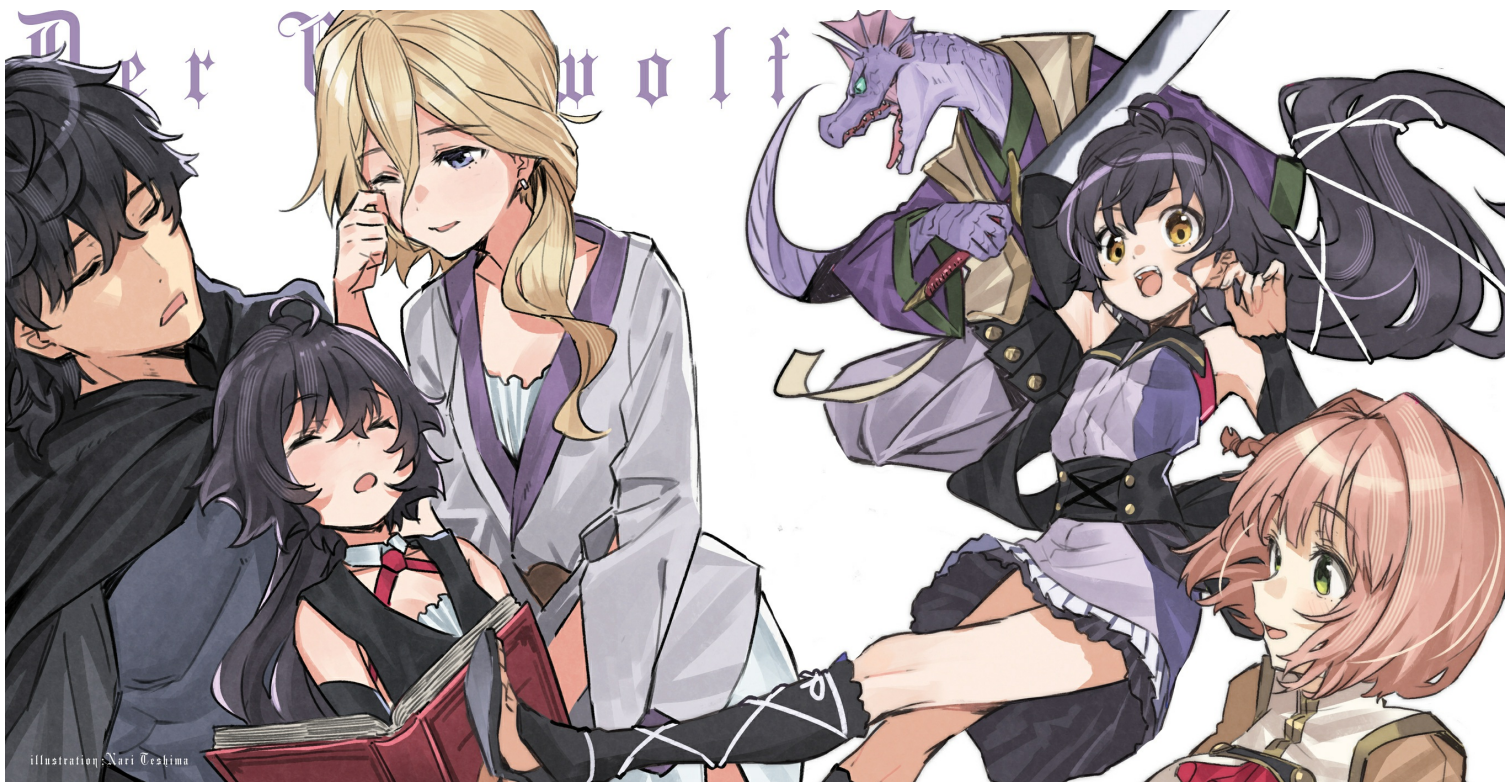
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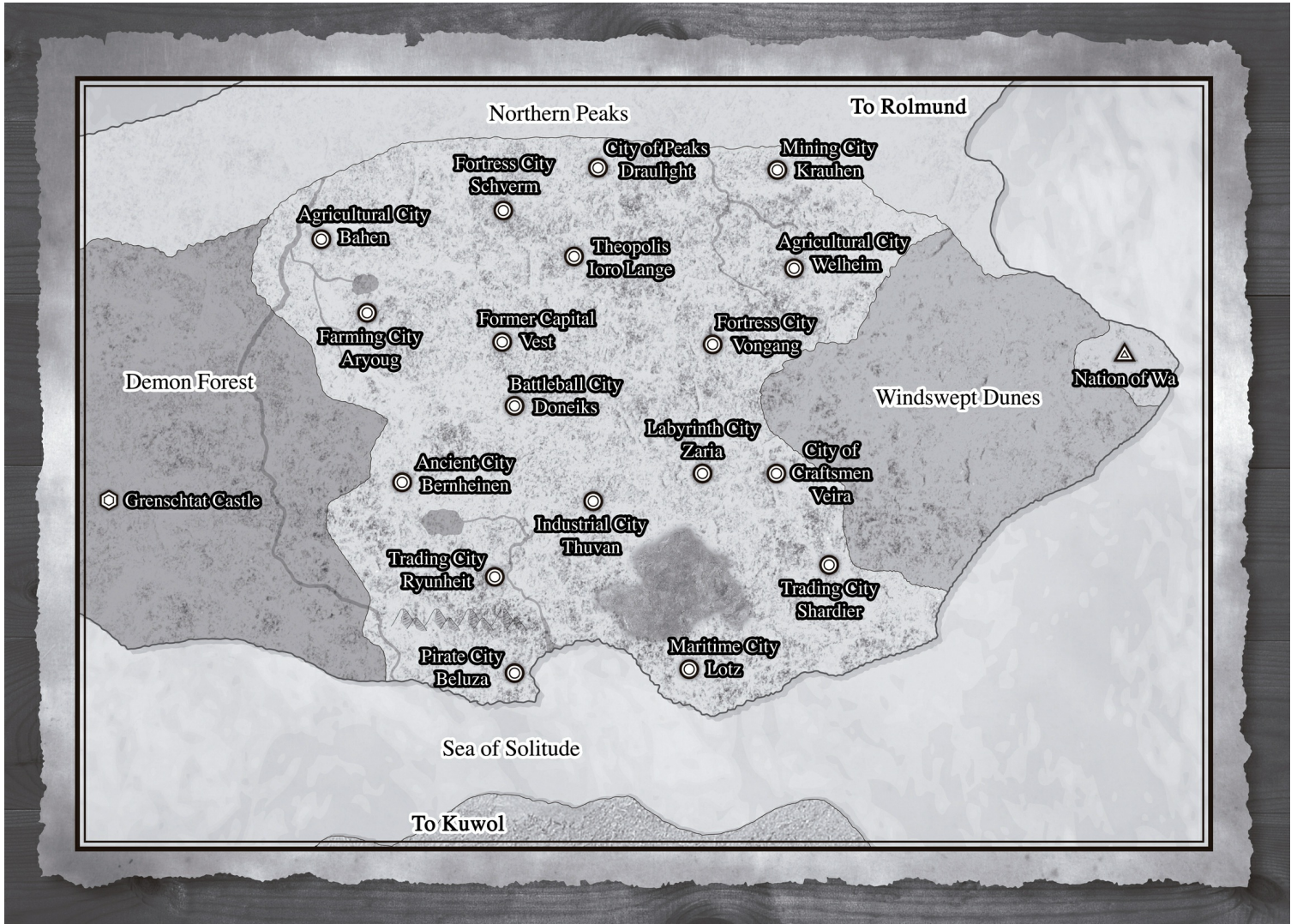
— The Dawn of a New Age —

Hyougetsu
ill. Nari Teshima









— *The Story So Far* —

Veight traveled to Kuwol to help mediate the dispute between the royal family and the coastal nobles. Soon after his arrival, though, Zagar—head of the mercenary group hired by the coastal nobles—assassinated the king while pretending to be Veight. Zagar then took his mercenary troupe to the capital to claim the kingdom for himself. However, Veight learned from the king's spirit that his wife was pregnant with his heir, and found a way to stymie Zagar's plans for domination.

Feeling cornered, Zagar attempted to seize a Valkaan's power for himself, but he failed to realize the texts that had told him about the treasure he sought had been forged by Veight. After a brief scuffle, the mercenary leader died, along with his ambitions.

Unfortunately, as soon as Kuwol's problems were settled, Veight learned that a divination had predicted his wife would have severe complications in childbirth. Hearing this, he rushed back to Meraldia and, with the help of Gomoviroa and other skilled magicians, successfully performed a C-section, saving both his wife and daughter.

In the afterglow following the birth of their daughter, Airia and Veight decided to name her Friede, after Veight's mentor and former boss, Friedensrichter.

The story so far

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Chapter 12

After various escapades in Meraldia, Rolmund, Wa, and Kuwol, peace had finally settled within the continent. Or so I'd hoped anyway. So far, my second life had been filled with a lot more adventure than my first. I even managed to get married. The life of matrimony was a novel experience in and of itself, but the real shocker was becoming a father. And perhaps the most surprising thing of all was that our daughter, Friede, had the potential of a Demon Lord lying dormant within her. Her cries were laced with the power of my Soul Shaker, and she struck fear into people's hearts simply by bawling. Not only this, but she also possessed the ability to absorb mana just like me.

Naturally, the first thing I did upon learning these things was consult with my master.

"I've examined Friede to the best of my abilities," she said to me as she scooted to the edge of her seat so that her feet would touch the ground.

Master's tests indicated that my daughter did indeed possess the same abilities as Airia and myself.

"Her screams have the power to alter the flow of nearby mana and draw it towards her. And like you, Veight, she can only absorb pure mana."

"Does that mean this power of mine is hereditary?"

"Of that, I am not certain. There is much about magic we still don't understand."

If a sage who has lived for hundreds of years didn't have a definitive answer, there was no way I could figure it out myself. Fortunately, Friede's power wasn't too strong yet, and Master was able to teach me a simple formula that would keep her powers in check.

"Anything enchanted with this magic circle will have its influx of mana reduced. I use it on myself when necessary, so I know it works. Simply embroider it onto her underwear or something that she wears all the time."

“Thank you... Wait, why do you need to use something like this?”

Master sighed deeply. “Well, if I absorb too much mana, I’ll end up becoming a true Demon Lord...or, well, a Valkaan.”

In recent times, “Demon Lord” has come to mean the “leader of the demons” rather than a particularly strong one. We’d also learned that Demon Lords and Heroes were effectively identical. Because of this, we’d started using the ancient Kuwolese term “Valkaan,” also known as “War God,” to refer to individuals whose mana passed a critical threshold instead.

“I had Kite measure my mana, and it appears I have around 3,000 kites worth.”

“Whoa, that’s a lot.”

“Before Kuwol’s civil war, it was around 2,800 kites.”

So it’s still growing, I thought.

Master showed me the magic circle sewn onto the inside of her robe and said, “This happens to everyone who can absorb mana, not just me.”

In the same way that training helped your muscles grow, constantly circulating mana through your body helped increase your total capacity. This was why veteran mages who’d spent decades studying always had more mana than new apprentices.

“Fear not. There is still a long way to go before I become a Valkaan. Judging by my calculations, you need between 100,000 and 1,000,000 kites of mana for the transformation to take place.”

“I didn’t realize there was a factor of ten separating the upper and lower bounds.”

Master gave me a sardonic grin. “It was quite difficult to narrow the range down this far, you know?”

“Sorry,” I said, scratching the back of my head. *I guess that hurt her pride as a researcher.*

“A single drop of water evaporates quickly, but the oceans never shrink. In the same way, once a person’s mana passes a certain point, it stabilizes and

becomes effectively infinite. You can use as much as you want and not run out.”

“Kind of like how excessively dense stars become black holes...” I mumbled.

“Why do you always tempt me by dangling interesting tidbits like that without elaborating?” Master replied with a pout. She knew I was a reincarnator now, so she’d probably pester me for a thorough explanation later.

“But because Shupo—I mean, Friede—is a baby, she cannot control how much mana she absorbs. If she continues instinctively sucking in as much as she can, she’ll turn into a Valkaan in just a few years.”

A toddler with the strength of a Valkaan would be a nightmare. *You can’t exactly teach a three-year-old self-control. Also, please stop trying to call her “Shuporin,” we already rejected that name.* Seeing my troubled expression, Master chuckled.

“At present, Friede only has 10 kites of mana. She’s stronger than the average adult werewolf, but not so strong that she’s completely unmanageable. And if you and Airia keep her growth in check with this magic circle, she’ll never have to worry about turning into a Valkaan.”

“Thank goodness.”

If she turned into a Valkaan, the continent’s mana balance would be disrupted, and an opposing Valkaan would eventually appear to confront her. This was the world’s way of trying to restore balance, and the two Valkaan would exterminate each other simply by being in proximity, so it would be hard for them to coexist.

“Did this happen because Airia and I have such high mana pools? If so, I feel bad for Friede.”

“There’s no need to worry. I’m here to help.” Master puffed out her chest and patted it reassuringly. “Fortunately, now that I’ve become the Demon Empress I’ve been able to push all of my duties...err, I mean, transfer them to Airia.”

“You know, I should tell Airia you said that.”

“Hmph! It’s your fault for forcing me to become the second Demon Lord.”

No one else could have taken over back then! Regardless, it seemed I had yet

another responsibility now. I needed to raise Friede well so she didn't turn into a Valkaan. If she got a big head because of her extraordinary strength, it would almost certainly lead to tragedy. As her father, it was my duty to make sure that didn't happen. *This is gonna be stressful.*

Master grinned and said, "Really, you don't need to look so worried. Never forget that the Great Sage Gomoviroa watches over you too."

"Thanks, Master."

"Think nothing of it."

Why are you so happy?

For some reason, after that conversation with Master, I was now training the head maid, Isabelle.

"Graaaaaah!"

I transformed and let out a howl. This was just a plain howl, not a Soul Shaker one. However, a werewolf's howl naturally struck fear into the hearts of other living beings—even if it wasn't enhanced by a spell. Unsurprisingly, Isabelle gritted her teeth and sunk to her knees.

"Ngh!"

I immediately shut my mouth and hurried over to her side.

"Isabelle, let's stop this. You can't resist something like this with willpower alone."

But Isabelle stubbornly shook her head. "No, I will learn to endure this."

The reason we were doing this strange training was because of Friede. While the seal that Master taught me was able to keep Friede from absorbing too much mana, it didn't stop her crying from having the properties of Soul Shaker. Weak as it was, it was still powerful enough to leave the maids paralyzed with fear. As a result, the maids were all exhausted, and they were having trouble taking care of her.

For now me, Airia, and Master were taking turns looking after Friede, but the three of us were all important members of Meraldia's government. Isabelle,

who was known among the residents of the manor as Isabelle the Unyielding, had stepped up to offer to be my daughter's caretaker in our stead so we could return to our duties. Hence why we were doing this training.

"Isabelle, I really don't think it's possible."

"No, I won't give up!"

She clenched her hands into fists and staggered to her feet. Normally she was quite level-headed, but when it came to Airia and Friede, she got uncharacteristically heated up. Isabelle had looked after Airia her whole life, so she was quite loyal to her.

"What kind of head maid is unable to take care of the heir of the Aindorf family? Besides, I need to set an example for the rest of the maids."

You're pushing yourself way too hard. I knew how stubborn she could be, though, so I gave up on trying to dissuade her. *It'll be faster just to indulge her until she's satisfied.*

"All right. First, imagine holding an invisible shield up to protect yourself. Raise your hands as if you're really holding that shield. If your body goes through the motions, your mind will be convinced. And conviction is the source of strength."

"Yes, Master!"

Eventually, Isabelle progressed far enough that she could resist Friede's Soul Shaker to some extent. I knew that was theoretically possible since I was teaching her the basics of protecting herself with magic, but I was still surprised she'd been able to make it this far in such a short time. *I'm once again reminded that humans really are amazing. They have so much potential.*

Then again, out of all the maids that went through this training, it was only Isabelle who'd managed to build up any resistance, so it was more Isabelle who was amazing than humanity in general. Incidentally, I wrote down the details of this whole saga and added the story to the collection in Meraldia University's library. Hopefully future generations would draw inspiration from Isabelle's determination.

A month had passed since Friede was born. Back on Earth, this would be around the time the newborn period was ending. And indeed, Friede's skin had lost its ruddy tint, which made her look a lot more like a person than an alien now. She slept in short cycles, and when she was awake she was either crying or drinking milk. As of now, she was still too young to communicate intelligently with anyone.

Though I had to hurry home, Parker and Mao were still back in Kuwol to represent Meraldia during their meetings. According to the letters, they'd convinced Kuwol to keep their council going even after the new king was old enough to rule. It would function similarly to Meraldia's Commonwealth Council, and would work together with the royal family to manage the nation. Since they would be aiding the king during his youth, he would be indebted to them even after his coronation ceremony. Where the country went from there would depend a lot on what kind of person the prince was. Also, their council had decided to hire all the mercenaries Zagar used to lead as frontier soldiers to protect and settle Kuwol's borders. They were already clearing land to make new sugarcane plantations.

"So this is the crest of the Royal Sugarcane Corps, huh?"

At the bottom of the letter I was reading was a small crest. It depicted a sword and a sugarcane stalk crossed in an X. Honestly, it looked pretty cool.

Airia, who was rocking Friede on her lap, leaned over to read the letter as well. "The mercenaries seemed rather eager to become frontier soldiers."

"The title may not sound fancy, but they'll be working directly for the royal family, so it's technically a prestigious post. Besides, the people who really hate farming can be watchmen or work in the sugar processing plants."

Since their position was a government one, the job was stable and the salary adequate. Moreover, the honor of working directly for the royal family meant they had some social standing as well. So long as they worked hard, they would be treated well enough that they wouldn't feel pressured back into banditry. It was an elegant solution.

"Most of Kuwol's money is going to be coming from sugar exports to Meraldia and Wa. If the royal family has its own sugarcane plantations, it'll be able to

secure a source of revenue that's independent from the nobles. With this, I hope that'll stop them from being so fussy about taxes."

Airia smiled and said, "More importantly, if they start producing more sugar, we'll be able to buy it for cheaper. Isn't that right?"

"Indeed, my beloved Demon Lord."

Telling them to produce more was probably Mao's idea. I could see his cunning mixed in with Parker's patience in the current proposal. It was basically a "good cop, bad cop" play. The treaty we'd signed with regards to buying sugar was really lopsided in our favor.

Because we'd promised to buy a set minimum of sugar each year from Kuwol, we were entitled to buy in bulk for lower than market price. And since we were buying so much, even a small discount added up. The contract was also worded in such a way that if Kuwol had issues further down the line, Meraldia would still come out ahead. *You guys really squeezed them for all they're worth, huh?*

"We'll be able to import sugar from Kuwol for cheap, then sell it to Meraldia and Wa at a markup. Neither country has any sugarcane production capabilities, so we'll be able to control the market price. The profits are just waiting to be reaped."

I grinned, but Airia gave me a quizzical look.

"But will we really be able to find people to sell all this sugar to?"

"Absolutely. People love sweets. I guarantee you the consumption of sugar is going to rise considerably. In fact, we can even have a baking course in Meraldia's university to increase the number of bakers in the country."

At long last, I'm able to put my past life's knowledge to use. Meraldia's desserts were all boring and bland. Meanwhile, Rolmund grew sugar beets, so they had a huge variety of delicious delicacies. It'd be nice if Meraldia's dessert culture could catch up to Rolmund's.

Airia put Friede to bed, then turned back to me.

"Are you thinking about your past life?"

"Yeah. The sweets back on Earth were amazing. Even peasants could afford

snacks coated in sugar. Honestly, they probably lived better than the nobles do here.”

Sugar, butter, and eggs were all expensive, which meant they were a luxury good in this world. In Meraldia, a single cookie would run you the equivalent of a thousand yen. It was insane.

“Things have finally calmed down. I want everyone to be able to enjoy tasty food for as long as this peace lasts.”

“I know what you mean.”

It was hard to believe this was a conversation between a Demon Lord and her vice-commander, but that’s just how we were. *Actually, since I have time right now, why don’t I practice baking? It’d be nice to one day hear Friede praise my sweets. Hmm, yeah. This is a great idea.*

Taking care of Friede was difficult, but fortunately I had experience looking after infants. As I gave her a bath, I smiled and said, “I used to look after the neighbor’s newborns pretty often back in the werewolf village.”

I placed a small towel over Friede’s torso, which seemed to relax her. This towel also had the anti-mana absorption charm embroidered onto it. There was no telling when Friede might unleash another Soul Shaker, so it helped to always have something with that magic circle handy.

She closed her eyes as I lowered her into the wooden tub—looking like a zen monk who’d just reached enlightenment. *You really like baths, huh?* Friede still hadn’t grown enough for her neck to support her head, so I had to make sure her back and head were level. It was a simple enough process if you were used to it, and I could do it with one hand.

As she watched me bathe Friede, Airia muttered, “Did you take care of babies often in your past life as well?”

“Nope. Never even touched one.”

In retrospect, a lot of the skills I had now I’d learned after reincarnating into this world.

“Anyway, you still haven’t finished your paperwork, right, Airia? I’ve got this,

so you can finish up.”

“*Fiiine*,” Airia said with a pout, returning to her desk.

Sorry, but your vice-commander is a little busy at the moment. Besides, you need to get your work done in the little free time you have right now. I looked back down at Friede, who opened her tiny mouth and let out a yawn.

“Feels good, right? Thank the Demon Lord you’re a fan of baths.”

As I smiled, I noticed bubbles rising up from the bathtub.

“Oh, you released some gas.”

Airia jumped out of her chair and turned to me.

“Really?! Let me see!”

“...Finish your work first.” I gave Airia a stern look, and she sulked back to her desk. Honestly, I found it mystifying how energetic she was.

Friede woke up frequently and was always hungry, so Airia ended up not sleeping much. Normally, nobles hired a wet nurse, but since Friede was always firing off Soul Shakers, Airia ended up having to nurse our baby herself. It would have been nice if she could take maternity leave, but unfortunately for her, the Demon Lord didn’t get to go on vacation. That being said, my friends and I were taking care of as much work as possible, leaving only the most important tasks that couldn’t be given to anyone else for Airia. *Still, it’d be nice if we could lessen her workload some more right now.*

I finished giving Friede her bath and turned back to Airia. From the looks of it, she’d nodded off at her desk. *I guess even if she acts energetic, her batteries still drain like everyone else. I’ll take care of these documents in her stead.*

I turned back to Friede and whispered, “Mommy’s tired so stay quiet, okay?”

Of course, I knew that was wishful thinking, but I nevertheless cradled Friede in my left hand and picked up the pen with my right.

More time passed, and Friede finally reached the point where she could lift her head on her own. At this point, everyone who’d gone to Kuwol had returned here, along with Elmersia and her werecat entourage. Kumluk had

come as well. Elmersia and the other werecats all became formal disciples of Master and started learning magic from her. Much of the werecat tribe's magical knowledge had been lost over the generations, so they were starting from the basics. Meanwhile, I made Kumluk into Meraldia's official ambassador to Kuwol.

Shortly after everyone came back, I got a report from Kite's investigation team. They had gone to Mount Kayankaka to examine all the artifacts the werecats were guarding. According to the report, the strongest artifacts could store up to 500,000 kites of mana. Unless someone had an exceptionally large base mana capacity, that would be more than enough to turn them into a Valkaan.

"I believe we need to pinpoint the exact amount of mana it takes to turn someone into a Valkaan. Furthermore, I think we should refer to that number as the 'Movi Constant,'" Master said with a smile as she took a sip of her sweetened black tea.

"I don't really have a problem with that, but why do you want to call it the 'Movi Constant' and not the 'Gomoviroa Constant'?"

"'Movi' is easier to say, don't you think? And this way, my nickname might finally start to stick."

Please stop polluting science with your personal problems. That being said, it was a fact that Master and her team were contributing more to magic-based research than anyone else on the continent.

I closed the sugar jar and muttered, "The study of magic is going to be indispensable in advancing other fields of science. It's impossible to perform any consistent physics or chemistry experiments until we understand how mana interferes with everything."

Even simple charms could have far-reaching effects in this world. Moreover, mana spontaneously influencing its surroundings was a commonplace occurrence. Until we know how to control for the effects of mana, we wouldn't be able to perform any traditional scientific experiments. This was why understanding magic was necessary to advance any of the other scientific fields.

Master gave me an odd smile and said, "'Interferes' you say? For a mage, you

don't have much respect for mana, do you?"

"Sorry, it's just how I am."

I guess I should appreciate mana more since I am studying it too. Though I don't think I'll ever respect it.

Master's smile grew wider and she replied, "Is that because you're a reincarnator? Friedensrichter had a habit of trying to box everything into logical compartments as well."

I never knew Master was taking note of all these similarities between us. Her observational skills were what led her to realize both Friedensrichter and I had reincarnated into this world. At this point, I didn't really mind her knowing the truth, but it did get kind of draining always answering her questions.

"Oh yes, could you go into more detail about those diseases you mentioned last time? I want to know what the difference between bacteria and viruses is."

"I'm not an expert, so there's only so much I can tell you. Bacteria are living organisms, but viruses don't perform any of the functions generally associated with life until they take over a cell. Honestly, I'm not sure whether or not death magic will work on them."

Master nodded along to my explanation.

"Then I suppose I must capture a virus and experiment on it. First, I need a way to observe them. That alone might take a few years."

There were no antibiotics in this world, but once people learned more about medicine they'd probably be able to craft them with magic. However, normal antibiotics were useless against viruses, so we needed to research whether or not magical antibiotics would have the same drawbacks. Master was already thinking about the future.

"I'm sorry, Master. If I was a doctor I would have been able to explain better."

"You've already given me the clues I need to puzzle together a solution, that's more than enough. Just leave the rest to me. Besides, if you simply gave me all the answers, there would be no fun in pursuing knowledge."

"I didn't realize that was important."

While we were talking, Baltze and Shure walked into the room. Baltze stepped forward and said in a flat voice. "Sorry for interrupting. Our wedding ceremony went smoothly."

"Mmm, congratulations. Have you told Airia as well?"

"Yes. She gave the both of us her blessing."

For better or worse, dragonkin were rather aloof, and they had a tradition of only inviting close family to events like weddings. We only learned Baltze and Shure were getting married after the wedding was over. They had just come back from visiting the various dragonkin holy sites on a pilgrimage that every couple had to make to be officially wed. It was a bit of a culture shock seeing how they treated their wedding compared to mine and Airia's. *Though I am glad they didn't ask me to help plan their wedding like Kite did... Man, I can't believe he's really getting married to Lacy.*

I'd lost count of the number of times he'd come complaining to me about how annoying she was. Not only that, but their personalities were polar opposites. I had no idea how the two of them had fallen for each other. *Then again, Lacy's laid-back way of doing things might help keep Kite from getting too stressed or overworking himself.*

We invited Baltze and Shure to sit down and join us for tea. Once they were seated I muttered, "Jerrick's wedding is soon too. It feels like everyone's tying the knot now."

"It's because we finally have peace. Everyone wants to settle down now that we're not so busy anymore," Master replied with a smile.

Baltze took a sip of his iron tea, a staple dragonkin drink, and said, "I suspect your marriage made everyone else more conscious of their own desires to settle down, Veight. After all, if even the esteemed Black Werewolf King is raising a family, then Meraldia must truly be at peace."

"That wasn't exactly why I got married, but..." I scratched my head awkwardly and changed the topic. "By the way, I heard you're pregnant, Shure. When are you expecting?"

Despite having reptilian features, dragonkin gave live birth like mammals,

instead of laying eggs. I was curious how dragonkin fetuses developed, but I figured it was a delicate subject, so I kept my curiosity in check.

Somewhat embarrassed, Shure replied, “A little over a year from now...so sometime next summer.”

That’s longer than a human baby’s term. Must be rough. My scientific curiosity began to rear its head again, but I ignored it.

“I see. It’d be nice if your child and Friede could be playmates.”

“Yes. Our child will be the firstborn of a union between a member of the crimson scale and the azure scale clans. I hope that will help put an end to the long-standing rivalry between the two.”

Up until now, this region had been plagued by chronic conflict. Whether it was human against demon, human against human, or demon against demon—each clash had left behind numerous tragedies and painful scars. But now, the residents of Meraldia were working together to stamp out the seeds of strife.

Baltze turned to me and said solemnly, “It’s precisely because our child will be so important that we were hoping you would honor us by choosing their name.”

“You want me to pick? But wait...they won’t even be born for another year, right?”

Baltze seemed amused by my confusion and replied, “It is the dragonkin way to name a child before they’re born. That way we have a name to call them, and if by chance they do not survive to childbirth, we can mourn them by it.”

I’d heard of this custom, but normally dragonkin waited at least a little longer before picking a name. *I guess Baltze is just that excited to be a father.*

“I imagine you might be thinking my husband is being too hasty, but every time I’ve told him that, he says it’s better for a soldier to be steadfast, so I’ve given up on trying to change him,” Shure said with a wry smile. “Furthermore, I do agree that it would be an honor to have a champion like you name our child, Veight.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Please, Veight.”

Great, now I have to decide right this second. As I was hesitating, Master got to her feet and said, “If Veight is unwilling, I would be more than glad to name your child. I may be no Black Werewolf King, but people do at least call me the Great Sage.”

“No, it’s fine, I’ll do it. You can sit back down, Master.”

“But I was thinking maybe a common name from the Old Dynasty like Numezza or Poksul might fit...”

Shure pulled a face as she heard those names, which gave me the last push I needed. I took out a sheet of washi paper and an ink brush, then started brainstorming potential names. This would be the first child between crimson and azure scale dragonkin. While I couldn’t be certain, I suspected the child’s scales would be purple since dragonkin scale color appeared to be hereditary. *Violet scales... I guess that’d be “shirin” in Japanese. Hmm. Yeah, Shirin sounds like a pretty good name. Let’s go with that.*

“What do the two of you think of the name Shirin?”

I wrote down Shirin in kanji and explained what the characters meant to the couple. “Shi” meaning violet, and “rin” meaning scale. Of course, I introduced it as the language of Wa, rather than Japanese. Baltze nodded in satisfaction and let out a small sigh.

“That’s a wonderful name. It’s short and without any long vowels, so it will be easy to pronounce in the case of an emergency. The name has a pleasant ring to it, and I appreciate the meaning behind it. It’s a fitting name for a future champion. The voicelessness of the first syllable is a point in its favor as well.”

I’m not really sure why those points are important, but I’m glad you like it? Shure seemed pleased by the meaning behind the word as well, and thus it was adopted as her baby’s name.

Master grinned at me and said, “Giving you the push you need never gets old. Despite how cautious and hesitant you are, once you make up your mind to do something, you act decisively.”

“Wait, did you purposely choose the weirdest names you know just so I would

step up instead?”

“I do think those two names are quite nice, personally. But I suppose children these days wouldn’t like them.”

The Demon Empress grinned and took another sip of her tea.

Half a year passed, and spring came to Meraldia. Friede was now old enough that she was crawling around everywhere. I made sure at least one room in the mansion was safe for her to crawl around in so she could explore freely.

“Remove all of the furniture. It’d be dangerous if any of it fell on her. Also, I’ll put this little fence around the walls so she doesn’t accidentally get stuck in the doorway or hit her head against anything.” I said as I carpeted the room with thick quilts. The tiny fence I’d set up had been made for me by Jerrick. The reason we were using quilts instead of a rug was to make sure Friede didn’t get ticks. Now she had a nice circular space to crawl around and drool on to her heart’s content.

“It kind of looks like a miniature pasture,” Airia said absently, and I nodded.

“When you think about it, infant humans aren’t too different from horse or cow babies. They’re all mammals at their core. If anything, humans are born even more immature than cow calves, so this is exactly what our daughter needs.”

Human children couldn’t walk until around a year after being born. Meanwhile, other mammal babies could walk from birth. It took human babies a year just to catch up to the rest of the animal kingdom. This was part of the reason why humans had a harder time raising their young than any other species.

Airia went around the fence to make sure it was sturdy, and that Friede wouldn’t get her head stuck in any of its holes.

“With this, we can let Friede crawl around without worry. Did you learn about this from your past life too?”

“Yes. According to my mother, she did the same thing for me when I was a baby.”

Though, based on the pictures I'd seen back home, I had a lot less space than Friede here. As she crawled around, she picked up one of the wooden building blocks Jerrick had made and waved it through the air.

"Dadaaaaah!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Babies often did dangerous things, but my current policy was not to step in unless absolutely necessary. If I stopped her, that would put an end to her curiosity.

"Right now she's exploring this confusing new world in her own way. It's kind of similar to how I felt when I first reincarnated here."

"How did it feel right after you reincarnated?" Airia lifted Friede onto her lap and smiled at me.

Blushing a little, I replied, "It took about a year for my brain to develop enough that I realized I had all my old memories, and from there I spent a few days asking a bunch of questions and trying to see if the stars changed with the seasons. I wanted to know if this place I'd found myself in was a planet or not."

"What's a 'planet'?"

"Let me explain..."

Since my village had been surrounded by trees, I hadn't been able to study the horizon to see if the world was round or not. It had taken quite a bit of time to deduce that the world Meraldia was in was almost certainly a planet similar to Earth—which at the time was a huge relief. If the world had been flat with waterfalls at its edges that spilled down into nothingness, I would have had to relearn physics from the ground up.

"Of course, the elders and everyone else thought I was a weird child. But thanks to my curiosity, no one complained when I said I was going to go study under the Great Sage Gomoviroa."

Just then, Jerrick walked in with a bunch of carpenter's tools. He was a blacksmith by trade, but he'd been learning woodworking recently. Now that he'd married Pia, his new hobby had become building all their house's furniture himself.

"Yo, boss, what're you guys talking about?"

“Nothing much—just what I got up to as a kid.”

Jerrick started inspecting the fence to make sure there were no loose screws or sharp edges. As he worked he said, “Oh yeah, you were a real child prodigy.”

Airia perked up at that. “He was?”

“For sure.”

Jerrick seemed unhappy with one of the edges and started shaving away with a hand plane. With a few deft strokes, the sharp point turned into a round nub.

“Back when he was a kid, the boss was super smart. And he was always asking about the weirdest things. Oh, and he picked up on stuff everyone else missed all the time.”

That’s because I wasn’t picking up on it, I was just confirming things worked the way I thought they did. I averted my gaze in embarrassment, but Airia looked like she was enjoying this conversation.

“I see, so that’s what he was like.”

“I knew even back then that the boss wasn’t any ordinary kid. I bet all the other werewolves felt it too. That’s why we all joined the demon army, and why we’ve stuck with him until now.”

Oh great, he’s going to ramble for at least two hours, isn’t he? Once Jerrick got going, it took ages for him to stop. Thankfully, a particularly odious smell interrupted his story.

“Uh-oh, looks like she pooped.”

“Definitely smells like it.”

We noticed immediately thanks to our enhanced sense of smell, but after a few seconds, the odor grew pungent enough for Airia to tell too. There were no disposable diapers in this world, so after I removed her soiled cloth diaper I folded it up to be washed later.

“Man, that stinks. You’re such a stinky baby, Friede. But hey, at least that means you’re healthy.”

“Don’t call her stinky, boss. She’s your daughter.”

Since she'd started eating solid foods, Friede's feces had started smelling as bad as anyone's. But while the smell was awful, I wasn't instinctively repulsed by it. Probably because she was my daughter. After she did the deed, Friede almost always wanted to eat and then take a nap, so I had an excuse to send Jerrick home.

Once we'd cleaned Friede up and put her to sleep, Airia stepped out of the room and made herself some soybean tea.

"I thought I was prepared for this, but raising a child is more taxing than I thought," she said. "I had no younger siblings to look after, and I've never babysat for anyone either."

"I did look after other people's children back in the village, but when you have to be with the kid all day, every day, it's a lot harder."

"But you're the apprentice of the world's greatest sage, and a teacher at Meraldia University. Surely you must have some child-rearing tips you can share."

I feel like you're barking up the wrong tree here... As I folded my arms and lapsed into thought, I realized there was one useful thing I'd learned about looking after children.

"The most important thing is observation."

"...Meaning?"

"It's one of Master's pet sayings. Each and every student has different desires and learning preferences, and is curious about all sorts of stuff. So the most important thing when teaching is to observe what your students' tendencies are and think about what method of teaching is best suited for them."

Teaching wasn't a one-way street. It was a dialogue between student and teacher. Or at least, that was what Master believed. Naturally, back in my old world that was common knowledge, but here it was a novel idea.

"Plus, carefully observing your kid means you're better equipped to keep them safe. Since you have an idea of what specific kinds of dangerous things they're liable to do."

Our daughter happened to be quite adventurous, and she tried to escape the confines of her playpen every chance she got. She seemed to think she had the best odds while we were changing her diaper, so that always turned into quite the struggle. If I took my eyes off her for even a second, she'd try to crawl off somewhere buck naked. Apparently, most kids were like this.

"Also, if you're watching your own kid, you'll end up spending a lot of time with them, which is also important."

"Why's that?"

"It helps build the bond between parent and child."

For infants, each new day was a challenge. The world was full of things they didn't understand, their bodies didn't move the way they wanted them to, and they lacked the words to communicate their thoughts. They also had no idea if the people around them meant them harm or not. As a result, they didn't have the leeway to show affection to people. They needed to receive love from their surroundings so that they could grow and learn to love back.

I explained all this to Airia before taking a sip of my soybean tea. It had a nice fragrance to it, but right now I was craving something with caffeine.

"It's only after spending time with your children and forging a bond of trust that they'll love you back," I said.

"Spending time together with them... I see."

Nobles tended to leave child-rearing to wet nurses, both in this world and back on Earth. It was hardly surprising since nobles that actually did their job were quite busy managing their territory. They frequently had to leave their homes for weeks at a time as well. Moreover, they had money to spare, so hiring a trained caretaker made financial sense. Of course, nobles still personally taught their children the lessons they believed most important, but ultimately they still spent less time with them than most people. Some were so apathetic about raising their young that they met them once a year at most.

If you ask me, seeing your kid that infrequently should count as neglect, but apparently it happens all the time in this world. Developmental psychology isn't exactly a thing here, though, so I couldn't blame people for being ignorant.

Thankfully, Airia had spent a good chunk of her childhood with her father. After the death of his wife, he had dedicated himself to raising her. So it didn't take a lot of convincing to get her to see my point of view.

"It's important that we raise Friede properly. Since she's the daughter of the Demon Lord, it would be a national issue if she grew up into a heartless woman."

Kuwol's problems had stemmed from the fact that Pajam's father hadn't raised him well, so Airia's words carried weight. That being said, Friede didn't need to be a genius or anything. So long as we taught her the right lessons, things would turn out fine. All I wanted was for her to be happy, live freely, and not cause problems for other people.

"I'm sure as long as we raise her with love, she'll grow into a kindhearted girl," I replied with a smile. *All right. Now that I've primed her, maybe I can convince her.*

I took a small object out of my pocket and showed it to Airia. It was a toy drum that I'd imported from Wa a few days ago.

"And I was thinking as part of showing our love, we could give Friede this..."

Airia gave me a terrifying smile. "...Veight."

"Yes?"

"Didn't you say just *yesterday* that it wouldn't be good to give her too many toys?"

"Yes."

Look, I did say that, but just one more isn't too many, right? I tapped the drum a few times, watching to see what Airia's reaction would be. *Come on, it's not like I bought our daughter a super werewolf mech, or a life-sized Friedensrichter robot, or anything.*

Airia's smile grew softer and she said, "Oh come on, that isn't fair. I can't possibly say no if you give me that look."

"What look?"

"I'm not telling you."

She took the drum from me and spun it around in her hands.

A few weeks later, Friede learned how to stand. She had to grip the edge of the fence and hobbled around slowly, but she was able to stay upright. She seemed to enjoy the view from a standing position more than a lying one, as she spent as much time as possible on her feet. It was heartening to see her grow so fast.

“Daaaah!”

“Enjoy it while it lasts. When you get to my age, you’ll wish you could be lying down all the time instead of standing...” I muttered with a sigh.

Soon after learning to stand, Friede started trying to walk. No one was pressuring her to go fast, but she spent all her time practicing anyway.

“Mmm...mrr...”

Airia smiled as she watched our daughter walk. “She’s finally made a full lap of her little circle.”

“Yeah, but that means she’s back where she started. Where were you trying to go, little girl?”

She was still new to walking so she fell often, but she never cried. Every time she tripped she’d just doggedly get back to her feet and resume walking. She seemed to just really like moving around.

Time continued to pass, and soon enough Friede’s first birthday arrived. It ended up becoming a massive affair, which was to be expected since she was the daughter of the Demon Lord.

“Happy birthday!”

“Happy birthday!”

“Happy birthday, Friede!”

“Your daughter’s finally one year old, Veight!”

People continued to visit the Aindorf manor throughout the day, offering us

congratulations and presents. I was grateful for the gifts, but since we had to catalog everything we received, the maids and butlers had a stressful time keeping track of it all. We'd need to send return gifts to everyone who gave us a present today. To be honest, I wanted to have a quiet birthday celebration with just the family, but unfortunately Friede was too famous to allow for that. A lot of the visitors only came out of obligation—like the head of the Merchant's Guild—which was a bit of a letdown. But the guys from my werewolf squad showed up as well, and I was genuinely glad to see them.

“Hahaha, you're already a year old, huh, Friede? You've gotten so big!”

“Bro, you saw her literally yesterday.”

To my surprise, it was the Garney brothers who'd gotten the most attached to Friede. *I guess it makes sense since they are technically her uncles, and they've always had a soft spot for family. Though they never pulled their punches against me...*

“Ahhh, she's so cuuuuute!” Fahn squealed, snatching Friede out of the Garneys' hands and giving her a tight hug. She really liked cuddling with Friede.

Jerrick hurriedly rescued Friede from Fahn and shouted, “Hey, watch it, Fahn! You're strong enough to strangle a bear with your bare hands, you can't just—Huh?”

“Ahahaha! Up we go!”

Monza stole Friede next, throwing her high up into the air. Friede laughed wildly as she flew, and Monza caught her well before she reached the ground.

Calm down, you guys.

As Monza rubbed her cheek against Friede's she shouted, “Mmm, I want a baby now too!”

“But there's no one to marry!” Fahn chimed in, and the two of them locked hands and started dancing.

Hey, put Friede down before you start your acrobatics.

“Every time we find a nice guy...”

“...Someone else takes him first!”

“It sucks!”

“It sucks!”

“Put Friede down already, you two!”

Friede seemed to be enjoying being part of the dance, but I was worried they might really drop her. Still, it was relaxing watching my friends carouse around the manor. *Yeah, it's important to have good company.*

This year really went by in a flash. I had to look after Friede, handle all my responsibilities in the council and in the demon army, and help Master with her research. It felt as though time was racing by much faster now that I was a father. Probably because I was that much busier now. And of course, when it rains it pours, so another troublesome issue just had to land on my desk now of all times.

“Valkel? Isn't he that guy who works for Lord Peshmet?”

I looked up at Kumluk, who'd brought me that report. Lord Peshmet was one of Kuwol's nobles. His city sat closest to the mountains which were the source of the Mejire River. From what I remembered of him, he was a nice fellow. Valkel was one of his subordinates who'd infiltrated Zagar's mercenary army. He'd played a vital part in quelling the civil war, and he was pretty famous now.

“Valkel's supposed to be managing his new sugar plantation, isn't he?” I mused.

“Yes, it seems this letter has something to do with that plantation.”

After Zagar's ambitions had been crushed, Kumluk had come to Meraldia to work for me. Right now, he was my personal diplomat to Kuwol.

“You're aware of the nomadic tribes that live beyond Kuwol's borders, correct?”

“Yeah. They come from the same ancestral roots as Kuwol's citizens, but they chose not to settle down, right?”

Back when Valkaan were running rampant across Kuwol, it had been impossible to settle down in any one place. There was no telling when a battle

between Valkaan would break out nearby, leveling any cities that had been built. The people living on the continent had been forced to become nomadic, and a subset of them continued that lifestyle even after the Valkaan were gone.

“Sir Valkel says that those nomads are hindering his attempts to cultivate the land he was granted.”

“Okay, but why’s he telling me that?”

Isn’t this the kind of thing you’re supposed to report to Peshmet or the Kuwol Noble Council? I thought. Well, I can probably tell why this report came to me instead.

“Let me guess, Lord Peshmet is also having trouble with these nomads, and the Noble Council doesn’t want to do anything about it?”

“Precisely, sir. The council’s stance is that if the nomads commit to an attack, they’ll repel them with force. Sir Valkel is understandably displeased by that. He believes the council is being too passive.”

“He’s right. They are.”

Valkel had spent years serving as a lowly mercenary, and he’d experienced a lot in that time. He knew how well-armed and determined the nomadic people were. They wouldn’t retreat without a fight.

“This is one of those problems that could spiral out of control and threaten the stability of the whole nation,” I said.

“Sir Valkel thinks so as well. He told me you were the only person who would understand that though.”

Aww, you’re making me blush. I’d experienced a lot of the same things Valkel had during his time as a mercenary, so we were on the same wavelength.

“Ask him for more details. Also, get some people together for a formal investigation into this problem.”

“Ummm...” Kumluk’s expression clouded over. “The Commonwealth Council has its hands full investigating Mount Kayankaka. We’ve sent everyone we could spare there.”

Oh yeah, I forgot about that. Kite and Parker were still at Mount Kayankaka

examining the artifacts and collecting as much information as they could about the era of Valkaan. In a way, this was an anthropological mission, but it had important implications for national security so it was a top priority. If someone like Zagar ended up a Valkaan by accident, we'd have a huge mess on our hands.

"Is there no one around who can speak Kuwolese, has a rapport with Lord Peshmet and Valkel, and also has the skills necessary to negotiate with the nomad tribes?"

Kumluk cleared his throat pointedly. "There is one person."

"Really?!"

We still have someone like that who isn't busy? Perfect, I can send them over right away.

In an apologetic voice, Kumluk said, "You, Sir Veight."

"...Seriously?"

I don't like this punchline. That being said, I was probably the best man for the job. I met the criteria I'd just listed out to a T. Plus, I was confident I could get out alive if hostilities broke out. Not to brag, but I had taken on 100 werecats all by myself. I had heard the nomads were skilled archers, but I doubted any of them were stronger than a werecat. I'd be fine against them.

"Guess I've gotta..."

Looks like I need to save Kuwol's hide yet again.

Since Kumluk was one of my staff officers, he would naturally be coming with me. He was previously Zagar's vice-captain so if he went alone someone might try to get revenge on him. But as long as he was with me he'd be safe. Hamaam's squad seemed like another good pick for this mission. He'd once been part of a nomadic tribe that roamed the southern desert as bandits. Given how that tribe had initially come from Kuwol, it shared a lot of culture with Kuwol's nomads. Mobilizing my entire werewolf unit would take a lot of logistical planning, so I decided to just take Hamaam's squad this time around.

“Just remember, while they might share some similarities, Kuwol’s nomads will be different from the ones you’re used to,” I explained to Hamaam.

“Of course, but it’s still better that we go than Fahn or the Garney brothers. Especially considering you want to negotiate. It’ll be an honor to travel with you again, Vice-Commander.”

“Certainly.”

Fahn and the Garneys were the strongest werewolves of the pack, but they weren’t great at dealing with human subtleties, or negotiations in general. Werewolves who had experience infiltrating human society were far better suited to this expedition. Besides, we would soon be entering an era where physical might would mean nothing anyway.

Like always, the werewolves not chosen complained about being left behind.

“I wanna go too!”

“Stop whining, Fahn. You’re my second-in-command, I need you here while I’m gone.”

The werewolf unit was in charge of guarding the Demon Lord and keeping Rynheit, the demon capital, safe. My werewolves were one of the demon army’s biggest assets. Each of them boasted the power of a giant, but could also pass as human. They also took relatively few resources to maintain. Werewolves and vampires were the two races best suited to defending cities, where large demons couldn’t really fit.

“Keep Rynheit safe while I’m gone. There are a lot more demons living here now, so we have to be vigilant. If we slack off, then humans will start hating us again.”

“Well, I guess if you need me that badly... Don’t worry, I’ll take care of things while you’re gone,” Fahn said with a cheerful grin.

Of course, once I’d dealt with Fahn, the Garney brothers, Jerrick, and Monza all came to complain as well. Pacifying their protests took way longer than it needed to. In the end, I got beaten down by their constant complaining, and I agreed to also let Monza’s squad come as forward scouts.

As the group dispersed, I heard Jerrick mutter, “All right, now we can rest easy.”

“I’d be worried if the boss only took a single squad.”

“It was a smart idea to hide our real goal by pretending we all wanted to come.”

“We’re counting on you to keep the boss safe, Monza.”

“Ahahaha, you got it.”

Damn it, when did you all become such schemers? Their solidarity impressed me as well. I didn’t think they would coordinate like that.

The problem with me leaving was that I wouldn’t be able to see Friede for a while. That meant Airia’s burden would grow too. No one else could really take care of Friede since she still unleashed Soul Shaker when she cried.

“Sorry about this, Airia.”

Airia smiled gently and replied, “It’s fine. We both have jobs we need to do, so I understand. Be sure to play with Friede a lot when you get back though.”

“I will, I promise.”

Airia’s smile suddenly grew playful. “Oh, and you better play with me as much as you do with Friede.”

“Hahaha, will do.”

Man, my wife is so cute. I had a feeling I’d never be able to say no to Airia, but honestly, that didn’t seem like a bad thing. The Council didn’t want me gone for too long either, so they lent me their fastest ship for the journey. We boarded the day after and set sail for Kuwol.

“We’ve only just left, but you look like you want to go home already,” Hamaam said. I turned towards the pleasant sea breeze and nodded.

“I don’t want to miss watching Friede grow. Every day she learns something new, and every day she gets a bit smarter.”

“I never took you as the doting parent type.”

Most werewolves cherished their children, but that streak ran especially strong in me. Probably because my philosophy on child care was informed by my past life.

“Anyway, let’s get this over with as soon as possible so we can get back to enjoying our peace.”

“I’ll do my best to aid you, Vice-Commander.”

Hamaam flashed me a brief smile, a rarity for him.

The sea lanes heading to and from Kuwol had gotten a lot busier over the past year. Because the Commonwealth Council was prioritizing trade with Kuwol, sailors were also looking for newer, faster routes to get a leg up over their competition. There was now a detailed map of the sea between the two continents, and new currents had been discovered as well. It was amazing how much influence the Council had over Meraldia as a whole. *I’m a member of that council, so I need to make sure to present myself properly.*

A few days later, we landed in Kuwol. Lord Peshmet’s domain was close to Mount Kayankaka, where Kite and Parker were currently conducting their investigation. I knew they were busy, but I hoped they could make time for us to meet. I was looking forward to seeing Kite again. And well...I guess I was kind of, sort of, maybe, looking forward to seeing Parker too.

After landing, we got onto a smaller boat and headed south via the Mejire. There were ten of us in total. Me, Kumluk, Monza’s squad, and Hamaam’s squad. Some of Lord Peshmet’s retainers had come to guide us as well, but I wasn’t counting them as part of the party.

“The surrounding nobles are getting increasingly worried about our conflict with the nomads,” one of Lord Peshmet’s men said with a sigh. “But the only solution in their minds is eliminating the threat with force. Sir Valkel does not wish for the confrontation to come to blows, however.”

“He has the right idea. I’m glad he realizes that military might is not the only solution to a problem.”

“Thank you for those kind words,” the man replied with a bow. “You are

perhaps the only person on this continent who would agree.”

I couldn’t really blame the other nobles. From their perspective, the nomadic tribes were nothing more than brigands. They raided villages and caravans and stole people’s livestock. Naturally, it was only a fraction of the nomads that engaged in banditry, but that small fraction ruined the image of the whole.

“It’s a good thing Valkel got word to me as fast as he did. We should be able to resolve this before tensions escalate. I’ll do my best as Meraldia’s representative.”

“Allow me to thank you on Lord Peshmet’s behalf, Lord Veight.”

If I allowed this nomad problem to fester, I had a feeling Kuwol would end up in an all-out war with them a decade or two down the line. Resolving the issue before it blew up was the smart thing to do here.

As soon as we arrived in Lord Peshmet’s territory, I went to inspect the plantation. And Valkel came out to greet me personally, having heard we were here.

“Lord Veight, I wasn’t expecting you to arrive so soon! Thank you so much for coming personally to help.”

During the civil war, Valkel had worn a cobbled-together patchwork of old and rusted armor, but now he was dressed in a noble’s finery. However, his luxurious clothes were splattered with mud. Not only that, but he went down on one knee right there in the middle of the sugarcane field.

“Please, Valkel, you don’t need to be so formal. Besides, you’ll get your pants dirty.”

“Even if I got down on my hands and knees and kissed your feet, it would not be enough to express my gratitude to you, Lord Veight.”

Please don’t. He seemed like he might really get on his hands and knees, so I hurriedly said, “Anyway, why are you covered in mud?”

“I was inspecting the soil. From what I can tell, it’s quite fertile!”

Isn’t that the sort of thing you hire other people to do? Oh wait, the Kuwolese way is to do things you consider important yourself. The late king was like that

too. Kuwolese people were rather easygoing, so the guys at the top had a hard time making sure everyone was on task. Judging by the smiles on all the farmers and laborers nearby, Valkel was a popular and well-liked boss at least.

“Lord Veight, let us move somewhere more shaded so we can discuss the situation at length.”

“Works for me.”

Looking around, I noticed there were several gazebos dotting the plantation. They’d probably been made so the workers had a place they could rest and take a break. The sun was blistering in Kuwol, so shade was important.

“I’m impressed you thought to include facilities for your workers. Working as an underling has given you the perspective you need to be a truly benevolent leader. I think I could learn a thing or two from you.”

“Oh, no. If anything, I’m learning from your example. You taught me what a true noble should aspire to be like. Now come, we have much to discuss.”

Valkel wiped the sweat off of his face and led me to the closest gazebo.

A cool breeze swept through the shaded structure as I sipped my sugarcane tea and listened to Valkel’s story.

“There’s a nearby tribe called the Merca that have been running havoc on the land we intend to develop for our plantation.”

“There’s so much space here. I don’t see what the point is in fighting over it...” The grassland stretched out on all sides as far as the eye could see.

Valkel smiled sadly and said, “We chose this location because the soil is fertile, but it seems the nomads use that same land as pasture for their livestock. We asked if they would be willing to simply move their animals elsewhere, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“I’m sure they have their reasons.”

“Perhaps. According to the farmers that talked to them, they want their sheep to eat the grass there because it keeps them from getting sick. The same grass grows elsewhere, so I have a hard time believing that’s true.”

Valkel didn't seem biased against the nomads like many of his fellow countrymen, but it seemed he didn't get their customs either.

"Furthermore, this land was gifted to Lord Peshmet by Kuwol's royal family. If we defer to nomads within our own territory, we'll appear weak to the other nobles."

"Indeed."

The nomads existed outside of Kuwol's social hierarchy. If it seemed like Lord Peshmet wasn't able to keep them in line, people would question his capabilities as a leader.

"So far, all the nomads have done is vandalize the fences we put up and let their animals graze on our fields. They haven't actually hurt anyone yet. Which is why I'd like to avoid resorting to force, if possible. That being said, we can't just stand by and do nothing."

From the looks of it, the problem wasn't too serious right now. However, because of how complexly tangled this issue was with a bunch of other ones, it had the potential to blow up into something dangerous.

Valkel stared at me, gauging my reaction. "What do you think we should do?"

Both in my past life and in this one, I'd seen simple disputes escalate into bloodbaths. I could see why Valkel was so worried.

"It's true that you can't just sit by and do nothing. Let's start by taking a look at the land in question," I said with a nod.

"Those words alone give me strength! I knew I could count on you!"

Beaming, Valkel once again dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

Kumluk, my eight werewolves, and I went to the disputed area together. It was an undeveloped region right next to the Mejire.

"Is there anything special about the grass here?"

Kumluk bent down to examine the grass, then shook his head.

"It seems identical to the grass you can see everywhere else, but I am not a

shepherd, so I'm afraid I don't know much about the intricacies in grazing grass. I know which plants produce good dye for glazing, but that's the extent of my botanical knowledge."

"I've got nothing."

It just looked like average grass, so it was hard for an amateur like me to tell what was special about it. *Is it some unique subspecies or something?*

"I should have brought Master with me..."

No one knew as much about natural history and taxonomy as Master, but she was too important to call over just to identify some grass. Still, I was the one that put her in her current position, so I only had myself to blame.

"All right, I guess we've got no choice. Let's see if we can get in touch with the nomads."

Monza grinned and asked, "How are we gonna do this?"

I grinned back and said, "The werewolf way, of course."

Two days later, the Merca tribe showed up on Valkel's land. They were all mounted and equipped with bows and scimitars. That, combined with their white clothing, made them look vaguely Arabian. Their style of dress was subtly different from the nomadic tribes in Meraldia, probably because of the climate.

The moment I was spotted by them, they immediately surrounded me.

"Are you a farmer?" one of them asked in a gruff voice. I rose to my feet and patted the dirt off of the cloak I'd borrowed from one of the farmers.

"I'm no farmer. I've been waiting here for you."

The nomads tensed up at that. "What do you mean?"

"This is Lord Peshmet's territory. You can't simply waltz in here without permission."

"Hmph. As if we give a shit about your laws. Hey you, start ripping out those fences."

"If you take even one of those stakes out, it will be considered an act of

aggression against Kuwol,” I said in a stern voice.

The leader of the nomads looked down at me with disdain.

“I’ll say it again,” he spat. “We don’t give a shit about your laws.”

I figured this would happen. I was a single unarmed man who didn’t even have a horse. If anything, it was a surprise they had restrained themselves from shooting me.



“I did warn you, puny humans,” I said in my best evil villain voice, then transformed.

“Wha?!”

The nomads scrambled for their bows, but before they could nock a single arrow, I unleashed my Soul Shaker.

“GRAAAAAAH!”

“Waaaaah?!”

“Ugh!”

The horses fell into a panic, and their riders collapsed onto the ground. No matter how skilled they were at riding, there was nothing they could do when my Soul Shaker left them momentarily paralyzed. *I hope I didn't seriously injure any of them.* The horses were so terrified they bolted immediately, with some of them still missing their owners.

“Wh-Whoa, hold on a sec.”

Letting anyone escape was not part of the plan. Just then, Monza and Hamaam jumped out from some nearby bushes. As hunters and former bandits, they had a lot of experience in setting up ambushes.

“Time to hunt!” Monza shouted, and everyone transformed. The nomads started to really panic when they realized they were surrounded by eight werewolves.

“Nooooo!”

“H-Hey, wait! Not that way!”

The horses also froze in place, unsure of where to run now that there were werewolves on all sides. Even the ones that had riders weren't moving; they were totally out of control.

“Man, that was too easy,” Monza muttered as the nomads were rendered helpless.

“Cavalry have the hardest time with werewolves. Remember what happened to those mounted archers from Thuvan?”

“Oh yeah, that brings back memories.”

Despite their disadvantage, though, the nomads hadn't given up yet.

“Damn it!”

“Anyone who can move, grab your bow!”

Both the nomads on the ground and the ones struggling to tame their mounts knocked their bows or drew their scimitars.

“You'll only be incurring needless casualties if you resist. Besides, we didn't come here to fight.” I tried to sound as gentle as I could, but while transformed, any tone I took probably sounded intimidating.

A barrage of arrows flew at me in response.

“Come on now.”

I batted away the arrows or caught them between my fingers. With my enhanced kinetic vision, all their attacks effectively looked to be in slow motion.

“I'm telling you, resistance is futile. We don't intend to hurt you, so stop struggling. Though I won't take responsibility for any harm inflicted on your horses if you continue to fight.”

It was impossible for a werewolf to soothe a horse. To them, we were just another predator like a lion or a tiger. The nomads hesitated when I threatened their horses.

“Mrrrgh.”

For nomads, their horses were as important as their lives. Or so I'd heard anyway. They couldn't hunt or properly herd livestock without them. A man's pride rested with his horse. Without it, he was a laughingstock. According to what Hamaam had told me at least.

The nomads seemed unsure of what to do. But in the end, their horses' fear convinced them to back off. Their leader was still mounted, and he continued soothing his horse as he said, “Very well, we won't fight you. But we won't be your prisoners either.”

“That's fine. I only came here to talk.”

The leader sighed, then turned back to his men. “Sheathe your weapons. This man is too strong for us. We should at least listen to what he has to say.”

He turned back to me and narrowed his eyes sharply. “What is your name?”

I transformed back into a human and smiled cordially at him.

“I am the Vice-Commander of Meraldia’s Demon Lord, Veight Von Aindorf.”

“What?!” The leader’s eyes nearly popped out of his skull. “You mean the infamous undefeated Black Werewolf King? In the flesh?!”

“I wouldn’t exactly say I’m undefeated, but I am the one and only Black Werewolf King, yes.”

There weren’t that many werewolves to begin with, so if you saw one at all there was a decent chance it was me. The nomads exchanged uncertain glances, then came to a consensus.

“Everyone. Kneel.”

The leader slipped off his horse and dropped to his right knee, and the others followed suit.

“I am the son of Merca tribe chieftain Yuzura. My name is Lucan. I am also the leader of our tribe’s warriors.”

Lucan had a muscular build and looked to be in his early twenties. Seeing as how even the older warriors deferred to him, he was clearly respected among his people.

“Allow me to ask you again. Why do you keep ruining the fields here?”

“I’m afraid I can only give the same answer as before. We need the grass here for our sheep.”

“Is there no other place you could let your sheep graze?”

“If there was, we wouldn’t be bickering with the farmers.”

Fair enough. These guys were a lot more reasonable than they looked. In which case, negotiation was a possibility.

“What’s special about the grass here?”

“We don’t know. But for generations it has been our custom to have our sheep graze here. Our grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and great-great-grandfathers all did the same.”

“And what do your legends say about what will happen if your sheep don’t graze here?”

“In the past, there have been a few times where the grass here withered, and we had to go to another pasture. Every time we did, most of our sheep would die in the winter.”

“I see.”

The nomads’ livestock was their livelihood. They couldn’t afford to risk letting them get diseased. From their perspective, it was the farmers who were infringing on their ancestral pasture lands. They had a good reason for what they were doing.

“We’re in a real bind now.” I folded my arms and looked over the nomads. They stiffened up, clearly afraid of what I might say. “I understand, you have a valid reason for your grievances. It wouldn’t be fair of me to use force to chase you away.”

“Hm?”

They seemed surprised by my response.

“Lord Veight, what do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I understand and respect your circumstances.” I didn’t come here to take Lord Peshmet’s side. I came here to resolve a dispute. So long as the other party had just cause for their actions, I couldn’t unilaterally drive them away. “Besides, I know just how important livestock is to nomads.”

Since they owned no land, their sheep were their main assets. For the nomads, the survival of their livestock was quite literally a matter of life and death. If I took a hard-line stance, they would have no choice but to fight back. That being said, this was Lord Peshmet’s land. If we made concessions, it would harm the prestige of the nobles and erode the authority of the royal family. Managing one’s land was an important job for a ruler.

“I think it would be best for both of us if I visited your tribe chief and spoke with him.”

Since Lucan wasn't yet the chief, he didn't have the authority to make sweeping decisions. I needed to negotiate with their leader if I wanted to get anywhere.

“Would you be willing to guide me to him?”

I phrased it like a request, but we would have trouble if Lucan refused. Hopefully he was as smart as I thought.

Fortunately, my trust wasn't misplaced.

“Of course. It would be an honor to have the esteemed hero of the northern continent, the undefeated Lord Veight, as our guest. I have no doubt my father will be glad to meet you.”

Am I worshiped in Kuwol or something?

Lucan and his men guided us to a particularly arid part of the plains. Before long, the grass gave way to dirt and rocks. He looked back at us as he deftly weaved his horse between a few boulders.

“Ah, what a wonderful sight. I wonder if you can understand how relaxing this place is for us, Lord Veight?”

“Absolutely.”

“Oh? Now that's a surprise. I imagined those used to fertile farmland and forests wouldn't enjoy a barren landscape full of dust and stone.”

“It's true, you can't grow any crops here. But the lack of wildlife means you don't have to fear disease or deal with pests. Barren it might be, but it's also clean.”

Back on Earth, there had been plenty of people who preferred living in deserts. Everyone had a different habitat they liked most. Seeing this empty expanse, I had to admit there was something liberating about it. There weren't any dangerous beasts or hostile humans to deal with. So long as there was food, water, and shelter nearby it wouldn't be such a bad place to live. I explained as much to Lucan, and he and his men gave me an odd look.

“You’re a strange one.”

“For a man who’s supposed to be on the farmers’ side, you sure know a lot about us nomads.”

“I definitely haven’t seen anyone like you before.”

I smiled wanly and said, “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Lucan’s tribesmen exchanged glances before once again spurring their horses forward. After a few hours of traversing the desert, I could see a collection of tents in the distance. Lucan pointed to them and said, “That is our village.”

The tents came in all sizes and colors, and there were a lot more of them than I was expecting.

Lucan turned to some of his older warriors and said, “Explain the situation to my father and get ready to receive our guest.”

“As you wish.”

Two horsemen broke off from the group and galloped towards the settlement. *All right, let’s see what the Merca tribe’s village is like.*

I wasn’t too familiar with the nomadic tribal customs, but fortunately Kumluk was. His old boss, Zagar, had often been in contact with quite a few of the outlying tribes. He’d made secret alliances with the tribesmen to avoid having to fight them. The nomads would strike when his mercenaries weren’t around, which saved his men from fighting dangerous, unprofitable battles.

You really were a scumbag, Zagar, I thought.

Anyway, I stood in front of the elder’s tent and loudly proclaimed my name and title, like Kumluk told me to.

“I am a member of Meraldian Commonwealth Council and the Vice-Commander of the Demon Lord, Veight Von Aindorf! I have fought numerous battles in the frigid tundras of Rolmund, been envoy to the ancient eastern nation of Wa, and rescued Kuwol, the homeland of the sacred Mejire, in its time of crisis!”

Enumerating your various heroic deeds was the proper way to greet an elder

of one of the nomadic tribes. Meraldia's nomads didn't have any such customs, so it came as a surprise at first. *It's a bit embarrassing bragging about what I've accomplished, but when in Rome, you did as the Romans.*

"In Rolmund, I led an army ten thousand strong to crush the Doneiks Rebellion. In Wa, I saved the citizens from the monstrous Nue. And in Kuwol, I staked the pride of the werewolf race in a battle against one hundred werecats and emerged victorious!"

Everything I'd said was the truth, but it felt awkward to enunciate them like this.

I stepped towards the entrance and asked, "Do the people of this house welcome me or not?!" completing the ritual introduction.

"The people of this house welcome you. You are our honored guest, great warrior. Please, enter," an old, but powerful voice bellowed from inside.

I bowed, brushed aside the entrance flap, and walked in. The rest of my squad waited outside, which was also part of this tribe's customs. They were clearly prepared for my arrival, and the elders sitting in the tent were all dressed in formal clothing. From the looks of it, these were the most important people of the tribe.

Seated at the very end of the table was Lucan, looking bored. It seemed that despite being the chief's son and the commander of the tribe's soldiers, he held less authority than the elders. The elder sitting at the very head of the table was dressed in a particularly ostentatious robe, which was adorned with numerous gemstones. He looked me up and down, appraising me.

"I am Yuzura, son of Ifaan, and the chief of this tribe," he said, motioning for me to sit.

"Please, have a seat in the center, Lord Veight. This tent is symbolic of all creation. He who sits at the center is the center of the world. In other words, a god. Only you are fit to sit there."

"You think too highly of me."

Kumluk had told me earlier that where a guest was asked to sit showed how welcome they were in the tribe. Being asked to sit in the center was the highest

honor one could receive—though it was also the spot that was easiest to surround and attack. The nomads may have welcomed me, but they were still wary.

I took my seat and bowed my head to the chief. He scrutinized me for a few seconds, then narrowed his eyes and said, “I can feel the burning wind of the battlefield emanating from you. Yet I smell not even a single drop of blood. You are a strange individual.”

“I get that a lot.”

The elder smirked and asked, “Are you truly General Veight?”

“Technically, Meraldia no longer has any generals. My title is simply that of vice-commander.”

“I see.”

The chief fell silent, and the elders around him did as well. *Do they want me to speak first? I’ll ask just to make sure.*

“Shall we get down to business?” I asked.

“Yes. Let us hear what you have to say.”

Everyone straightened their backs. Choosing my words carefully, I began, “The grazing land that the Merca tribe values so highly was granted to Lord Peshmet by Kuwol’s royalty. If he does not defend it, he will lose face among the other nobles.”

The chief’s expression turned grim.

“Kuwol’s royals hold no power over us,” he replied. “We grazed those lands long before any farmers settled there.”

“Indeed. It is we who are in the right.”

“Kuwol’s royals are nothing more than propped-up puppets those foolish farmers worship.”

The elders nodded in agreement.

“I see,” I said with a nod. *So this is the source of the conflict. This is a pretty complicated issue.*

In order to make their stance completely clear, I asked the elders, “Do the people of the Merca tribe not respect the authority of Kuwol’s king?”

The elders exchanged hesitant glances.

“Well...yes. To put it simply, we do not follow their authority.”

The nomads were known for being forthright, but even they hesitated a little when it came to openly disrespecting the king. They were at least aware of how powerful Kuwol’s royal family truly was.

I frowned, trying to look as intimidating as possible. “You are aware that the entire kingdom of Kuwol, including all of the farmers, merchants, nobles, and soldiers who live along the Mejire, are behind Lord Peshmet, right?”

The elders fell silent. I could tell from their scents that they doubted my words. They assumed the royal family wouldn’t interfere directly over a minor problem like this.

I said flatly, “I, the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, was personally called here to resolve this issue of Meraldia’s ally, Kuwol. The kingdom is taking this problem very seriously. Surely you realize what will happen if you continue to escalate tensions.”

The Merca tribe would be making an enemy out of both Kuwol and Meraldia. Lucan turned to his father, looking like he wanted to say something. But the chief held up a hand to forestall him.

“I know, my son. I’m not foolish enough to doubt your tale.” He cleared his throat. “You single-handedly sent my strongest warriors scurrying home with their tails tucked between their legs. We realize that if we fight the farmers head-on, we will lose to you. However...” Yuzura looked me up and down once more. “We know how to fight from a disadvantage. Strike where the enemy is weak, and retreat when they give chase. For generations, Kuwol’s kings have struggled against us to no avail. Our defeat is not as certain as you might think.”

“I’m willing to concede that point. But you have no hope of winning in a battle of territory.”

“You sound so certain.”

“Because I am. If those farmers are given time to build fences and walls, no amount of warriors will be able to mount a successful attack.”

It was for that same reason that the nomadic Sternenfeuer followers had been defeated by the Sonnenlicht adherents in the distant past. Farmers had a lot more to lose if they lost their land, so they defended it to the death.

Yuzura stroked his beard and muttered, “I must admit that while farmers are incapable of riding horses, they do build troublesome defenses. But walls alone cannot keep us out. Their spears are no match for our bows.”

Kuwolese peasants weren’t skilled archers. Wielding a bow was a rarity at best for them. If it came down to it, they’d fight with pikes, which didn’t do great against mounted archers. But I’d expected Yuzura to bring up this argument.

“I see your tribe has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. However, the people of Kuwol have continued to evolve. I’m afraid you would no longer stand a chance.”

I clapped my hands.

“Here you go,” Monza said, walking into the tent and leaving a long, narrow package next to me. I unwrapped it, revealing my customized Blast Rifle, Ryuuga.

“Technology has given rise to weapons that far surpass bows. Allow me to show you.”

This’ll knock their socks off.

I had my werewolf squad set up 50 human-sized boulders about 100 meters away. The number matched the amount of warriors the Merca tribe had.

I turned back to the elders and asked, “A bow could hit those targets from this distance, right?”

“Yes. Our composite bows are small, but their arrows fly far. If those were charging spearmen, dozens of them would be dead before they reached us.”

Composite bows were difficult to make and had a very high draw weight for

their size. I set Ryuuga to rapid-fire mode and took aim at the boulders.

“I see. Well, these Blast Rifles are what we use in Meraldia now.”

I pulled the trigger and a barrage of light balls shot out.

“Bwuh?!”

“What in blazes?!”

The balls of light blasted through the boulders one after another. Since I was the one supplying the mana for the rifle, I had a full 1,000 kites’ worth to play with.

“Whoa, the boulders are—”

As expected, my shots pulverized the targets with ease. In the span of a few seconds, nothing but rubble remained. Regardless of whether the enemy was mounted or on foot, they wouldn’t be able to go anywhere in the time it took my Ryuuga to mow through them.

I lowered the rifle and turned back to the elders. “Do you understand now?”

Everyone was silent, and I could smell the fear and nervousness coming off from them. After a few seconds, the chief timidly asked, “Where...did such a weapon come from?”

“From the far north, in Rolmund. It’s a weapon that uses magic to take out enemies. Meraldia has its own regiment equipped with these as well. I imagine Kuwol will in due time too.”

Though, it’ll probably take some time to actually start mass-producing rifles and training people to shoot them. I naturally kept that fact from the chief and said, “Before long, the farmers you look down on will be using weapons like these from behind their walls. Believe it or not, that’s the future in store for you. How will your grandchildren fight against something like that?”

I’d just shown them a weapon that fired a dozen shots a second, each shot boasting enough power to destroy a boulder. Even a handful of men armed with weapons like this would be able to decimate armies of archers.

Yuzura’s face was pale, but he tried to maintain his dignity as a chief and said in a solemn voice, “May I have some time to discuss this with my peers, Lord

Veight?”

“Of course,” I replied with a grin.

I could easily make out the fierce debate going on within the tent. They were talking in hushed tones, but a werewolf’s hearing was far more sensitive than a human’s.

“If they have weapons like that, we don’t stand a chance!”

“Don’t falter! Believe in our bows that have repelled our enemies for generations!”

“Faith isn’t going to save us here! Can your bow shoot through rock?!”

The chief stepped in to bring order.

“Calm yourselves. It’s clear that the farmers have grown stronger than we ever expected. Fighting them would not be wise.”

“But to think we would bend the knee to mere farmers.”

“Those mud-caked morons can’t even ride horses.”

You guys are really prejudiced against farmers, huh? Though, I guess farmers think you guys are all bandits, so it goes both ways. If the two sides weren’t so biased against each other, coming to a compromise would be a lot easier. *Man, what a pain.* I could make the nomads comply by force, but as long as they felt like they’d been wronged, conflict would spark up again eventually. And it would be fiercer than ever because of how long the resentment would have been festering. *Isn’t there any way to get these two sides to reconcile?*

Just then, I heard a baby crying a few tents over. Since this was a village, there were of course women and children around. They just weren’t coming out because they were wary of us.

Monza’s ears perked up and she said, “Aha, he sure is loud. Is he hungry?”

“I’m not sure... I can’t tell what other people’s babies are thinking.”

In Friede’s case, I was able to guess with about 60 percent accuracy what she wanted based on her gestures and facial expressions.

“Both the nomads and the farmers care about their children. Surely there must be some way to make them see eye-to-eye.”

“You really are weird, you know that, boss?” Monza stared at me for a few seconds, then grinned. “But that’s why we all trust you.”

“Precisely, Monza,” Hamaam said, walking over to us. “He treats everyone fairly regardless of whether they’re his close friend or a complete stranger. It’s why we chose to join you guys in the first place.”

Hamaam and his squadmates hadn’t been born and raised in the village. There were actually quite a few people who’d ended up drifting to our village from elsewhere.

A few minutes later Lucan came out and said, “Lord Veight, my father wishes to speak with you again. Please follow me.”

“Sure.”

The discussion went exactly in the direction I’d been afraid of.

“Loathe though I am to admit defeat, I have no choice but to accept that we would lose if we fought,” the chief said with a grimace. He stroked his beard and let out a long sigh. “I suppose we have no choice but to let those filthy farmers have our pasture...”

Merca’s chief had capitulated—meaning technically the negotiations were a success. But I could hardly say I’d achieved my goal. If you oppressed a group by force, they would simply gather their strength and rebound twice as hard.

I smiled sadly and asked, “Why do you hold such a grudge against the farmers?”

“I worry about what might happen to our sheep if they don’t have that land to graze on. Moreover, those farmers are at fault for settling around the river once the Valkaan vanished, then building walls to keep the rest of us out. We’ll never forgive them for that.”

That literally happened hundreds of years ago. I suspected the story had been passed down for generations, but there was no need to hang on to your

resentment for that long. Arguing about the past was pointless, and it wouldn't help me convince the tribesmen anyway. I had to go at this from a different angle.

"If you pledge to stop hostilities, the Meraldian Commonwealth will respect your tribe's sovereignty. It heartens me to see that your people are both wise and merciful."

Everyone loved a little flattery, and I could see the elders relax a little as I praised them.

I added, "I'll negotiate with the farmers to see if they'll allow you to let your sheep graze there. They don't want to see your people starve, after all."

"We are in your debt."

The elders bowed their heads, their wariness fading.

"But those farmers are a crafty lot. You have to be on your guard when negotiating with them," one of the elders muttered, and the others nodded.

"They always haggle us down when buying wool or leather from us."

"But they keep charging more for their grain year after year."

"They keep making excuses about how the law requires they sell at this price or that."

Well, that's a problem. Kuwol's citizens were capable of producing their own wool and leather. But only farmers could grow grain. They had a clear advantage when it came to trading, so they could set the prices.

I nodded solemnly, then said, "You know, I heard a crying child while I was waiting outside. I happen to have one myself, so I can't help but worry about the children of the Merca tribe."

"I didn't realize you were a father, Lord Veight."

"My daughter just turned one the other day. She's as cute as her mother, and I would like nothing more than to hurry home back to her."

I envisioned Friede's face. A week or so had passed since I'd left, so she probably looked a bit different now. If this was my past life, I would have asked

Airia to send me pictures and videos so I could look at them on my cell phone. *Man, I wanna go home.* It was painful to miss out on my daughter's growth. Before I knew it, I was gushing about her to the elders.

"She still has trouble standing, and she can't walk without holding onto something. But by the time I get home, she might have already taken her first unaided steps. I hope I can make it back soon enough so that I don't miss them."

The chief grinned and stroked his beard.

"Ah, I understand you completely. Isn't that right, Lucan?"

"Wh-What do you mean, Father?"

"Everyone in the village celebrated when Tiriya took his first steps, remember?"

Lucan scratched his cheek awkwardly. "I know you like doting on your grandson, but is a meeting like this really the time to be talking about him?"

"Why not? Lord Veight is talking about his own daughter. So, how has he been doing?"

"Tiriya is learning how to run now. Though he still trips a lot." That was the first time I'd seen Lucan smile, and it brought a smile to my face too.

"He's only going to get cuter from here on out," I said.

I'd babysat a lot of kids back in the werewolf village, and personally, I found babies hit peak cuteness at around age two. It was adorable how they tottered around everywhere, but they'd also grown enough to talk. That was also the age where you had to keep the closest eye on them.

"That's a little worrying, actually. He hasn't hurt himself, has he?" the chief asked.

"Father, now really isn't the time for this."

I raised my hand and said, "It's only natural to talk about your children. If possible I would like to meet your son."

The chief slapped his knee and said, "Oh, that's a great idea. Let's have our

guest see the future chief of the Merca tribe.”

“Father, please stop being so— Oh... Very well, let’s go.”

Lucan seemed to have realized nothing he could say would get through to his father, so he got to his feet with a sigh. Despite his reluctance, I could tell he was still happy he had a chance to show his son off to me. Soon enough, Lucan returned with a woman who I assumed was his wife, and he was carrying a baby in his arms. Their son looked to be a bit older than a year old.

“This is our son, Tiriya.”

Before Lucan could say anything more, the chief butted in and said, “I was the one who named him, you know. Tiriya is the name of one of our tribe’s ancient heroes. He helped fight against the Valkaan and put their reign of terror to an end.”

“Father, please restrain yourself,” Lucan said as he put his son on the ground.

“Tiriya, say hi to our guest.”

“No!”

Tiriya turned around and clung to his father’s pants. It was a bit early for his terrible twos, unless he was older than he looked. *Come to think of it, Lucan did mention he was already running around.* Tiriya looked too small to be two, but perhaps he wasn’t getting enough nutrition. I decided to surreptitiously ask about that.

“Is he already eating solid foods?”

“He’s able to eat porridge now, but grain is expensive...”

So the high produce prices are bad enough that babies are going hungry. Sick people, the elderly, and babies could only eat specific foods, so a lack of supply hurt them the most. I had brought some meji flour with me in case I needed it.

“The truth is, I actually have some meji flour on me. Please, feel free to give it to your elderly and your children.”

“That’s extremely gracious of you.”

The chief bowed to me, and Lucan and his wife hurriedly followed suit. Tiriya’s

grasp on language was still tenuous, but he could tell something was going on by the way everyone was acting. He turned back to me, and I flashed him a gentle smile.

“He looks quite handsome. I see Tiriya takes after his father.”

In truth, most children looked like their fathers when they were infants. This was true for humans in my past life and this one, as well as for demons. Tiriya seemed confused as to why I was smiling and tottered over to me.

“Aaauuu!”

“I’m Veight, from Meraldia. It’s nice to meet you, Tiriya.”

He held something out to me. “Yours!”

Tiriya’s mother gasped when she saw what was in his hands. Lucan, too, looked shocked. Tiriya was offering me a black, hardened lump. I could see bits of grass mixed into it, which made me realize this was probably dried horse dung. Despite how nervous everyone else was, Tiriya’s offering didn’t really offend me. I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and reverently took the dried lump.

I smiled at Tiriya again and said, “Thank you, Tiriya.”

“Daaauu!”

He nodded happily and tottered back to his parents. Her mother hurriedly scooped him up into her arms.

“I-I’m terribly sorry!”

“You use this for fuel, don’t you? I realize it’s valuable.”

I looked down at the dried dung. Nomadic tribes back on Earth used this in place of firewood too. I’d seen a documentary about it on TV. In retrospect, this whole situation was rather comical.

“Your future chief already knows what negotiating is truly about.”

“What do you mean?”

I carefully placed the wrapped dung onto the floor next to me and told the chief, “Tiriya willingly offered me something valuable of his without asking

anything in return. Even a one-year-old child...or perhaps it's precisely because he's just a one-year-old child, he knows how to interact with others."

Everything in the world was novel to a young child, and everything seemed so much larger than they were. But even so, Tiriya had worked up the courage to walk over to me. He'd instinctively realized there was no other way to survive. No one could make it on their own, they needed to forge connections with others.

"Once you get tainted by worldly knowledge, you start to lose sight of simple truths. I'm sure there will be much my daughter will teach me as I raise her."

I looked up and saw that all the adults were breathing a sigh of relief. They just seemed glad that I hadn't gotten mad Tiriya handed me dung. Even the chief looked like he'd been worried.

"Thank you so much for forgiving my grandson's rudeness. Not only that, but as his grandfather, it's heartening to know you think so highly of him."

"I'm simply doing my job as a diplomat. It's in my best interests to get close to the man who will be leading you in the future," I joked, and the elders laughed.

Though that incident did help us all grow closer, which would make negotiating a lot easier.

"I see you are not only a peerless warrior, but a kind man as well. It's rare to see people like you in positions of leadership."

"Our pack had few children, so each child was a treasure. That's all."

Our village didn't have much food, and we had no real doctors, so most babies didn't survive to childbirth or long past it. Jerrick, all the others, and I were treated with special care when we were kids.

I looked at Tiriya once more, then said, "For the sake of your children, won't you please come to a truce with the farmers? They have a stranglehold on the supply of grain."

The elders exchanged glances.

"But..."

"Those farmers are crafty and can't be trusted."

“They love staking their claim on something and then building walls to keep everyone else out.”

“They don’t understand the value of livestock, and they don’t appreciate horses either.”

Look, I get there’s been generations of bad blood, but you guys really need to do something about that prejudice of yours. After thinking about it for a few minutes I suggested, “Not all farmers are the same. The plantation land you are arguing over belongs to Valkel, a retainer of Lord Peshmet. He’s a very reasonable man, so why don’t you at least try talking to him first before jumping to conclusions?”

—The Tribe Chief—

After Meraldia’s general left, Merca’s elders sat in a circle in the chief’s tent to discuss their next course of action.

“What should we do?”

“If those weapons—the Blast Rifles—end up in the hands of farmers, we’ll never stand a chance. But we can hardly strike now.”

It was the Merca tribe’s way to first see whether or not violence could solve a problem.

“Yes, if we attacked now, we would have to contend with Meraldia’s soldiers as well. A single werewolf could crush all of our warriors. We cannot afford to antagonize Lord Veight.”

It didn’t take long for the elders to come to a consensus. There just simply wasn’t any way to win a fight.

“If we cannot win, then we must submit.”

“Surrendering doesn’t suit us. Why don’t we abandon the Mejire and head further inland?”

“What about our livestock? Our sheep and horses can’t live off of sand.”

Most grazing land had already been claimed by one tribe or another. If the Merca tried to muscle in on someone else’s territory, there would be

bloodshed. The remaining unclaimed land was all arid wasteland that couldn't support livestock.

Everyone folded their arms and lapsed into thought. Ultimately, they knew they had no choice but to accept Veight's proposal. If they refused, they would have to deal with the farmers on their own. And if it came to blows, Veight would take the farmers' side.

"I feel like he has us trapped."

"Yeah, we're dancing on the palm of his hand."

"But our only choice is to do as Veight says."

With that, the topic shifted to the Black Werewolf King.

"Though I must say, he seems a much more agreeable man than I initially thought."

"He smiles at children and is kinder than the rumors would have you believe."

"At the very least, he didn't strike me as the kind of man who revels in battle."

"Maybe if we just pretend to submit to him we'll be able to squeeze through this crisis."

"Indeed. What do you think, chief?"

Yuzura looked over at his son, his expression grave. "What do you think?"

At long last, Lucan was given permission to speak. He immediately replied, "We absolutely cannot afford to cross him or break any promises we make. I have no doubt that our lives will be destroyed if we do."

Yuzura's expression remained unchanged. "What makes you think that?"

"It's true that Lord Veight is kind to children and generally a nice person. But once he starts a fight, he becomes an intimidating force. Facing off against him is like facing off against the inevitable demise of the world. Naturally, he has the strength to back that up too." A bead of sweat rose on Lucan's forehead. "You'll need to bring a Valkaan if you want to defeat him. The reason he can be so casual with us is because he knows our martial strength is no threat to him."

Lucan prostrated himself before Yuzura as he spoke.

“Please Father, do not betray Lord Veight’s trust.”

“Hmm...” Yuzura closed his eyes and stroked his beard. “There are those in this tribe who are as fierce as a lion, and also those who are as gentle as a saint. But I have not known anyone to possess both of those qualities in tandem. As far as I know, there isn’t anyone like that in the neighboring tribes either. This isn’t too surprising, as those qualities are polar opposites.”

He opened his eyes and looked wistfully off into the distance.

“Veight is the first person I have met who is able to reconcile those opposing attributes. A man like him is a true warrior, a general without peer. Those who spurn his kindness will have to contend with the full might of his wrath.”

The others fell silent and Yuzura got to his feet.

“I see you’ve grown, my son. This is a good opportunity. I leave the seat of chieftain to you.” He motioned for Lucan to take his seat. “Negotiate well with Veight, my son. I’m counting on you to bring prosperity to the Merca tribe.”

Still in shock, Lucan staggered over to his father’s spot and sat down.

Lucan’s wife and son were waiting for him when he returned to his tent. Tiriya was old enough to recognize his father, and he sprinted over to hug him.

“Dada!”

That was his attempt at saying “daddy.” Tiriya still struggled with words, but Lucan was glad one of the first ones he’d learned was dad.

“You’ve got some nice legs, kid. You’ll need strong legs to ride a horse.”

“Horsey!”

Tiriya was a big fan of horses, and his mother always had to keep an eye on him to make sure he didn’t get too close to the stables. If he got near one of the more unruly horses, it might kick him to death. *I’ll need to make sure I pick a good horse for him once he’s older.* In the Merca tribe, you weren’t a real man if you didn’t have a horse. Moreover, the healthier, stronger, and faster the horse was, the more respect you earned. Most important of all, though, was how

much a rider's horse trusted him. *Of course, that's something I can only worry about if the Merca tribe survives that long.*

"Dada! Dada!"

Tiriya rubbed his tiny hands on Lucan's jaw. He enjoyed the texture of his father's stubble quite a bit. *Come to think of it, I played with my father's face when I was a child too.* Naturally, Lucan didn't remember that, but everyone told him he had when he was a toddler. *Maybe beards are fascinating because fathers have them and mothers don't?* As he looked at Tiriya's innocent face, Lucan swore to himself that he needed to protect this tribe at all costs.

But how do I do that? Lucan thought back to what Veight had said after Tiriya had given him the dung.

"Your future chief already knows what negotiating is truly about... Tiriya willingly offered me something valuable of his without asking anything in return. Even a one-year-old child...or perhaps it's precisely because he's just a one-year-old child, he knows how to interact with others."

Lucan thought, *He willingly offered something valuable of his without asking for anything in return, huh?* It was something most people couldn't do. Depending on who they offered it to, it was possible that person would just steal even more of their things. That could include the lives of their family, the future of their tribe, or the pride of their soldiers. None of those were things that could be easily offered.

But at the same time, Lucan couldn't help but think, *Lord Veight isn't the kind of person who would steal what isn't offered.* If Veight wanted to force the Merca tribe to give up their land, he could easily slaughter their warriors. In fact, it was Lucan who had fired the first shot by antagonizing the farmers. Eventually, he'd been defeated when Veight showed up, but no one had died.

I see now... I will put my trust in him. Lucan lifted Tiriya into the air and smiled.

"Right, there certainly are many things our children teach us."

"That there are," his wife said with a smile.

That evening, Lucan visited us in his new capacity as tribe chief. Technically, the succession ceremony would be held tomorrow, but he was the one who'd be negotiating with Lord Peshmet. I was a bit surprised that the position of chief had changed hands so quickly.

"Is this my fault?" I asked.

Lucan gave me a wan smile and poured some rum into my glass. "To put it bluntly, yes." He handed me a plate of grilled lamb. "For as long as I can remember, I've been treated like a novice by my father. Yet suddenly he decided I should lead the tribe. From here on out, I'll be making decisions for the good of my tribe."

"I pray we can resolve things peacefully."

"Likewise..." After a moment of contemplative silence, Lucan said in a resolute voice, "I intend to take you up on your offer and negotiate with the farmers. Would you be willing to mediate for us?"

"Of course."

Perfect, everything's going smoothly. However, Lucan didn't look too happy with his decision.

"I can't say I've grown any fonder of the farmers. They treat us like barbarians and fence off their land from others. They're prejudiced and cunning." Lucan downed his rum in one swig. "But we lack the strength to drive them out, and we can't afford to abandon this area either. Our only option is to find a compromise. One that lets both sides prosper."

"That's the only way to survive."

It wasn't as if the people of Meraldia had wanted demons in their cities at first. Even now, many humans still dislike us. But they knew we couldn't be driven out, so they were forced to negotiate. What was important was learning how to coexist after compromises were made. Mediating conflict was the duty the late Friedensrichter had given me, and I intended to fulfill that duty to the best of my ability.

"A judge, or 'richter,' of peace, or 'friede,' huh? It was a nice name..." I muttered softly.

“Is something on your mind, Lord Veight?”

“No, it’s nothing. I was just thinking it sure is a pain having to take over someone else’s responsibilities. Wouldn’t you agree?” I smiled wryly and downed my rum.

The next day, we headed back to Lord Peshmet’s land with Lucan and his entourage. Valkel was busy working on his new plantation, so we decided to stop by there first. A truly unexpected sight was waiting for Lucan and the others when we reached it.

“Oh, hello there, Lord Veight!” Valkel shouted, running up to us in his mud-caked noble’s dress.

“What happened to your clothes?”

“I’m terribly sorry for the unsightly appearance. But while we were waiting for you, we discovered a leak in the irrigation ditch that needed to be fixed immediately.”

Sure, but you didn’t have to fix it personally, did you? I introduced Valkel to Lucan and the others. I mentioned that Valkel used to be a mercenary and that his family formally served in the royal guard. Military rank meant a lot to the nomadic tribes near Kuwol. They respected soldiers, even if they disparaged farmers.

After I finished my introduction, Valkel smiled and added, “I have also been granted the honor of receiving a letter from Lord Veight’s name. It is an achievement far greater than any of my military accomplishments, so I cannot help but brag about it.”

Lucan and the others looked at Valkel in confusion. “I didn’t realize you were such a decorated soldier, Sir Valkel.”

“Why are you covered in mud then?” someone asked.

It definitely was strange to see a supposed warrior dressed in finery and covered in muck.

The farmers standing around Valkel grinned and one of them said, “There’s no

point in asking Master Valkel to change into farmwork clothes.”

“Whenever there’s a problem, he always rushes to the fields to help out.”

Valkel scratched his head and smiled awkwardly. “I know it’s not very regal of me, but sitting back and giving orders just doesn’t suit me.”

Can’t teach an old dog new tricks, I suppose. I decided to throw Lucan a bone and said, “Your tribe doesn’t do farmwork so Sir Valkel must seem like a strange man to you.”

“Yes...” After a brief moment of hesitation, Lucan asked, “You don’t mind being covered in mud, Sir Valkel?”

“Of course not.” Valkel pointed to the field behind him. “Tilling fields is an honorable way of making a living. You can feed yourself without having to hurt and steal from others. This is the kind of lifestyle I’ve always wanted.” He let out a long sigh. “However, I forgot that to be a farmer, I first need land. I’m sure the people of the Merca tribe aren’t happy that the land they graze is becoming a sugarcane plantation.”

“Well, yes...” Lucan said with a hesitant nod.

Time for me to step in, I thought as I took a step forward. “Apparently they need to feed their sheep grass from this area, or they die in the winter. There’s probably something in the soil around here that gives the grass medicinal properties.”

I’d asked Lucan earlier and he’d told me the species of grass growing around the plantation was the same as the grass growing everywhere else. Meaning, it wasn’t the grass that was special, but the soil.

Valkel smiled and replied, “I see. Changes in soil alter the taste and nutritional value of a crop. I can’t see why the same wouldn’t hold true for grass.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Lucan said solemnly.

That reminds me, I have a souvenir for you, Valkel.

“This is how that grass ends up, by the way.” I took the piece of dried dung that Tiriya had given me out of my bag.

Valkel picked it up with his bare hands and sniffed it. He then showed it to the

other farmers, asking, “What do you think?”

“Not bad. If that sheep was fed a bit more nutritious food, it would produce some quality fertilizer.”

“I see.” Valkel nodded and stroked his chin thoughtfully. After a few seconds, he suggested, “In that case, why don’t we let the Merca tribe’s animals graze on the fields in that area? In the spaces between the sugarcane rows, we can plant beans. And in places with good drainage, we can even plant meji.”

“Not a bad idea,” I mused.

“Livestock dung makes for good fertilizer, so we’d be willing to buy it off you. In return, we could even trade you firewood so you don’t need to worry about not having any fuel for fires.”

I wasn’t sure how well that would work, but it was worth trying it at least. *If it turns out it’s actually the grass and not the nutrients in the soil that the sheep need, then...well, if they die maybe we can convince the royal family to reimburse the Merca tribe.* Technically, Meraldia had enough leeway in its finances to cover the costs, but it would be bad if we meddled too much in foreign affairs. Ideally, Kuwol could take care of its own problems.

I looked up at Lucan, and he nodded gravely.

“I understand now. So this is what happens when you are willing to make concessions.” He stepped forward and took Valkel’s dirt-stained hand. “We still don’t trust Lord Peshmet or Kuwol’s royal family. But I can see that you at least are a man worthy of receiving a letter from Lord Veight’s name. The other farmers seem to respect you as well, so I’m willing to put my faith forward as well. You were willing to give up what you could, so we’ll do the same. We will unstring our bows.”

“Unstringing your bow” was a nomad idiom that meant the same thing as “sheathe your sword.” Because the nomads fought almost exclusively with bows, most of their fighting idioms revolved around them.

Valkel nodded, smiling. “Thank you. I used to be a wanderer myself, so I understand the hardships nomads face.”

“As the Merca chief, I declare you a man worthy of our trust. Let us work

together so that all of our descendants may prosper.”

“Of course.”

Perfect. All's well that ends well.

An agreement was made between Valkel and the Merca tribe, and Lucan agreed to let the farmers plant on the tribe's grazing land. In return, Valkel would offer the Merca feed for their livestock. Naturally, that feed would be grown in the same place their current grazing grass was. Moreover, Valkel would buy their dung, giving the Merca a modest but consistent revenue stream. Tenuous though it was, there was now a bond of friendship between the farmers and the nomads.

Before I left for home, I met with Valkel one last time.

“It's up to you whether an amicable relationship can be built with the Merca or if you end up fighting them again. I'll be watching from my place in Meraldia.”

“You can leave the rest to me, Lord Veight. I won't let all the work you've done for us go to waste.” Valkel gave me a reassuring nod. “If we can make the nomads our allies, we'll have their mobility and firepower on our side. Moreover, we'll have access to inland trade routes that no one else does. It would be bad for business to antagonize them.”

“It certainly would.”

The nomads were excellent riders and peerless archers. They also knew the only safe routes through the desert. If Valkel gains their favor, they'd make for expert guides, guards, and messengers. Peshmet's land was the furthest from the coast, so it was imperative he find efficient transport routes for his goods.

“As always, I'm impressed by your foresight.”

“Hahaha, that's high praise coming from you, Lord Veight! If I have even a fraction of your insight, that means Lord Peshmet's territory will be safe for decades!” Valkel guffawed. Knowing him, he'd do just fine negotiating with the tribesmen.

I had high expectations for Valkel. Also, I needed to get home as soon as

possible or my wife would start to sulk.

—Airia's Daycare Diary—

Once Friede falls asleep, I gently carry her to bed. She fell asleep while feeding, so she's face down on my chest right now. I walk slowly, making sure I don't wake her up. The hard part starts once I reach her bed.

Please don't wake up. If I'm not careful, she'll wake up when I lay her down. She usually notices right away when she's separated from me. *Oh no, the blanket is a little crumpled.* If Veight were here he would have straightened the blanket out immediately. He always notices these minor details. I debate calling someone over for help, but decide against it since it might wake Friede up.

It's fine, I can do this. You've got this, Airia. Using all of the muscles I built up from practicing swordsmanship and horse riding, I slowly and gently turn Friede face-up and lay her down. The moment her back touches the blanket is the moment of truth.

She doesn't wake up, so I carefully pull my arms back and bring the blanket over her. *All right, how did I do?* I hold my breath and look down at Friede.

"Mmm..."

She frowns a little, but doesn't wake up. *I did it.* Now I can finally get back to work. There's a number of proposals I still need to read through. If they don't get my signature, work on certain projects will grind to a halt. That'll cause problems for the people on the ground.

If Veight were here, I could have just asked him to take care of it for me. Since he is my vice-commander, he is authorized to sign off in my place. Besides, everyone knows and trusts the Black Werewolf King. Unfortunately, my reliable husband is a continent away, making sure war doesn't break out in a foreign country. Everyone else would say to just let other nations handle their own problems, but Veight doesn't think that way. He believes the peace and stability of the neighboring nations are directly related to Meraldia's prosperity. He's not wrong either.

I go through the documents waiting for me, signing off on the ones that look

fine. Those that have some questionable elements or ones I have an alternate proposal for, I write my comments on and put them in the “return to sender” pile. *If Veight were around to discuss issues with me, I’d be able to go through this a lot faster.* Oftentimes he knows more about the subject in question than the person actually working on the project, so I can just ask him for a quick rundown on the things I need to know. There is no one as reliable as him. He is a master of negotiation, a knowledgeable investigator, an unbeatable warrior, and a skilled mage. Most importantly though, he is a doting father.

But it is because he is so good at everything that everyone else wants to rely on him too. *It’s not fair. He belongs to me, not anyone else.* I want to be selfish and keep him all to myself, but I know if I did that it would make him sad. I am more afraid of disappointing him than anything else. Besides, he doesn’t belong to just me anymore.

“Maaa...” Friede mumbles in her sleep.

I wonder what she’s dreaming about? Now that we have a daughter, Veight belongs to the two of us. It is a different relationship dynamic from when we’d been childless. It is a happy change, but I still can’t help but worry a little. *Please Veight, come home soon. If you don’t, I might turn into an actually evil Demon Lord.*

Before I left I met up with Kite’s team and exchanged info with him. I also brought him some gifts. Kite naturally wanted to go home, but the investigation of Mount Kayankaka was far from over for Meraldia’s best epoch mage.

After I’d gotten the team’s latest reports, I took my squad back to Port Bahza. From there we took a ship back to Meraldia.

“I’m back, Airia, Friede.” As I opened the door, Friede came tottering over to me, with Isabelle close behind in case she fell. It had been a few weeks since I last saw my daughter. *Does she still remember me?*

“Do you remember your daddy, Friede?”

“Dada!”

Is that supposed to be a word?

Airia walked out of her office. “She’s saying ‘daddy.’”

“Really? She wasn’t saying any words when I left.”

“The past few days she’s been pointing to your portrait and saying ‘Dada’ over and over.”

Aha, I see. Ehehe. I lifted Friede into my arms and smiled at her.

“Daddy’s here!”

“Dada!”

Friede smiled back at me. She put her heart into that smile, the same way she put her heart into everything she did.

“I bet you’d get along just fine with Tiriya. He’s from the Merca tribe, but one-year-old kids don’t care about cultural differences or what country someone is from,” I said to her. *It’s a shame their fathers had to start out fighting each other.* “As you get older, you learn more about the world. That’s also precisely why we adults can’t do the kinds of things one-year-old kids can.”

Toddlers didn’t think of other people as crafty mud-dwellers or horse-riding thieves. They didn’t shoot bows or guns at each other at first sight either.

“Is intelligence really worth all that much?”

“Could you give me your report before you start waxing philosophical?” Airia asked.

Whoops, almost forgot. Airia was my wife, but she was also the ruler of Meraldia, and my boss.

“The conflict between Lord Peshmet and the Merca tribe has been resolved. All thanks to Friede.” I grinned at my daughter again. “I’ve already learned a lot from you. I hope you keep teaching me many things.”

“Daaaa!” Friede shouted.

“Hahaha. I see, I see.”

“Veight, if you don’t turn that smile towards me, I’m going to start getting jealous,” Airia said with a pout.

“Huh? What kind of smile was I making?”

I was capable of mediating between two parties from foreign cultures, but I

still couldn't figure out what my wife was thinking half the time.

It was amazing seeing how much Friede had grown while I'd been in Kuwol.

"She's starting to look more and more like you," I said to Airia.

"Really? If you ask me, she looks just like you."

It had been a while since I'd been able to enjoy flirting with my wife like this. Friede's face was starting to get less round, and her facial features were getting more prominent. Her eyes especially were becoming less circular and more beautiful.

"She's definitely going to grow up to be as beautiful as you."

"No, she's going to look as beautiful as *you*."

"In my case it'd be handsome, not beautiful, right?"

I was actually pretty fond of my looks in this life, but I had no idea if other people found me handsome or not. Everyone said my aesthetic sense was strange, so I probably wasn't as good-looking as I thought. Or maybe I was.

Airia chuckled and said, "It was your personality that I was attracted to, but you're not exactly ugly or anything. I'm actually pretty shallow, so you can trust me when I say you're handsome."

"R-Really?"

That made my heart skip a beat. We'd been married for over two years now, but Airia still knew how to get my heart racing. She really was a mysterious woman.

While I was trying to calm myself back down, I was interrupted by a voice from below.

"Mmmmmmm!"

It sounded like Friede was mad about something. *Maybe she doesn't like that I'm taking Airia's attention away from her? Look, kid, that's my wife.*

"Listen, Friede."

"Mmmmm!"

“That’s your mom I’m talking to, but she’s also my wife.”

“Mmmmmmmmm!”

“Which means I—”

“MMMMMM!”

Damn, she’s stubborn. Friede was the kind of person who wouldn’t give an inch during negotiations. She might actually be the toughest negotiation partner I had encountered yet.

Smiling, Airia took Friede into her arms and said, “You’re not doing a very impressive job here, Mr. Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.”

Friede clung to her mother, looking content. There probably wasn’t a baby in the world that wouldn’t be happy to rest in their mother’s bosom.

“All right, all right, I give up. You win this round, Friede. But I’ll be taking my wife back in twenty years, mark my words.”

Just then, a messenger came running up to us. “Your Majesty, Lord Veight. I bring urgent news!”

“What happened?” I asked, still grinning. It was hard to immediately shift into work mode when Friede was still right there.

I cleared my throat and forced my expression to go blank, and the messenger said, “Sir Baltze’s expedition team was attacked by dragonkin in the Windswept Dunes!”

“What?!”

A while back, Wa had asked Meraldia for help in surveying the Windswept Dunes. It would be useful to have a map of the desert so we could establish land-based trade routes and move troops between nations if necessary. I’d been gone, so Baltze had volunteered to head the expedition team. He was known as the Azure Knight, and was one of the most capable dragonkin commanders.

Demons were strong in a chaotic brawl. But when it came to fighting in organized formations, we were amateurs. Only werewolves and dragonkin put in the time to think up formations and tactics. However, werewolves only

followed werewolves, and dragonkin only followed other dragonkin. In other words, Baltze was an invaluable member of the demon army. Plus, he was my friend.

“I’ll ride to his rescue immediately,” I said, and Airia nodded in agreement.

“Yes, this is serious. Leave things back home to me. Take your full werewolf contingent.”

By that, she meant both handling politics and taking care of Friede. *Dammit, the three of us were supposed to go on vacation to Shardier. But I guess now’s not the time for that.*

“Airia, I’m going to be borrowing our Demon Empress as well.”

“Very well, I’ll trust your judgment.”

Master could use teleportation magic and also heal. Her skills would be vital in a rescue mission.

I picked up Master and the rest of my werewolf squad, then headed to the Windswept Dunes.

“Veight.”

“Yes, Master?”

“I am the Demon Empress and your teacher. You cannot just call for me like a common maid.”

“I’m sorry, but this is urgent. You can scold me later.”

Please, you were so excited to come when I said you could investigate the desert while we were there. We went by land, since Baltze’s team had apparently been attacked pretty far inland. All of us werewolves ran while transformed, so we made it to our destination in no time. However—

“Master, it seems I forgot something important...”

“So you did. I should have realized myself.”

I looked down at the dunes in amazement. Master followed my gaze and muttered, “Baltze is a master of dual-wielding, but he’s also one of the more

friendly dragonkin...”

It wasn't a battle playing out on the sand below, but a banquet. Brown-scaled desert dragonkin mingled freely with the blue-scaled dragonkin Baltze was leading. Despite being from completely different cultures, the two tribes of dragonkin were drinking happily together.

“Baltze really is strong. Don't you agree?”

“Oh yeah. His twin swords were a sight to behold. It was as if he were two warriors at once.”

“But your warriors' coordination and spear-play were astounding as well. No wonder you're feared as the hunters of the desert.”

“It's an honor to be praised by warriors as strong as you. Here, have another drink.”

“Thank you kindly.”

The dragonkin spoke quietly enough that the sound of their drinking was louder than their voices. To a human, this would look like a vigil. But for dragonkin, this was one hell of a party. They seldom outwardly showed emotion. We'd all come here expecting a fight, so we were completely taken aback.

I walked over to Baltze and asked, “What happened here?”

“Oh, hello, Veight. You see...”

—Azure Skies and Ocher Dust Storms—

Baltze had taken 60 of his best men and led them into the Windswept Dunes. The desert was devoid of life; there was only sand and rocks as far as the eye could see. At noon the sand was blisteringly hot, but at night the temperatures dropped to freezing. Rumors claimed that strange monsters wandered the dunes as well. The central regions of the dunes were still uncharted as the climate was even harsher than the coastal areas. Baltze's team found it too dangerous even for them, and they stuck to the coastal parts of the desert. The bipedal wyverns the dragonkin rode were well suited for blistering heat. Both

the dragonkin and the wyverns had scales that were much tougher than human skin, so the sunlight and the sand weren't as debilitating.

As they rode on, the wyverns would occasionally call out to each other. Both their voices and the dust clouds they kicked up were carried away by the wind.

"The wyverns are acting strange..." Baltze murmured as he looked around. He took out a telescope and surveyed his surroundings. "Keep watch on all sides. Be especially wary of those sand dunes over there. Gunners, be ready to fire at any time."

"Yes, sir!"

There was a large collection of dunes to the party's right. They were about as tall as Ryunheit's walls.

As soon as they were within bowshot of the dunes, Baltze shouted, "Gunners, get in position for high-angle fire! Aim for the peaks of those dunes! Open fire!"

A few of the dragonkin set cannons on the ground. They aimed them at the top of the dunes and lit the fuses. There was a series of bangs, and a barrage of cannonballs sailed through the air. They exploded upon impacting against the dunes. These cannons were special inventions of the dragonkin engineers. They were limited in the amount of force delivered, so the shots were rarely lethal, but the humans and demons of this world weren't used to gunpowder weapons.

"Whoa?!"

"What was that?!"

"Don't falter! Return fire!"

There was a loud roar followed by arrows hurtling down from the dunes. But Baltze's knights scattered long before the arrows reached their targets. They split into two groups, deftly avoiding the center of the volley. After realizing they were being ambushed, Baltze had purposely fired the first shots to lure the enemies into shooting back. By observing the number of arrows, he could tell roughly how many archers there were and how skilled they were.

"There are around thirty archers! And they're good!" Baltze shouted, raising

his sword high into the air. “Pincer them!”

One of the two groups of knights started circling around to the back of the dunes. The other group followed Baltze in his frontal assault. The wyverns’ legs sunk into the fine sand, impeding their progress. Going uphill was also a struggle, and the knights’ speed dropped significantly. A second later, something popped out of the ground, sending a cloud of dust into the air. It was a line of spears, their sharp points glinting in the sun. Fortunately, Baltze had been expecting this surprise attack.

“Haah!”

He kicked off of his saddle, lightening his wyvern’s load enough that it could dodge out of the way. As he sailed through the air, his wyvern used its tail to knock back the spears. Wyvern tails were thick to help them balance, and a good swing from one could knock out even an armored soldier.

“Bwaaah?!”

While the assailants were still trying to recover from their shock, Baltze’s wyvern fled back to where the other knights were waiting.

“Dammit!” a brown-scaled dragonkin shouted, jumping out of the sand. He had a short spear in his hands.

“Where’d the rider go?!” another asked.

“I’m right here,” Baltze responded, landing behind the warrior.

He’d spent many years as a soldier, and he knew not to show mercy to his enemies. His twin swords drew a perfect arc through the air as he cut down two enemies at once. But these assailants were skilled warriors themselves. Those who remained standing quickly circled around Baltze, surrounding him. They raised their spears, ready to thrust simultaneously. There were still a few seconds left before the rest of Baltze’s knights reached him.

“Shaaaaa!”

They struck as one, blending in with the sand so well it was hard to keep track of them. It looked almost as if the desert itself was trying to kill Baltze. However, Baltze didn’t lose sight of them for a second, and he swatted their

spears away with his swords. Despite the predicament he was in, Baltze was as calm as always. He brandished his weapons with the grace of a dancer.

After a furious flurry of offense and defense, Baltze's knights caught up and surrounded the ambushers.

They spaced themselves at even intervals, their spears all held at the same height. It was a strange double-formation with Baltze at the center, the brown-scaled ambushers surrounding him, and his blue-scaled knights surrounding the ambushers. Half of the ambushers turned around to deal with the new threat that had arrived. The other half kept their spears trained on Baltze.

Before anyone could strike, the other half of Baltze's contingent crested the dune. The fact that they'd shown up meant that they'd already eliminated the archers at the top.

One of the blue-scaled knights shouted, "We've eliminated the enemy, Captain!"

It didn't take long for the assailants to realize they were beaten. One of them stuck his spear into the sand and asked, "How did you notice our ambush?"

"Wyverns are sensitive to the smell of dragonkin. You shouldn't have been upwind of us." Baltze answered truthfully, but he kept his guard up. He'd be ready, no matter what direction an attack came from.

"But that doesn't explain how you knew we were hiding in the sand," the brown-scaled dragonkin said.

"I could tell from how many arrows you fired that you had around thirty archers. But even if you had the geographical advantage, it would be reckless to attack a contingent of knights twice as large as your group. I assumed there had to be more to your ambush."

The brown-scaled dragonkin exchanged glances with each other.

"That was a truly impressive display of martial might. Please let us hear your name, dual-wielder."

"I am the captain of the demon army's blue-scale dragonkin warriors, Baltze the Azure Knight."

The remaining brown-scales stuck their spears into the sand as well.

“We submit to those who are stronger. Steal our fortunes or kill us, we won’t resist any further.”

After listening to Baltze’s report I gave the brown-scaled dragonkin a sympathetic smile.

“You picked the wrong guy to mess with. Baltze is the demon army’s best swordsman.”

According to one of them, they called themselves the Sandscale tribe. Usually, they hunted wild game to feed themselves, but every now and then they attacked caravans for their goods. They’d figured Baltze’s unit would make for an easy target. The fact that Baltze and his soldiers were dragonkin didn’t matter to the sandscales. It was the same as human bandits attacking other humans. Unfortunately, they’d misjudged the strength of their prey.

“I’ve never seen such fluid yet deadly swordsmanship before. How in the world did you parry all of our spears at once?”

“That specific move doesn’t have a name of its own, but among dual-wielders, we have a special training method known as the Four Swords Dance. There’s a number of parrying techniques we learn called the Shadow Counters, and that was one of them.”

“I see... Fascinating.”

Baltze’s swordsmanship was even fiercer than the desert sun. None of the sandscales had been able to keep up.

Master sidled over to me and asked, “I wonder what the secret behind Baltze’s strength is?”

“I think it’s simply because his reflexes and kinetic vision are better than normal.”

A few of the other skilled warriors in the demon army and I had noticed that Baltze was exceptionally good at following the movements of multiple targets at once. His true strength shone in a chaotic melee. Even when being attacked from multiple directions, Baltze was able to accurately parry and counter. Not

only that, but he was capable of training his swords on separate targets simultaneously.

It sounded simple, but normally if you tried to hit different things, either one arm or the other would get sloppy. The reason for that was if you shifted your balance to hit one enemy, you were in a bad position to hit anyone else. But Baltze used his tail to compensate for that, which took insane amounts of practice and skill.

I explained all of this to Master, who stroked her chin and said, “Oho, now that sounds fascinating.”

“Baltze’s abilities aren’t normal. Maybe one in a million people could reach his level.”

It was because Baltze had single-handedly trounced the sandscales that they’d been willing to surrender so soon. Dragonkin didn’t like fights they had no chance of winning. Afterwards, Baltze’s relative friendliness (for a dragonkin) had endeared him to his ambushers, and they were now fast friends. In fact, the sandscales practically worshiped him now.

The werewolves and I decided to join the banquet since we’d already come all the way here.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Baltze.”

Baltze scratched his head awkwardly and said, “I’m sorry I worried you. I simply wanted to give a brief report on what had happened, I didn’t mean to call for aid.”

“The problem is your reports are *too* brief. It’s impossible to tell what’s going on.”

Baltze was a straightforward guy, but he had an optimistic streak as well. Unfortunately, that meant he worried for ages about trivial things and treated crises like they were nothing. It made it hard to tell when he was actually in trouble.

Baltze gulped down the cactus liquor that sandscale dragonkin seemed to prefer and took a bite out of his grilled scorpion.

“The sandscales said they’d be willing to forge a friendship with the demon army. What do you think, Demon Empress?”

“Indeed. What do you think of this, Veight?” Master asked, turning to me. *You really hate getting involved in politics, huh?* I decided to play it safe here.

“If we can get them to agree not to attack our expedition parties, that’s already more than enough,” I replied.

“Then let’s ask them for that.”

What if I’d given you bad advice?

Before I could say anything, one of the sandscales shook their head and said, “It’s not the demon army we are willing to obey, but Baltze himself.”

“Well that’s a problem...”

Baltze had fought as a representative of the demon army. His victories were the army’s victories. But a tribe of dragonkin living in the desert wouldn’t accept that kind of logic.

“Werewolf warrior, you said your name was Veight, correct?”

I’m more of a mage than a warrior, but yeah, I mentally quipped.

“We only obey the strong.”

It had been a while since I had to deal with the typical demon mindset. As always, demons valued power above all. They only respected those stronger than them—not smarter or kinder. *This is why you guys keep losing to humans. Don’t you get it?*

“Only following the strong will not lead you to prosperity, members of the sandscale clan,” I said in as diplomatic a tone as I could muster. Unfortunately, Baltze, who was a little drunk, chose that exact moment to butt in.

“Veight’s the demon army’s strongest general. He’s far stronger than even I am. You should afford him the same respect you give me.”

That caught the sandscales’ attention.

“Impossible...”

“Is that really true?”

“Anyone stronger than Sir Baltze must have surpassed the limits of a demon.”

Naturally, my werewolves took this opportunity to talk me up even more.

“Veight’s beat both Heroes and Valkaan, you know?”

“There isn’t a single person alive who can defeat him in a fight.”

“Yeah, Veight’s the strongest in the world.”

To make matters worse, even Master started chiming in. “All good scholars know that discussing theory will get you nowhere. If you doubt our claims, why not test our hypothesis?”

“Master, are you suggesting I fight them here and now?”

Technically speaking, she was higher-ranked than all of us. So if Master told me to fight, I’d have to fight. I sensed a current of unease run through the sandscales.

“We have heard about how strong werewolves are, but if you truly are more powerful than even Sir Baltze, then you must be able to fight our entire clan at once.”

My werewolves rose to the challenge, though I didn’t exactly want them to.

“Oh yeah, he could take you guys, easy.”

“Veight took on a hundred werocats by himself. He wouldn’t even break a sweat taking you guys down!”

“He probably wouldn’t even have to transform.”

“The man’s a monster.”

You guys are getting a stern lecture when we get back. The sandscales dropped their drinking cups and rose to their feet. It was hard to believe they were drunk with how steadily they walked. *I guess it makes sense skilled warriors would know to only drink in moderation.*

“Can you really defeat us without transforming?”

“Yeah, he can.”

Hey, who answered for me? I thought as I looked around for the culprit.

“Against these numbers?”

“You better not underestimate our boss.”

Is that you, Jerrick? Please stop. Why do all of you look like you're enjoying this so much?

And so, it was decided that I would fight the entire sandscale clan in my human form.

“You’ve got this, Veight!”

“Beat the guts out of ‘em!”

My werewolves were more bloodthirsty than usual, probably because they’d rushed here expecting a fight and hadn’t gotten it.

“You guys...”

This wouldn't even be a problem if I could fight normally, but you all just had to go and add that restriction. Strong as I was, in human form I wasn’t much stronger than the average human. Since the point of a werewolf’s human form was to help them blend in with other humans, they didn’t need any more than average strength. At best I could take more of a beating than others.

One of the sandscales offered a short spear to me.

“You’re welcome to use the same weapon as us.”

“I won’t need it.”

“You intend to fight us bare-handed?”

No, not that either.

“I’m a mage. I’ll fight with magic instead of weapons.”

“Very well.”

Though I could really only use strengthening magic. And without my transformation, it wouldn’t do me much good. I could buff my muscle strength by ten percent, but ten percent of my measly human capabilities wasn’t much. *Ah well. Guess I'll just do what I can.* I used strengthening magic to raise my physical abilities to their limit. Of course, in this form that limit wasn’t very big,

but I still gave it my all. I'd have to rely on the wrestling I'd learned from fighting other werewolves, and the martial arts I'd practiced in Wa.

A dozen or so sandscapes surrounded me, their spears at the ready. Transformed, one Soul Shaker would make short work of them, as would a few simple swipes with my claws. Unfortunately, neither option was available to me right now. *Man, why do I have to do this farce of a challenge?*

"Get 'em, Veight!"

"We're counting on you, boss!"

Seriously, you guys, stop. I'd fought humans in human form a number of times before, so I knew what magic would help me against an encirclement of spear-wielding infantry.

"Let's get it on!" the dragonkin said in unison and charged.

When it came to close-quarters group combat, no weapon was better than the spear. Other types were liable to hinder one's own allies, but spears could be jabbed straight forward. Moreover, they had a long reach. Thrusting forward as a unit was a highly effective group tactic. However, there being one clearly effective strategy made it easy to predict.

Just before the spears skewered me like a kebab, I leapt into the air. I'd used strengthening magic to shift the gravitational pull almost half my weight upwards, so I was effectively weightless. There wasn't much force behind the leap, but I still rose a good few meters into the air. Strengthening magic is pretty versatile.

"First things first, I need to get out of that encirclement."

I couldn't do a single thing while surrounded. As I landed outside their circle, the three enemies closest to me turned to fight. But this was a small enough number that I could deal with them.

"Shaaaaa!"

The first of them thrust his spear at me. *Time for some good old martial arts. Let's see how you like Master Seiga's Eight-Sided Branching Style.* I dodged the first thrust by a hair's breadth and got closer to my opponent. The theory

behind this technique was simple. The hard part was actually putting yourself in a position to execute it.

“Wha?!”

The dragonkin hurriedly retracted his spear. He was defenseless as long as his arms were outstretched. But in attempting to reset his stance, he gave me an opening. I grabbed the end of the spear and twisted it, and he immediately let go. Had he not, the force of my twist would have thrown him to the ground. *This guy's good.* This was one of the Eight-Sided Branching Style's techniques, Whitecrest.

“That's one.” I grinned, tossing the spear to the side.

The next enemy immediately bore down on me with his spear. When it became a one-on-one situation, spear-users started using slashing moves as well, making them a more troublesome opponent. Fortunately, the Eight-Sided Branching Style had techniques for this situation as well. I waited for the moment the dragonkin wound up for his swing, then hit him with a leg sweep while pushing his arms back. This technique was known as the Swan Stroke.

“Whoa?!”

“And that's two.”

At this rate, I might actually win. So long as they came at me one by one, I'd be fine. I made full use of the martial arts I'd learned in Wa.

The third warrior I took down by trapping his spear between my armpit and swinging him to the side. That technique was called Windsweep. It was similar to the Swan Stroke in that it threw the opponent off-balance, but here you pulled them closer to you instead of pushing them away. The point of using different techniques to knock my opponents off-balance was to avoid falling into a predictable pattern. As I parried another spear, I threw a counter punch, utilizing a technique known as Whistlerush. *All right, guess I can Swan Stroke again here. Another Whitecrest here, and then Swan Stroke again. Next, Windsweep. Then, Whitecrest.* There were three more techniques I hadn't used yet.

“Is this magic?!”

“Don’t falter! Surround him!”

I couldn’t let myself get surrounded, so I leapt away again before the encirclement was complete. I then returned to disarming the dragonkin one by one with my techniques.

“Take that!”

“Gaaah!”

I made a feint for the dragonkin’s spear, but then smacked the hand holding it instead. That technique was called Sparkblow. *Hell yeah, I fit a new one in. Just two more to try.* But it was at this point that I realized I’d messed up. There weren’t any opponents left standing.

“W-We...surrender.”

“To think you would defeat us so handily while in your human form...”

“With your bare hands, no less. The depths of your power are unfathomable.”

The dragonkin warriors bowed reverently to me.

“We’re terribly sorry for our earlier rudeness. You truly are a peerless warrior. We swear never to show such disrespect to you ever again. Please forgive us.”

What’s important isn’t how strong or weak you are. It’s whether or not you’re willing to negotiate with people weaker than you. Smiling sadly, I nodded and said, “Then let us talk, warriors of the sandscale clan.”

I still kind of wish I’d had the chance to use those last two techniques.

From that point on, I was given a reception on par with Baltze’s.

“Veight, what were those techniques you used earlier?” Baltze asked.

“They’re close-quarters combat skills developed by the humans.”

“I see... No wonder you always tell us not to underestimate humans.”

Wa’s grappling martial arts were similar to Sengoku-era judo. The Eight-Sided Branching Style existed to provide soldiers who’d lost their weapon a way to steal one from an opponent. The techniques were meant to be used as a last resort, when all else had failed you and you had your back to the wall. Outsiders

were rarely allowed to be taught its secrets, and those that were taught were forbidden from discussing its intricacies with others. Personally, I'd used Mao's old master's connections to find someone to teach me.

One of the dragonkin offered me a silver cup. It was likely something they'd stolen from a traveling caravan.

"Lord Veight, please drink with us. It will be an honor for our clan if our sustenance helps the strong grow."

"Thank you very much."

The dragonkin warrior handed me the same cactus liquor and grilled scorpion that he had to Baltze. The thing was, scorpion tails had a deadly venom stored within them. And from what I could tell, this scorpion had been grilled whole, venomous tail and all.

Seeing my hesitation, the warrior said in a worried voice, "Don't hold back on our account. You defeated us."

"Is the fare not to your liking?"

"No, no, no. That's not it."

If I wasn't mistaken, scorpion venom was made of a combination of special proteins. And proteins denatured when exposed to heat. Grilling the venom would neutralize it... But what if this scorpion hadn't been grilled thoroughly?

"Go on, eat up."

"Okay."

I timidly took a bite. It was surprisingly fragrant and flavorful. The texture reminded me of shrimp. It did feel like something stabbed the roof of my mouth as I chewed, but even if I had been poisoned, I could always detox myself.

As the party got into full swing again, one of the sandscales came up to me and said, "I am thoroughly amazed by your strength, Lord Veight. Just how powerful would you be if you transformed?"

"Hm?"

"I realize this may be an impudent request, but would you be willing to show

us the full extent of your power? I wish to have a story to tell my descendants.”

It seemed a bit overkill to go all-out during a party, but this was how demons were. My own werewolves and Baltze’s knights were looking expectantly up at me too. Even Master looked like she wanted to see the full extent of my capabilities.

“Veight. The previous Demon Lord was fond of saying a demonstration was worth a thousand lectures,” Master commented. “I agree completely, and I believe I’ve passed that lesson down to my pupils.”

“Fine, fine.”

Let’s get this over with so I can get back to eating scorpions. I transformed and sucked in a huge breath. It was time to unveil my trump card.

Just before I let out my howl, Monza muttered, “Ah... Let’s get outta here.”

All of my werewolves hurriedly hid behind Master. Baltze’s knights followed suit. Then a second later—

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”



My full-power Soul Shaker caused an eruption of sand all around me.

“Waaaaaaah?!”

“Un... Unbelievable...”

The sandscales were blown away, and all the food and drink flew through the air. A few seconds later, the sand my shout had kicked upward came down like rain.

“Blegh!”

“I can’t see in front of me, Veight!”

“What happened to my booze?!”

“R-Roll call, everyone!”

“Next time hold back a little, boss!”

“Wahahaha, there’s the Veight we know and love!”

The lot of us ended up covered in sand.

After some more discussion, the sandscales agreed to follow the demon army’s wishes. They also offered to aid us in our expedition. Since everything had been resolved neatly, I left the rest to Baltze and decided to take my werewolves home.

“All right, let’s head back. I want to hurry up and see Friede’s face.”

Master grinned at me and replied, “Of course. I’m sure your exhaustion will vanish once you see your daughter’s smile.”

“I mean, I’m not that tired, really. I just had a light spar, that’s all.”

She gave me a sympathetic look and replied, “I don’t mean physically. Dealing with problems in the demon way taxes you mentally, does it not?”

“What makes you think that?”

“I’m your master, do you really think your personality is a secret to me?” She floated up and patted my back. “It is those who say the right things who are *just*, not those who have power. But most humans don’t even believe that, let

alone most demons. It will take time before you can convince everyone of your principles.”

“I guess...”

It would be hard to change the thinking of demons who worshiped power. In fact, it would probably take a whole generation to do. I could only hope the coming generation of demons was smarter than us.

Still smiling, Master said candidly, “Which means you will need to continue displaying your *might* to others for some time to come.”

“Can’t you do that instead, Master?”

Friede continued to grow, and before I knew it, she was three years old. In that time, there were numerous rebellions in Rolmund, as well as over a dozen attempts on Empress Eleora’s life. But she managed to come out on top each time. From what I heard, Rolmund’s werewolves had played a big part in resolving each incident, and they were invaluable to Eleora now.

A new age of exploration began in Wa too, as sailors began charting newer, faster courses to Kuwol. The Chrysanthemum Court also began exploring the Windswept Dunes in earnest. Naturally, Meraldia assisted in both endeavors. Kuwol’s council of nobles did a good job of keeping the country prosperous, and while individual nobles occasionally butted heads, things were peaceful for the most part. Meraldia underwent many changes, but they all paled in comparison to the changes Friede went through.

“Friede, daddy has to go to work now.”

“Okay!”

I left Friede at the daycare affiliated with Meraldia University. It had been built just recently. Honestly, I wanted to spend every moment of every day with her, but I had courses to teach at the university. While both Airia and I had jobs, we could have left Friede in the care of Isabelle. Technically, there hadn’t been any reason to send her to daycare, but I’d insisted that we put her in one.

“I want to get her used to doing things in groups.”

“Why’s that?”

Normally it would be customary for the Aindorf family maids to take care of the heir. Seeing as Friede was the Demon Lord’s daughter, it wouldn’t hurt to give her a more sheltered upbringing. But personally, I wanted her to experience real life as soon as possible. Being forced to interact with other kids her age would teach her patience and cooperation skills.

I asked around Ryunheit to see who was interested in having a daycare built, and I received a flood of support from the city’s wealthier citizens. Not only that, but I received letters from people in neighboring cities saying that they wanted to put their kids in my daycare. I was surprised by the enthusiasm at first, but I soon realized everyone had ulterior motives.

“Everyone wants their kids to be friends with the Demon Lord’s daughter...”

“I mean, this is their one chance to do it,” Mitty, who was now also the daycare teacher as well as the city’s astrologer, said with a smile. “I never imagined there would be a daycare for both human and demon children though.”

After a lot of politics, the daycare finally opened two years ago, shortly after Friede turned a year old. Now, human children and demon children were playing happily with each other inside the building. The purple-scaled dragonkin child which stood out from the rest was Baltze’s son, Shirin. Right now, he was playing house with Friede. While he was playing the role of the dad, the mom wasn’t Friede, but Yuhit’s granddaughter, Yuhette. Friede seemed to be overseeing everyone’s roles.

“No! The daddy stays home and the mommy works!” she shouted.

Shirin cocked his head and asked, “Really?”

Yuhette seemed confused as well, saying, “Does your daddy stay home all the time, Friede?”

“Yeah!” She nodded emphatically. “Daddy’s always saying ‘it’s no big deal’!”

“Umm...”

Shirin didn’t seem to grasp how that connected to me staying home all the

time. But he didn't seem keen on arguing with Friede, so he sat down and started polishing two nearby sticks. He was probably mimicking the way his dad sharpened his swords. Mitty smiled as she looked at them.

"It seems your daughter has a mistaken impression of what you do."

"That's fine. Besides, it's true that I've been working less since she was born."

I'd left diplomacy, military affairs, and research to the respective specialists in each field. This left me to focus on my duties as a Commonwealth Councilor and teaching at the university. Occasionally I had to go abroad to resolve a high-priority issue, but the amount I was traveling was far less than before. My life was quiet and stable. Before our wedding, I never would have imagined I'd be enjoying such a slow, easygoing life. Best of all, human and demon children were now mingling together like it was completely natural. Of course, racial issues still popped up here and there, but on the whole, there wasn't any discrimination or oppression.

The daycare had been built on what had originally been the army's training grounds, so there were a lot of weirdly shaped areas meant to simulate rugged terrain. The asymmetry had worked in our favor, though, and the quasi-obstacle courses were now the kids' playground.

"This is what I dreamed of seeing..." I muttered, and Mitty nodded.

"It's a strange sight, but if we want a world without war, we need all races to see each other as friends. I hope this small cultural exchange will serve as a foundation to make that happen."

"I do too, Mitty. I'm expecting great things."

In my generation, humans and demons had grown up hating each other. Blood had been spilled on both sides, leaving behind painful scars and deep grudges. While time had healed some of those wounds, the hatred simmering in people's hearts hadn't died out completely. However, our children were mingling with each other from the moment of their birth, so they didn't have any underlying grudges to work through. In fact, I hoped that these children would eventually help quench the hatred their parents still harbored. If it couldn't happen with the parents, maybe it would with their children. I knew this wasn't an easy dream to achieve, but I had faith that we were finally going

down the right path.

I picked up my bag and bowed to Mitty. “I’ll be back in the afternoon. Take care of my daughter until then. And remember...”

“If she does something wrong, scold her?”

“Yes, please don’t give her special treatment.”

“Understood.”

Seeing how Mitty had united the disparate Mondstrahl believers in Ryunheit, I was confident she was the right person to run a daycare. *Now then, time to teach the new generation.* Today I was going to be giving a guest lecture for another professor’s class. Kurtz, the real professor of this class, was giving an introduction as I walked in.

“Listen well, those of you who wish to be officers in the future. Once you graduate from here, you will see firsthand what the demon army’s true strength is. Our might lies not in the sharpness of our fangs or the hardness of our claws.”

There were people in this class looking to be military officers who led troops in the field, as well as those wanting to be technical officers who did R&D. Most of them were dragonkin, but there were a few humans and demons of other races as well. *Man, why do you want an amateur like me to give a guest lecture to the future leaders of the demon army?*

Just as I was thinking that, Kurtz turned to me and proclaimed proudly, “I have invited Professor Veight, the vice-commander of the Demon Lord, to give a guest lecture today about the true nature of strength. Even if you end up pursuing a different career path, I guarantee his lecture will be of use to you.”

The class was disciplined enough that no one spoke, but I could tell from the scent coming off the human students that everyone was nervous. They looked like new recruits about to fight their first battle.

Kurtz ignored the tension in the air and said nonchalantly, “Professor Veight has served as the vice-commander for three Demon Lords now. He has protected the various demon races’ homes, brokered peace with humans, and protected Meraldia’s borders through both diplomacy and might. None of the

demon army's achievements in the past decade would have been possible without him. But of course, you all know that already."

The students nodded silently.

"Now then, Veight, if you would be so kind as to take the stage," Kurtz said, concluding his speech.

"Of course." I nodded and walked up to the lectern.

"Good afternoon everyone. I am Veight. My accomplishments have been exaggerated, but I won't deny that I am one of the demon army's most veteran members. ...But that's only true because everyone who joined before me died in battle."

The tension in the room ratcheted up a notch. I said that both as a joke and as a mild warning to the class. I'd hoped my half-joking tone would lighten the mood, but it seemed that had backfired. Mentally berating myself, I segued into the meat of my lecture.

"Once you become officers, you will get to learn about all of the secret weapons the demon army keeps under wraps. These are all powerful marvels of technology, which will be absolutely essential if we wish to protect our vast borders despite our small population."

The Blast Rifles we all used were made of an iron alloy known as magesteel, which was capable of storing mana. Iron's properties changed drastically based on what it was smelted with, and magesteel was one such variant. I had some theories about what exactly went into magesteel, and I had a suspicion it involved the same version of iron that was in people's blood. Unfortunately, the metals that got mixed into iron to make magesteel could only be mined in Rolmund. If magic weapons like these were the future of warfare, Rolmund had an overwhelming advantage. Meraldia needed its own method of producing magesteel in order to mass-produce Blast Rifles. But that wasn't the only problem that would be facing this country in the future.

"Now, while these secret weapons are all-powerful, they are difficult to mass-produce. Think of them as similar to catapults. Catapults are powerful enough to bring down castle walls, but are too complex to construct en masse." The students nodded. They'd seen catapults on their last field trip.

Thinking back on my battle to defend Zaria years ago, I said, “No matter what kind of powerful weapon you invent, if you can’t find a reliable means of production, it’s useless on the battlefield. You’ll run out of stock before it can have any real strategic impact. Moreover, the more training that weapon requires to use, the worse it is. Soldiers die frequently on the battlefield. Increased training leads to decreased cost-effectiveness.”

During the battle in Zaria, I’d confiscated all of the Northern Alliance’s catapults. And since all the people capable of calibrating and constructing catapults had fled, the Senate had been unable to create another catapult squad despite having a few left in reserve.

“When developing a new weapon, you must consider what it will cost to produce, how convenient it will be to transport, and whether or not it can be easily repaired. There must be an entire support system for each weapon type on the battlefield.”

Weapons that couldn’t have systems built around them shouldn’t be used in large-scale armies.

“Such a system is integral not just for armies, but for any project or policy a large organization wishes to pursue. However, few outside of the demon army are aware of this fact. Do you know why that is, Shatina?” I asked, pointing to her. She kicked her chair back and got to her feet. She was a fourth-year, but she’d begged her way into this course to hear my lecture. Considering she was more experienced, it seemed fitting to throw the hard questions at her.

“Yes, Professor! That’s because this concept is too difficult for most people to grasp!”

“In a sense you’re right, but... We’ll say that’s half-correct.” I flashed her a quick smile, then continued my lecture. “The reason is because these systems must, by their very nature, be complex. For example, if we were to apply this system to catapults as-is, we would need to dig deep just for simple things like the production and repair of the machines. This calls for an overhaul of its individual parts so that they could be easily swapped in and out when necessary. Otherwise, you would be forced to have a craftsman and a maintenance crew for each individual catapult.”

Right now, every nation's army uses this inefficient method. No weapon in circulation now had standardized parts. Each individual weapon was built by an individual with their own quirks. While the end products looked similar, they were not compatible with each other. Their parts were all made to different measurements, so trying to swap them out would just lead to malfunctions. Blast Rifles were no different. Their firing mechanisms were currently handmade by skilled craftsmen.

"Making all parts of a certain piece of equipment the same is known as standardization. However, standardizing a product requires skilled craftsmen working off of highly precise measurements. It also requires some means of mass-production."

If I wanted to industrialize Meraldia's society, I needed to adopt modern techniques like standardization. And if I wanted a strong, disciplined army that functioned like clockwork, I needed an industrialized society.

"This is the one thing that sets the demon army apart from the rest of the world's armies. Our first Demon Lord, Friedensrichter, realized the importance of systems. I will now show you the ideas he came up with."

I wasn't a military engineer or a systems designer, so my explanation wasn't the greatest. However, the students sitting in this class were all the cream of the crop. They listened intently, taking notes on everything I said. *That reminds me, I should mention magic's relation to all of this.*

"You can see how systematically approaching a field produces results in the field of magic right now. Thanks to Professor Kite's organizing of mana quantities into measurable units, we are able to perform experiments with far more accuracy. It is for this reason the basic unit of mana is aptly named a Kite. He is one of the demon army's most valuable assets."

There were a lot of new students this year, so I had to make sure everyone knew how amazing Kite was. He looked like a plain, boring old professor, but he was actually one of Meraldia's top geniuses. The people close to him were under the impression that he was studying under Master now, and Master was leaning into the rumors and acting more and more like his mentor. *Anyway, I think I've said everything I need to for this lecture.*

“No matter what career path you end up going down, you’ll have to deal with the problem of standardization eventually. ‘How will this new technology I developed work on a higher scale?’ or ‘What does this weapon need for an entire army to use it?’ Please keep questions like these in mind at all times.”

I didn’t really have the brain for that kind of thinking, but these kids definitely did. They were way smarter than me, after all.

I left the lecture hall and hurried back to the daycare. I still needed to decide which topics should be discussed at the next council meetings, but before I looked through the proposals, I wanted to see how Friede was doing. *Is she still playing house with everyone?* When I reached the daycare, I found the innocent game turned into something else entirely. Shirin had his two sticks at the ready and was facing off against Friede. Yuhette was playing dead along with all the other kids. Friede was swinging a smaller stick around, shouting, “Movi magic! Everyone dieeeee!”

“Oh no, it’s Friede’s evil magic!” Shirin shouted, dropping to the ground. *I’m pretty sure this isn’t how you’re supposed to play house.* I knew most of my friends were bad influences on Friede, but I didn’t realize even our beloved Demon Empress was teaching her all the wrong things.

—Your Father, the Black Werewolf King—

Friede is now seven years old. In this world, you’re considered an adult at age fourteen or fifteen, and the halfway point is considered a special milestone. Depending on the region, people celebrate your “half-adulthood” by giving you gifts or sending you off on a journey or letting you do more adult things.

“You want a sword from Wa as your present?” Friede asks, jumping on top of a training dummy. It’s carved out of a log and is the size of a grown man, but she leaps to the top easily. “But you already have such cool swords.”

“Thanks, Friede,” the purple-scaled boy says with a smile. Resting in Shirin’s hands are two wooden training swords. They’ve been intricately decorated, and look regal despite being just training swords.

“But these are just made of wood.”

“Isn’t it too dangerous to use a real sword when you’re only seven?”

“Not at all. I’m the son of a knight. Swords are the tool I need for my job, like how farmers need hoes.” Shirin spreads his legs slightly as he says that. Friede realizes what he’s about to do and leaps off of the dummy a second before he steps forward.

“Haaah!”

His wooden swords slam into the dummy, one hitting the shoulder and the other the flank.

“That always looks so cool no matter how many times I see it!” Friede claps enthusiastically as she lands on the ground, and Shirin blushes.

“Thank you. But wooden swords are much lighter than real swords. I want to start using real ones soon so I can get used to their weight.”

“Hmmm...” Friede cocks her head to one side, but then smiles cheerfully. “If you can’t get a real sword, why not try fighting bare-handed like the Black Werewolf King?”

“Only giants and werewolves are strong enough to fight with their bare hands. Dragonkin can’t do it,” Shirin says with a sigh. “You’re really enamored with the legends of the Black Werewolf King, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, he’s so cool!” Friede curls her fingers into fists. “Besides, the Black Werewolf King has the same name as my dad! Of course I’d like him.”

“Um, Friede? What are you saying?” Shirin’s a smart child, and he quickly realizes what Friede’s words mean. “Wait, don’t tell me you never realized the Black Werewolf King *is* your father?”

“Huh?” Friede gives Shirin an awkward smile. “Ahaha, that’s a good one. There’s no way my dad would be the Black Werewolf King.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

Friede puffs her chest out proudly and says, “There’s no way my dad killed four hundred people. He hates violence and he never fights.”

“O-Oh...” Shirin folds his arms thoughtfully. “But I heard everything in the plays made by Lord Forne is the truth. And the plays say he did all of those

things.”

“No way,” Friede scoffs as she shakes her head. “That would mean my dad took out a force of four hundred men, pushed back against an army of three thousand, defeated a Valkaan, slew one of the beasts of the sea, kidnapped Rolmund’s princess and then made her their empress, *and* defeated a Nue?”

“I can’t believe you remember all those stories.”

“I’ve seen every play, you know? Umm, what else... Oh yeah, he also dueled a hundred werecats and won!” Friede exclaims, ticking off the Black Werewolf King’s achievements on her hands. “There’s no way someone who can do all *that* really exists. Stop dreaming, Shirin.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree here...” Shirin shakes his head. “My father really respects yours. He says your father is a legendary warrior.”

“But he doesn’t act like one...” Friede can’t reconcile her image of her dad with Shirin’s description of him. “Dad always says he’s just one of the grunts on the Commonwealth Council.”

“I’m telling you that doesn’t make any sense!” Shirin shouts. “I mean, Uncle Veight is the one who decided my name! Do you really think my father would let a ‘grunt’ pick my name?!”

“No, but...”

“For the dragonkin, the person who decides your name is as important as your real parents. If you keep insulting Uncle Veight like this I’m going to get angry.”

“But I’m his real daughter...” Friede mumbles as tears form in her eyes.

Just then, Veight and Forne turn the corner into a hallway next to where Shirin and Friede are training.

“Isn’t it about time you stopped making those Black Werewolf King plays?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Their reputation has finally begun to spread. My apologies, but I’m going to keep using your achievements to make governing and commerce easier.”

“I can’t say I approve...” Veight says with a sigh, not noticing Friede running

over to him.

“Daaaad!”

“Whoa, don’t run in the hallway.”

Veight gives his daughter a big hug, then smiles at Shirin, who’s waiting a few paces away.

“Hey, Shirin. How’s your swordsmanship training going?”

Shirin stiffens up and gives an awkward nod. “I-It’s going well, Uncle!”

“The Four Swords Dance training regimen Baltze came up with sounds pretty tough. Have you mastered all the Shadow Counters yet?”

“N-No... Father says my counterattacks don’t cut deep enough. I thought these were supposed to be defensive techniques, so why do I have to be the one striking first?”

Veight grins, then replies, “Your dad just wants you to go in with the mindset of always getting the first hit in. The moment your opponent realizes their attack has been blocked, they’ll immediately launch a follow-up attack or switch to defending.” He pauses for a second to ruffle his daughter’s hair. “However, everyone lets their guard down the moment they believe they’ve won. Your dad’s trying to teach you to take advantage of that opening and cut them down.”

“I see! Thank you so much, Uncle!” Shirin exclaims, his eyes sparkling with admiration.

“Baltze is the demon army’s best swordsman—and quite possibly the strongest swordsman on the continent. The standards he expects are insanely high, which is why his lessons are so difficult. It’ll take you decades to reach the level he’s at, but there’s no need to be in a rush. No one expects perfection immediately.”

“Got it! I’ll keep practicing as hard as I can!” Shirin straightens his tail and runs back out to start slashing at the training dummy.

As Veight watches with a smile on his face, Friede asks, “Hey, dad?”

“Call me father when we’re in public.”

“Hey, father?”

“Yes?”

Friede looks up at her father with a dead-serious expression.

“Are you *really* the Black Werewolf King?”

“I am— Wait, did I never tell you?”

“You didn’t!” she exclaims, looking up at her dad with wonder. “So, dad—I mean, father. Does that mean you killed a Valkaan and a giant sea monster?! And fought Lord Woroy—the ferocious White Tiger—Tzar of the Wilderness, and battleball champion?! I heard the Doneiks Knights that he’s the captain of have won the Black Werewolf Cup every single year! Also, that means you, umm, what else...”

“Calm down, Friede...” Veight pats her on the head and lets out a long sigh. “Everything you saw in the plays is an exaggeration. My actual achievements are much simpler.”

“Really?”

“He’s lying,” Forne interjects, causing Veight to frown.

“No, I’m not. All of those things I did were only possible thanks to the help of my friends and allies. It’s not as though I accomplished everything on my own.”

“I see... I guess that makes sense.” For a moment Friede looks disappointed, but then her expression lights up again. “That’s a relief! It’d be weird if you were actually really cool, Father!”

“Hahaha. I know, right?” Veight says with an awkward laugh.



He turns back to Forne and says in a stern voice, "See, look. Your plays are giving this new generation the wrong idea."

"If anything, I'm giving them the right one. The contents of my plays are the unvarnished truth."

"All I'm saying is you're playing up my contributions too much. Besides, if the plays really were the truth, it would mean I'm having an affair with Melaine, Firnir, Eleora, and Shatina. All while married to Airia."

"Look, they all gave me permission to make them heroines in our plays," Forne replies defiantly.

"You've gotta be kidding me. Swear that you won't turn Master into a love interest too."

Forne averts his gaze, but then glances back at Veight. "I've...already gotten the Demon Empress's permission. A mere vice-commander such as yourself has no right to protest."

"You son of a... So that's how it is, huh." Veight falls silent, and Forne grins triumphantly.

"Fear not. Plays need to be entertaining or they're not doing their job. At the very least, I'm keeping things mostly truthful. And the plays are giving the demon army's reputation a huge boost, so what's the problem?"

"The council is happy with them; I just have personal reasons to be annoyed." Veight looks up at the sky and sighs. "I'd like my annals to be a thing of the past. A life of peace and quiet is all I desire now."

"Sorry, but you're the best diplomat we have—especially when dealing with Rolmund, Wa, and Kuwol. There's no way we can let you retire. Sorry, Friede, but I'm going to be borrowing your father for a bit longer." Forne smiles at Friede and pats Veight on the shoulder. "Come on, you need to negotiate prices for next year's sugar imports. Kuwol's messenger awaits. If you take an aggressive stance, he'll crumble before you."

"I don't really like being forceful though..."

"After that you have a meeting with the Battleball Committee. If you don't

take part in this year's tournament, Woroy's going to build a stadium here in Ryunheit and force you to play."

"That damned rascal. Anything but that."

Friede watches Forne and her father walk off.

"Umm..." She cocks her head. "So is my dad actually super cool after all?"

Had anyone been around, they would have immediately told her the answer, but she stood alone in the hallway.

I spread a number of documents out on my table and looked up at Kite.

"So, Friede's a demon then?"

"I'm reasonably confident that she is, yes. She can't transform, but she has all the other abilities a werewolf would."

Over the past few years, Kite had earned himself a reputation as the continent's leading researcher on mana.

He flipped through his notebook and explained, "Werewolves and werecats normally stockpile mana and then use it in one explosive burst when they transform. However, Friede is able to absorb mana from her surroundings."

"Normally, she keeps that ability suppressed, but that doesn't mean it's not there," I mused. "If she wanted to, Friede could easily suck in a few dozen kites of mana from her surroundings."

Kite nodded and added, "The main difference is she doesn't need to transform to use her mana effectively. The reason her base form is that of a human and not a werewolf is probably because her mother is human."

Thank goodness she's not stuck in werewolf form forever, I thought before saying, "Wouldn't that mean Friede is an entirely new species of werewolf? Since she can fight with a werewolf's strength while remaining in human form?"

"Correct. So long as her mana reserves don't dry out, she's ridiculously powerful."

That explained why she had such an enhanced sense of smell and hearing, and why her physical abilities were so high. Also, whenever Airia lied to her,

Friede would start sniffing and comment that she smelled weird. As a parent, there were a lot of things Airia wanted to keep from Friede until she was older, but that was hard to do when Friede had a built-in lie detector. Fortunately, I wasn't human, so Friede couldn't sniff out my lies. However, she could still read my expressions and tone pretty easily, so I had about just as hard a time lying.

As Kite and I were discussing Friede's potential, Fumino walked into the room.

"Lord Veight, the short swords you ordered have arrived."

"Thank you, Fumino."

I opened the wooden box she handed me and saw a pair of short swords lying within. Both of them were exquisitely crafted, and there were inscriptions on each of the blades. One said "Sky Blue Determination" and the other said "Burning Red Passion." Shirin's dad had a pair of blue swords and his mother had a pair of red ones, so I'd decided to get him one of each color. Moreover, determination and passion were two qualities Shirin possessed in spades. On top of that, if you combine parts of the Japanese characters for both concepts together, you get "Shirin." The inscriptions were beautifully engraved and highlighted the craftsmanship of the swords themselves.

"This is wonderful... Thank you again for getting these made. I didn't expect them to be so expertly made."

"Hehe." Fumino puffed her chest out proudly.

I wasn't that knowledgeable on bladesmithing, but I could at least tell these had been designed for actual combat. Fumino gave me a lengthy explanation about the steel that had been used and what kind of smithing techniques had shaped the blades, but all I really got out of it was that these were quite sturdy.

"This is a perfect gift for Shirin's seventh birthday. Do you think you could teach him how to care for these as well?" I asked.

"Of course. The smith adjusted the hilt to be a more comfortable grip for dragonkin hands as well. Hopefully, we'll have more chances to make tools and weapons for demons in the future," Fumino said with a grin.

Meraldia was a promising market for Wa. But because a good amount of our population was demons, Wa craftsmen had started making things catered

towards demon anatomies lately. Moreover, in order to make good weapons for demons, you had to understand not only their different anatomies, but also their physical capabilities. There was a lot that went into it.

I gave Fumino a probing look, and she nodded to me. It was a very Japanese exchange, with no words being said and everything being conveyed through eye contact. From the looks of it, my guess was right on the mark. *Ah well.*

“Just don’t go overboard, Fumino.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.” The spy dressed as a miko gave me a courteous bow then said in a more serious tone, “Incidentally, Veight, we have an emergency that I must apprise you of.”

“If it’s an emergency you should have told me that first.”

Her serious expression vanished in an instant and the playful grin came back. “I figured delivering the present would serve as a nice icebreaker.”

What do you mean?

“You see, young girls in Wa have been going missing with alarming frequency lately. Numerous villages have reported multiple girls disappearing at once. It’s gotten so bad that the Chrysanthemum Court has gotten involved.”

Most government agencies in this world existed explicitly to protect national and local interests, not the citizens themselves. They upheld law and order, but they weren’t like a modern police force. Naturally, the concept of civil rights didn’t exist, and nations didn’t have any official channels for victims to seek redress for their grievances. In general, governments wouldn’t care about kidnapping incidents, so the fact that the Chrysanthemum Court was involved meant that these incidents had reached the point where they disrupted things on a national level.

“As far as we can tell, almost a hundred girls have been kidnapped at this point.”

“Sounds like the work of a large-scale organization.”

“Yes. We managed to capture one of the individuals involved in the kidnappings and tortured him until he talked.”

In a world where even victims have no rights, it was hardly surprising that criminals didn't have any either. Fumino said it so nonchalantly, but I could imagine the torture must have been inhumane. They'd probably waterboarded the guy, or crushed his knees with heavy stones, or something.

"It's all right. Once he'd spilled the beans, we made sure to crucify him in front of the main gate to set an example."

"I...see."

That was the lawful punishment for capital crimes in Wa, so I decided not to argue. That said, the guy *did* probably deserve it. The girls that were being kept somewhere in Wa had been rescued, but a lot of them had been sold off to a foreign country already.

I folded my arms and muttered, "The most likely place they were taken to is Meraldia."

"Correct. The Heavenwatchers are out in full force searching for where they went, but we don't have enough people. Would you be willing to cooperate with us?"

"Of course."

People's lives were on the line. This was no time to be negotiating a deal for my help.

"If Friede had been kidnapped like that I know I wouldn't be able to stay calm. I'll look for Wa's missing girls with the same urgency I would for my own daughter."

"Thank you very much. My heart goes out to those girls as well. I can easily imagine what kind of horrors they're being put through."

As far as I could tell, Fumino wasn't lying. She was relieved that I agreed so readily though.

"Thank goodness you're a man of virtue, Veight. Most people wouldn't humor a request like this one."

That's just how society is... I smiled sadly and said, "It's not good to let personal feelings get in the way of work, but would anyone even want to

negotiate with a man heartless enough to abandon children in need?"

"Hehe, perhaps not," Fumino replied, returning my smile.

The next day, I gave Shirin his present. Unfortunately, that put Friede in a sour mood.

"Dad..."

"Call me father. We're in the middle of an important ceremony."

Shirin was sitting in a formal pose in front of me, his back ramrod straight. It was rather difficult for him to fold his legs under him thanks to his tail, but Shirin was enamored with Wa culture, and he wanted to do everything their warriors did.

"Uncle, I humbly accept your gift. I am deeply graceful to receive such a valuable blade," Shirin intoned. He'd memorized the words, but he tripped up and said graceful instead of grateful.

Friede pouted at me and said, "Father, I want a gift from Wa as well!"

"What kind of gift?"

"A castle, maybe?"

Please ask for something realistic. Don't think you'll get everything you want just because you're the Demon Lord's daughter. I mirrored Shirin's formal pose and gave Friede a stern look.

"I gave you a dress on your seventh birthday, didn't I?"

"But swords are so much cooler!"

"You're not getting a sword." I shook my head firmly. "They are neither toys nor decorations. Swords are a warrior's tool. They exist to protect the lives of you and your comrades. And the way of the sword is a never-ending journey you must devote your entire life to."

Shirin nodded along in agreement. Most dragonkin were stoic, but Shirin had been influenced a lot by Friede and was quite expressive now.

I looked into his sparkling eyes and said, "Shirin has undergone harsh training

since he was a child, and is qualified to wield a sword. He knows when not to draw his blades and who he should never point them at. Only those who've learned these lessons are fit to own a sword. Amateurs do not deserve one."

Friede looked taken aback and after a brief silence she muttered, "You..."

"Yes?"

"You've got a point..." She nodded solemnly. Despite her young age, she was surprisingly understanding. Friede couldn't use a sword, bow, or a spear. She wrestled frequently with the other werewolf kids and was learning how to ride horses from Airia, but she hadn't practiced with any weapons. She herself wasn't too interested in learning how to fight with them.

"If you want a sword, Friede, you must first practice how to use one."

"Fiiiiine," Friede said with a reluctant nod.

We both know you're not gonna learn how to use a sword. She bowed to Shirin and left the room, and I turned back to him.

"I'm sorry my daughter's always bugging you."

"I-It's fine!" Shirin replied with a hurried shake of his head. "Friede's really strong, and she's older than me. She knows a bunch of stuff, and..."

"And?"

"And I think she's amazing. She's always surprising me somehow."

I'm sorry. Thank the Demon Lord that you're such a patient kid.

"Thank you for being friends with Friede. I'm not sure anyone else would be able to keep up with her. All of the werewolf kids can't transform yet, so they don't stand a chance when it comes to physical contests."

Most werewolves learned how to transform around the time they hit puberty. Some outliers were born in their werewolf form already, but kind of like how chicks learned to fly by watching all the adult birds around them, most werewolves learned how to transform by watching their pack.

Shirin smiled awkwardly and replied, "Friede's insanely strong so she's usually the one training me instead of the other way around."

“You get that humble streak of yours from your father. I’m proud of you as your uncle.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Shirin looked down, his tail wagging back and forth energetically. From the looks of it, he was becoming a bridge not only between the two big dragonkin clans, but also a bridge between dragonkin and humans. He’d also inherited his mother’s feathers, and all of the other dragonkin considered him very handsome. His scales were said to be the color of the dawn, and many of the older dragonkin women were enamored with him. While I wasn’t too familiar with dragonkin culture, I did know everyone loved him.

I explained the meaning behind the inscriptions on Shirin’s new swords, which moved him to tears. He really was a rare breed of dragonkin with how easily he let his emotions show. But despite how emotional he was, he was still humble and analyzed most things logically. It was almost unfair how perfect he was. Baltze and Shure were really raising him well.

“If only our daughter was half as obedient...” I said with a sigh and folded my arms. Friede was a bit too wild for her own good. *Speaking of which, where did she go?*

—Friede’s Adventure—

“Fine. I’ll just ask Uncle Mao,” Friede said with a pout as she walked around Ryunheit’s new market district. A lot of immigrants from Wa lived and worked here, which gave the area an exotic vibe. Veight was a big fan of this district, which was why Friede spent a lot of time here as well.

“Dad and Shirin really like Wa’s swords and clothes and stuff... Well, I think they’re cool too, but...”

Mao was an influential figure in this area, which had been dubbed Watown. Since Veight was good friends with Mao, Friede knew him as well. He always gave her presents which was why she liked him, but for some reason her father always frowned when Mao brought her a gift. The salt store Mao ran was located deep within Watown. There were a number of bars and restaurants around it, and it was basically the tourist section of the region.

“This is Mao’s store, and that one is too. I think the one over there also belongs to him?” Friede muttered, thinking back to what Mao had told her as she glanced around the street.

A few seconds later, she came to a sudden stop. There was a foul odor in the air. It was the smell human sweat gave off when someone was afraid. Normally, werewolves found this smell pleasant since it meant their prey was close, but Friede didn’t like it. There were multiple scents mingling together, which meant that a lot of people were afraid. They were all young girls as well.

“Over here?” Friede said to herself, stopping before an extravagant building that had its doors shuttered. Red pillars adorned the entryway, making the building feel different and special. But there was no signboard saying what this building was for. Friede couldn’t tell the building’s purpose either, but an older person would have realized it was a brothel.

“Hm?”

As Friede cocked her head, a group of men who were loitering around the entrance walked over to her.

“Whaddaya want, runt?”

Friede opened her mouth to protest, but then realized these men were over twice as big as her so she didn’t bother. She was the kind of person who accepted the truth for what it was. Instead, she said, “Doesn’t it smell kinda weird here?”

“Huh?”

The men exchanged confused glances, but then decided to shoo Friede away instead of humor her.

“I smell nothin’. Now scram.”

“But there’s a lot of girls here, right? Why are they all so scared?” she asked.

At that, the men’s expressions stiffened.

“The hell is with this kid...”

“Hey, brat, what do you know?”

“Just leave her, man.”

The fact that they were refusing to answer her questions made Friede suspicious. She figured they wouldn't tell her anything even if she asked, so she looked up instead.

“See ya,” she said, and leapt up to the second floor. She had no need for stairs or doors. Going in from a second-floor window was far easier. Unsurprisingly, the window she'd gone for wasn't locked.

“Huh?! Where'd that brat go?!”

“She jumped! Look, she's on the second floor!”

“Shit, someone go catch her!”

Hearing the commotion below made Friede excited. *These guys are definitely bad people.* Her intuition was right on the mark. There were a number of girls lying on the bed and the nearby sofas in the large room Friede had entered. They were all wearing high-quality kimono and expensive jewelry. But for some reason, none of them had reacted when Friede jumped in.

“Umm... Hello?”

No one responded. The door on the far side flew open and a middle-aged man burst into the room.

“She's the one, Boss!”

“What kind of guards are you?! You can't even keep a little girl out?!”

“What did you want us to do?! She jumped up to the second floor!”

The man talking to the “boss” was the same one Friede had seen down below. The others were with him, and they fanned into the room.

“Someone toss her out!”

The burly men rushed her, but Friede just glared at them.

“Don't touch me, you creeps.”

The men were by no means slow, but Friede dodged them with ease. Her kinetic vision was as good as any werewolf's, so they looked like they were moving in slow-motion to her. She danced between the men, easily escaping

their grasp.

“Dammit! Who the hell is this girl?!”

“Fine, let’s just kill ’er,” one of the men snarled, unsheathing the knife on his belt. “She’s already seen too much. We can’t let her leave alive. Isn’t that right, Mr. Pokus?”

“I suppose... And didn’t I tell you not to use my name?” the middle-aged man muttered in annoyance.

Friede could tell from their scent that these men meant business. And that awakened her own instincts. She wasn’t afraid. A group of humans was no match for her. In fact, she was excited. This was her chance to take down some bad guys.

“Don’t think I’ll go easy on you just ’cause you’re a kid,” the attacker with the knife said, charging forward. His movements were lithe and unpredictable; it was clear he’d fought his fair share of battles. But such feints were only useful against human opponents. He lunged forward with his knife, attacking with a confusing tempo that would normally be impossible to react to. A regular human would have been stabbed to death, but Friede was neither regular nor a human.

“What the hell?!”

Using her enhanced vision and athletic abilities, Friede was easily able to grab the man’s arm.

“Weirdo,” she said as she threw him backwards. He hit the floor so hard he was knocked unconscious. That shocked the other men into silence. Their expressions stiffened and they drew their knives as well. Their animosity was so thick Friede nearly choked on the stench.

“Oh?”

They’re starting to scare me, so I should get rid of them quickly. There was a little sprout of fear in her now, but ultimately these guys were still human. Friede sucked in a large breath and unleashed her secret weapon—

“AWOOOOOOOOO!”

Soul Shaker. It no longer worked on Isabelle, who'd practiced resisting it for years, but it was effective against every other human. Including the ones here.

"Whoa?!"

"What the—"

"I-I can't move..."

Friede exulted in the thrill of victory as she saw her opponents freeze. They'd be paralyzed for a few seconds, meaning they were completely at her mercy.

"Oh yeah! Run away while you have the chance, girls!" Friede shouted, remembering the kidnapped girls. But their expressions remained blank, and they didn't move.

"Hurry up! There isn't much time!"

She tried shaking one of them, but there was no response. Unfortunately, the precious seconds she wasted gave her enemies time to recover.

"What was that?"

"Was that magic, Mr. Pokus?"

"No, that wasn't magic. Looked more like a demon's power to me. That brat looks human, but she's some kinda demon," the middle-aged man called Pokus spat. He held his palm out towards Friede, careful to maintain some distance between them. "Submit!"

"Ngh?!"

Sensing danger from his palm, Friede dashed into the hallway. The moment she did, she realized it would have been smarter to jump back out the window instead. The whole building was an atrium, so Friede was able to jump from the hallway to the first floor. She tried to run out the front entrance from there, but her body wouldn't move. For some reason, she didn't want to go out. The exit scared her. Friede didn't realize it, but the reason she hadn't escaped through the window earlier either was because magic was messing with her thoughts.

A voice shouted from above, "That brat's resistant to mind control magic! Someone shoot her with a Blast Cane!"

“Are you sure you wanna use that here, Boss?!”

“Not like we’ll be able to keep doing business here anyway!” Pokus took aim with his own Blast Cane as he shouted. “This whole town’s gone to hell! Take this, you little shit!”

A ball of light streaked towards Friede. Her movements were dulled because of the magic, but in an act of desperation, she took off her coat. It was her coat that prevented her from passively absorbing mana from her surroundings. With her restraints removed, she was able to absorb the mana of the speeding bullet. But unlike the ambient mana around her, the amount of mana in the bullet was highly concentrated. She wasn’t able to absorb the entirety of the mana contained within, and some of the mana still inflicted damage.

“Ngh?!”

She barely managed to stay on her feet, but the fact that she was still alive was a shock to her enemies.

“She can resist Blast Canes too?!”

“She’s a godsdamned monster! She’s definitely a demon!”

“Keep firing! Finish her off!”

Numerous people on the first floor pulled out Blast Canes as well and started firing at Friede from all sides.

“Ow! S-Stop! Hey!”

Friede wasn’t a mage, so she wasn’t able to do anything with the mana she was absorbing. And while the damage was slight, the bullets were starting to wear her down. She had no way of mounting a counterattack since she couldn’t launch multiple Soul Shakers in quick succession. Moreover, she didn’t know how to control the flow of the surrounding mana with it like Veight did. She wasn’t able to run either, since she was still affected by the mind control magic.

After a few seconds of being bombarded, Friede fell to her knees. Her vision grew blurry and red. A wave of fear broke through the dense haze her thoughts were in.



“Huh? Am I...”

...About to die? If I die, I won't be able to see mom and dad again... A shiver ran down Friede's spine, and a second later her pain vanished. She thought she'd died, but her enemies sure didn't.

“What the hell?!”

“Our bullets aren't hitting?!”

Looking up, Friede saw that everyone's bullets were spinning around her. They were moving as fast as they had been when fired out of the enemies' Blast Canes, but they were just whirling around without hitting her. Eventually, they slowed down, and their glow faded away. The residual light created a sparkling trail heading towards the brothel entrance. Everyone turned and saw that the double doors had been blown away.

“Did she call for reinforcements?!”

“I don't know, but just keep shooting!”

Everyone on the first and second floors raised their guns. The man standing in the entryway was Veight, dressed in all black.

“Dad...?” Friede whispered.

A barrage of light bullets shot towards him, but Veight strode forward right through them. Every bullet hit, but they didn't do anything to slow him down.

“What the hell is with that guy?! Bullets don't work on him either!”

“Hey, Boss, these Blast Canes are the same ones Rolmund's army uses, right?! What the hell's going on here?! You're the one who loaded them all with mana!”

“I-I don't know! That guy's absorbing my mana...” Pokus trailed off, suddenly realizing something. “D-Don't tell me... You're the Black Werewolf King?!”

In response, Veight transformed into his black-furred werewolf form.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

“H-H-He's a werewolf?!”

“He’s the monster who killed four thousand men!”

“Shoot! Shoot him with everything you’ve got! You can’t let him leave alive!”

The barrage of bullets was practically an unending stream of light, but Veight remained unfazed. Each bullet had enough power to smash through a steel helmet, but they did nothing to him. Eventually, the rifles ran out of mana, and the storm of light came to a stop. Pokus was the only mage of the group, so no one else could reload. In the silence that followed, Veight walked over to Friede and stood protectively in front of her. He gently patted her head, then bared his fangs at the men who’d been attacking her.

“The big bad wolf’s here.”

A few minutes prior, I’d been getting an update on the situation in Watown from Mao.

“I believe I told you before how these men had gotten their hands on Blast Canes.”

“Yeah, they got some of Rolmund’s latest models, right? Did you find out how many, or why they wanted them?”

Apparently, when a number of Rolmund’s criminals had fled to Meraldia, they’d brought a lot of stolen contraband with them. It had come as quite a shock to me when I first learned that.

“I don’t know exactly how many they managed to procure, but I do know they have only one mage capable of charging them. I had Kite help me investigate who that might be, and...” Mao trailed off, looking annoyed.

You really don’t get along with Kite, huh? I thought. It wasn’t too surprising considering Kite was an upstanding government official and Mao was as corrupt a merchant as they came.

“His name’s Pokus. He used to have a pretty quaint post back when the Senate was in charge. He was one of Kite’s direct superiors, in fact. He’s one of the rare mages who can use mind magic, but the council refused to hire him back on because of his despicable behavior.”

I skimmed over the report Mao handed me, taking a look at all of Pokus’s past

transgressions. Most of the mages working for the Commonwealth Council originally used to work for the Senate. As a result, the Councilors had a good grasp on who'd abused their authority back then.

"Mind magic's primary function is to control other people," I said. "Anyone using that for evil would be able to get away with a lot of heinous crimes."

"He's managed to sneak into Watown thanks to that unsavory magic of his. I had some of my men tail him whenever they came to me to negotiate, but they never managed to find the group's hideout."

Mao's army of private bodyguards looked like a gang of hired thugs, but they were all surprisingly good people, and disciplined to boot. I'd heard nothing but good things about them from everyone, so there were times when even the Commonwealth Council commissioned them for official business.

Mao let out a weary sigh. "I've expressly forbidden anyone from importing drugs, slaves, and banned weaponry. But there are some people who just don't listen."

Those didn't sound like the words of a corrupt merchant, but I knew Mao well.

"You'll bribe everyone under the sun, Mao, but I know you don't take bribes yourself, and you don't condone any trade that directly harms people. Of course, not everyone is as principled as you."

"Oh, is that praise I hear?"

"Begrudging praise, but yes."

Mao had no compunctions about bribing those in power, so I needed to keep some level of professional distance from him or it'd set a bad precedent. *He may be principled, but he's still a crook. Still, at least he's a crook I can trust.*

"This district is doomed to have some kind of criminal underbelly no matter what we do, so I may as well let a criminal I can negotiate with control that underworld."

"Now that's definitely *not* praise."

If you want me to praise you then change your methods. Just then, a member

of Monza's squad slipped into the room. Both my werewolves and Mao's bodyguards were responsible for keeping the peace in the city, so they all knew each other. No one would bother stopping him to see if it was okay to let him in.

"Boss, I've got bad news."

After he stated his report, both Mao and I shouted "What?!" simultaneously. I then ran out of the room, heading straight for the brothel.

The men guarding the front entrance with knives and cudgels didn't stand a chance against me. Normally, I would have just killed them, but I needed them alive to interrogate later. Holding back made things more of a pain, but if I let loose a Soul Shaker here, it would affect innocent citizens in the street. Besides, Ryunheit's garrison and the demon army's Demon Knights had the brothel surrounded, so there was no way these scoundrels were escaping. But they didn't know that, which was why they thought they'd be in the clear if they could beat me. Their desperate struggle was almost comical to watch.

"Shit, this guy's a monster!"

"Surround him!"

"Someone get the axes!"

Sorry, but you're going to need a ballista if you want to do any real harm. I strolled through the brothel, beating up anyone I came across. The thugs were strong individually, but they had awful coordination. Also, their weapons were of poor quality, except for their Blast Canes. They were either disgraced mercenaries or upstart bandits who'd decided to try their hand at human trafficking. It was clear none of them had been career soldiers or pro assassins in some noble's employ.

"Waaaaaaah?! What the hell are you?!"

"Stay away! Stay awaaaaaaay!"

"I don't wanna die!"

Now do you realize how the people you kidnapped and enslaved felt? You

didn't stop when they begged, so neither will I. There was only one staircase leading to the first floor, probably to keep the prostitutes being imprisoned above from escaping. But now that same floor plan was keeping the kidnappers trapped as I made my way towards that lone staircase. I showed them no mercy, as I didn't want to let them take Friede hostage.

I shattered my enemies' limbs, then used magic to make those broken appendages heavier, pinning them in place. Around the time I'd finished off all the kidnappers, Monza waved to me from the skylight. It seemed she'd rescued all of the kidnapped girls. *Time to let the Demon Knights and the regular soldiers in.* Meanwhile, I decided to grill the ringleader behind this whole operation.

"You're Pokus, aren't you?" I snarled, grabbing the middle-aged man by his robes and lifting him into the air. That shut him up, which was good, since he'd been firing off mind magic the entire time I'd been fighting. His pathetic level of skill wasn't enough to harm me, but it was still tiresome to have to deal with his amateurish spells.

"You used to be a big shot back when the Senate was in charge, but I see you've fallen a long way since then. I can't believe you joined up with a foreign criminal organization."

"H-How do you know all that?!"

Because one of your old subordinates is now my vice-commander. I also know you abused your authority and your mind magic to sexually assault the women working under you. Oh, and that you were corrupt to the core. People like Pokus deserved every misfortune they suffered. I had no sympathy for him.

"Not only have you been buying and selling Blast Canes illegally obtained from Rolmund, but you've also been trafficking girls from Wa. You've got a lot to answer for. I'm also *very* interested in hearing how you managed to pull this off right under our noses."

"E-Eeep..."

Time to pay the piper.

"Hamaam."

"Yes, Vice-Commander?"

A werewolf with sand-brown fur dropped in from the skylight above. I handed Pokus over to him.

“Take him in. Make sure he doesn’t die. He knows a lot of secrets that we need to extract from him first.”

“Roger.”

He grabbed Pokus, who’d fallen unconscious, and jumped back out of the skylight. Now that the suspects were no longer resisting, the Demon Knights and regular soldiers rushed in with their shields. They quickly rounded up the kidnappers, cleared the crowd that had gathered to gawk, and sealed off the building. *Good work, guys.* It was probably safe to leave the cleanup to them.

Sighing, I transformed back into a human and returned to where Friede was.

“Are you okay, Friede?”

The blank look in her eyes told me Pokus’s mind magic was still affecting her. She had a few small scratches on her as well. They’d heal in a day or two, but because of Pokus’s mind magic, it seemed like she thought they were fatal wounds. Friede had never been in a real fight before, and because she was stronger than basically any other kid her age, she’d never known the taste of defeat. Despite her tomboyish nature, she was quite sheltered. In a way, this escapade might have served as the reality check she needed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll heal you up.” I cast a basic healing spell making her scratches vanish. I also removed any traces of mind magic still affecting her brain.

Friede looked up at me, her eyes still a little glazed over, and sunk to the ground in relief.

“Dad...”

Her quivering voice was so different from her usual brash tone that I nearly burst out laughing. But I held it in and smiled kindly at her.

“Don’t worry. The adults will take care of the rest.”

Friede nodded, then looked down and mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” *Good, you remembered to apologize.* I patted Friede on the head and said, “What you did today was very dangerous. Finding where these

scoundrels were hiding is something you can be proud of, but you should have let the guards know after that.”

“I know...” Friede’s head drooped even further down. I didn’t want to make her more depressed, but this was a good opportunity for a lecture.

“Don’t ever underestimate humans, Friede. You’ll come to regret it. Us werewolves might be much stronger than them, but they were the ones who drove us to near-extinction. Despite how weak they are, humans can be terrifying.”

“Terrifying...? How?”

Humans continued to thrive, despite their apparent weakness. The reasons for that were simple: they knew how to band together, stockpile resources, and use tactics and magic where brute force failed. Advances in agriculture and medicine allowed them to multiply faster than most other intelligent species. Knowledge of architecture and engineering allowed them to protect their homes. And their faith and smelting techniques gave them the strength to fight back against those stronger than themselves.

“You might be strong, but you wouldn’t want to be attacked while you were sleeping, eating, or having bedtime stories read to you by mom, right?”

“Yeah! Especially not that last one!”

Friede nodded emphatically, and I patted her head again.

“That’s why you need to remain vigilant, no matter how strong you become. Also, it’s in your best interests not to make too many enemies.”

Not even a werewolf was safe if the entire human race turned on them. Besides, it made for a stressful life always having to watch your back.

“If you can find some way to solve a problem without fighting, always choose that option. Got it?”

“Got it!”

Thankfully, it seemed she’d cheered up a little now.

Punishing smugglers and kidnappers was a job for the justice department, so I

just waited patiently for them to do their thing. My job on the other hand was to make sure my daughter got home in time for dinner. I walked back to the old residential district with Friede. This adventure had likely taught her a lot.

As we rounded a corner and our mansion came into view, Friede muttered, "Dad, I want to learn magic. And...I also want to go to school."

"That's a smart idea."

I didn't want to force anything onto her, but if she wanted to do this of her own volition, there was no reason to stop her. I was a little worried about her magical power growing any stronger than it already was, but studying magic would teach her to control it, so it would be a net positive overall.

"Also...I want to learn swordsmanship and martial arts."

"Well, I guess it can't hurt..."

I was hoping she would show an interest in medicine, history, or some kind of academic field. Secretly, I had wanted her to become a researcher, so I was a little disappointed, but I didn't let it show.

Friede turned to look at me and asked, "By the way, dad, how did you know where I was?"

I couldn't tell her that I had a group of werewolves tailing her at all times to make sure she was safe. If she knew she had bodyguards, she'd try her best to lose them. That was just the kind of girl she was. So instead I smiled and said, "Parents are always watching over their children, no matter where they are."

"I see... Ehehe." Friede nodded, seemingly happy with my answer.

Thankfully, she's still just a kid. That being said, I hadn't expected my daughter of all people to end up attacking the criminal group I'd purposely been letting run free. My plan had been to raid them the day after tomorrow and rescue the kidnapped girls. I'd only been waiting so the Demon Knights could finish their training on how to handle a situation like this one. Ultimately, all of that training ended up going to waste, so I was planning on apologizing to them later. *I really wish I could do something about Friede's tendency to stick her nose into trouble. She's too good at sniffing it out. Worst of all, she tries to handle everything on her own. Though I guess I'm not one to talk.*

“What’s wrong, dad? Did I say something weird?” Friede asked, confused by my sudden smile.

I shook my head and replied, “It’s nothing. I’m just thinking you really take after me, Friede.”

“I do? I do!” Friede grinned and grabbed onto my arm. “I’m glad I’m like you, dad!”

“Well, it makes me happy to know you think that.”

“Cause you’re super-duper strong!”

That’s probably my least important trait, I mentally rebutted.

Friede circled around me a few times and exclaimed, “You were like the Black Werewolf King back there!”

“That’s because I *am* the Black Werewolf King...”

“It was so cool how you beat up all the bad guys! How are you so strong?”

“Because I’m a werewolf.”

Werewolves specialized in hunting humans, so it was hardly surprising they had a favorable matchup against them.

“But you won’t be able to beat humans just by relying on your werewolf abilities. Humans are crafty, and they’ve found ways to make themselves stronger.”

Not only did this world have standard gunpowder weaponry, but it also had magical guns. It wouldn’t be long before the physical advantages werewolves had were all but neutralized.

“If you want to get stronger, you’ll have to study as well as train,” I said. *And the studying half of the equation is way more important.*

Smiling, Friede nodded and replied, “Got it! I’ll train lots so I can be strong like you, dad!”

I literally just said you need to study too.

—Friede’s Classroom—

Friede spread her arms wide and looked at her classmates. She was currently in the classroom reserved for the elementary-grade students in Meraldia University.

“My dad is super strong!” she proclaimed to Yuhette, who was listening with a smile on her face. She was one year older than Friede, but still in the same grade as her. Meanwhile, Shirin, who was also in the class, looked like he’d passed the point of exasperation and had just given up on stopping her. However, he was continually fidgeting with the two short swords strapped to his belt. He was one year younger than Friede, but he too was in the same grade.

“Also!” Friede leaned forward to emphasize the importance of her next statement. “When he transforms, he grows suuuper big! And his fangs and his claws are all ‘graaaaawr’!”

Friede bared her teeth and pointed to her canines while trying to strike as intimidating a pose as possible. Yuhette seemed to be enjoying the show, but Shirin looked exhausted. He stared off into the distance, trying his best to reach a state of zen. But in the end, he found it impossible and let out a long sigh.

“Friede. You told us this story three days ago. And this is the twenty-sixth time I’ve heard it.”

“Wait, that’s it?” Friede seemed surprised by how low the number was, which left Shirin utterly nonplussed.

“Are you telling me you’re repeating this story over and over even though you’re aware that we’ve heard it already?”

“Yep,” Friede said with a straight face. “Ummm, where was I? Oh yeah, so then dad took out forty—no, four hundred bad guys, using cool moves like this!” Friede jabbed the air with a surprising amount of force, then followed it up with a roundhouse kick. “Their heads flew off with each attack.”

“That would mean they died, which isn’t possible. Uncle Veight told us that he captured them all alive.”

Friede puffed out her cheeks and retorted, “Well it *looked* like their heads were flying off at least! What I thought I saw is more important than the truth.”

“You know they call that lying? Spreading misinformation. Distorting events.”

Still smiling, Yuhette patted Shirin on the head. “You know so many big words, Shirin.”

“U-Umm...” Shirin seemed at a loss for how to respond to that. Yuhette held her Sonnenlicht emblem aloft with the hand that wasn’t patting Shirin’s head.

“But using complicated words won’t make your argument right.”

“Maybe not, but my argument is clearly the moral one here, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes you can’t tell right away if something is right or wrong. You have to think about it.”

“Umm, is this really one of those cases?” Shirin didn’t look convinced. But before the discussion could get any further, Professor Gomoviroa showed up. Not only was she the university’s principal, but she was also the magic teacher.

“All right, everyone. Class will begin shortly. Get to your seats.”

“Okaaaaaaaay!” Shirin, Yuhette, and Friede said in unison, rushing to their assigned seats.

The elementary grades in Meraldia University taught the fundamentals for a lot of subjects so students could choose their specialty later. That also meant that everyone took the same courses, regardless of what field they wanted to go into later. Shirin wanted to take the officer courses later, Yuhette wanted to go into the arts department, and Friede wanted to study magic. But for now, they all shared the same beginner course.

“Magic is our way of catching a glimpse into the underside of this world—the parts of the universe you can’t normally see. At times, it will appear as though magic is doing unbelievable things. However, it is simply tapping into principles that were already there, but hidden from view.”

Friede listened with rapt attention, nodding along to the Great Sage’s lecture, while Shirin looked like he was trying to stave off boredom.

“I want to practice my swordsmanship...” Though Shirin took his swordsmanship training seriously, he had no interest in magic. “Or at least learn about how to make Dragon’s Breath, or how to treat people’s wounds.”

Gomoviroa grinned and looked over at Shirin. “Well, that’s enough complicated mysticism. You’ll understand that in due time. Right now I just want to show you all the depths of magic and hopefully make you appreciate its wonders, even if only a little. Which is why I have brought in a very special teacher for all of you today.”

As the students started chattering excitedly amongst themselves, Veight walked into the room.

“You say that, but this is supposed to be my class to teach in the first place, isn’t it?”

“Now, now, no need to sweat the little details. I’m sure many of the children here are very interested in what you have to say.”

“You think so?” Veight looked over the classroom. “Well, regardless, today your class will be taught by me, Veight Von—”

Normally the students were well-mannered, but the moment Veight introduced himself, they went wild.

“Oh my gosh! It’s the Black Werewolf King! In the flesh!”

“Please transform for us, Professor Veight. Pleaaaase!”

“Whoa, this is my first time ever seeing Lord Veight!”

“H-He’s the Demon Lord’s vice-commander, isn’t he?!”

Most of the students were children of academics or rich merchants, so they had all been thoroughly schooled in proper etiquette. But Veight was such a monumental figure that they couldn’t contain their excitement upon meeting him.

“Umm...kids?” Veight waited patiently for everyone to quiet down before continuing. “While it’s true that I am the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, right now I’m just another teacher. I’m here to talk to you about magic, nothing else.”

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!”

“The Black Werewolf King’s supposed to be a master of magic, right?!”

“Yeah, he is! He’s one of Movi’s best disciples! Even Professor Parker says he’s an amazing mage!”

The students started chattering excitedly to each other again.

Friede looked around and shrugged dismissively. “He’s not that cool.” But despite what she said, the corners of her mouth were tugging upward into a grin. “I see... So dad really is amazing. Ehehe...” She couldn’t hide her true feelings for long.

Once everyone calmed down again, Veight cast strengthening magic on all of them. Everyone was surprised by how much more they could do under its effects, and Veight went on to explain how it works in as simple terms as he could. Friede had a huge grin on her face the whole time during the lecture.

After class ended, all of the students surrounded Friede.

“Your dad’s so cool!”

“He was just like the Black Werewolf King in the plays!”

Friede couldn’t hold back her smile as she saw how excited everyone was. Naturally, the only logical thing for her to do now was tell everyone the story of her dad’s latest heroics.

“Yeah! My dad’s super strong and smart, and kind! You know, just the other day...”

“This will make it the twenty-seventh time...” Shirin muttered sadly, but no one paid him any mind.

That evening, Friede waited at the entrance hall for her dad to come home.

“Daaaaaaaaaad!” she shouted the moment she saw him come inside. The legendary Black Werewolf King gave his shoes to Isabelle, then squatted down in front of his daughter.

“What is it, Friede?”

“Don’t give me that innocent look!” she shouted. “What was with those clothes you wore to school today?!”

“What do you mean?” Veight asked, pinching the sleeve of his coat.

Isabelle coughed politely and said, “You’re wearing a mass-produced coat that you bought on sale from a shop on Moyogi Street.”

“What she said,” Veight said, not seeing the problem at all.

“That’s no good! You need to wear better clothes! Or at least tailor-fit ones!”

“But anytime I transform, I ruin whatever outfit I’m wearing. It’d be rude to the tailor I get custom clothes from if I keep ruining their work every few days.”

“Mrrrrrrrgh!” Friede really wanted to chew her dad out, but as a noble’s daughter, she’d been taught not to curse in public. “Th-Then can’t you at least get clothes that are in a better style?!”

“That won’t make them any more functional.”

“Grrrrr!” She clenched her fist and looked up at the ceiling. “You know, Finnegan, the guy in the upper liberal arts class, asked me why you wear such lame clothes!”

“Ah, that would be Forne’s son. He comes from Veira so it’s no surprise he’s fashionable. His dad keeps telling me how Finnegan’s the most beautiful boy in —”

“That’s not important right now!” Friede grabbed Veight by the waist and shook him. “You’re wearing a wheat stalk-patterned coat, dad! In winter!”

“Oh, these weird lines were supposed to represent wheat stalks? I didn’t know that.”

“What kind of insane designer puts a summer pattern on a winter coat?! Why did you even buy it?!”

“Well, the fabric is durable, and your mom said the sewing was good, so...”

“Mom! *Moooooooooom!*”

Friede wanted to yell at Airia for indulging her husband’s awful fashion tastes, but unfortunately the Demon Lord was still in the middle of work. Friede bit her lip and turned back to Veight.

“And what’s with that shirt?! There’s a floral pattern along the collar!”

“Yeah, I know. But this is a camellia flower. They bloom in the wintertime.”

Veight seemed proud of his choice, but Friede shook her head in exasperation.

“Then why do your pants have grapevine patterns stitched into them?! It looks like camellia flowers are blooming on grapevines!”

Veight blinked in confusion and turned back to Isabelle.

“Is that bad?”

“I believe I mentioned earlier that the latest fashion is to match the plant patterns on both the top and bottom.”

“I see. Fashions sure change quickly,” Veight said jokingly.

“Come on, can’t you please wear decent clothes? You’re one of Ryunheit’s big shots, dad! You’re a legendary hero!” Friede pleaded.

“Don’t worry, everyone in the city recognizes me no matter what I wear.”

“That’s exactly the problem!”

Veight turned back to Isabelle, at a loss for what to say. She was leaning against the wall, watching everything with a perfectly neutral expression. But she couldn’t stop herself from muttering, “The poor girl has it rough, having to live with your fashion sense.”

“O-Oh...”

If even the head maid was taking Friede’s side, Veight had no choice but to concede.

“All right, I’ll try to pay more attention to what I’m wearing from now on. Do you think you could help me coordinate my clothes, Friede?”

“S-Sure!” Truth be told, Friede didn’t know too much about fashion herself, but there was no turning back now. “I’ll make sure you’re dressed right!”

“Thanks. I’ll be counting on you.”

Seeing her dad’s smile, Friede began wondering if maybe she’d been too harsh on him.

“Y-You’re the coolest guy in the world, so...you need to dress the part, okay?”

“Okay.”

Veight patted Friede on the head, which made her suddenly care a lot less about her dad’s fashion sense. Her resolve to help him dress better was already wavering.

*

Our precious Friede was now ten years old.

“Haaah! Hiyaah! Yaaaah!”

She’d been diligently studying magic and martial arts ever since her run-in with the kidnappers. She was studying magic under Master and had become her newest disciple. From what Master told me, she had quite a knack for it. Like me, Friede was studying strengthening magic. She’d already reached the point where she could maximize her own physical abilities. She was also learning a smattering of spells from other fields, amassing quite a versatile toolkit of magic. Though, it definitely felt like she was focusing on magic that would help her in combat.

Wrestling was the main hand-to-hand combat style werewolves fought with, so the martial arts she was learning were using that as a base. But she’d also learned a good number of punch and kick techniques, and she could now hold her own against adult werewolves. The other werewolves her age had only just started learning how to transform, and they were still at the level of hunting boars and bears. Compared to her peers, Friede was on another level. And just now, she’d beaten Nibert in a wrestling contest.

“I-I give up,” Nibert croaked, lying on the floor in utter stupefaction. Friede’s fist was pointed at his solar plexus, but she grinned and moved it away when he admitted defeat.

“Yes!” She lent Nibert a hand to help him up, then literally jumped for joy.

“I finally beat you, Uncle Nib! I’m the best!”

“You’re something else, that’s for sure. No wonder Jerrick and Monza couldn’t beat you.”

Nibert let out a long sigh and looked over at me. Though he didn't look like it, he was now the proud father of three kids.

I gave him a rueful smile and said, "Sorry about this, Nibert. And thanks for agreeing to spar with Friede even though you're so busy."

"It's fine, don't worry about it. Today's my day off anyway. My little rascals are off playing with my bro too."

Nibert smiled, but his face was pale. Losing to Friede must have been a shock.

"This is what I get for not fighting in forever... Or maybe I'm just getting old."

"It's definitely not age. Just look at old man Vodd. He's past eighty but he's still trouncing his disciples in that dojo of his."

"Yeah, I guess. You're really strong, Friede." Nibert ruffled Friede's hair.

"Ehehe." She blushed slightly and her smile grew wider. After we ate lunch together and Nibert went back home, Friede turned to me, her eyes sparkling.

"Dad, look at how strong I've gotten!"

As her parent, I wanted to praise her growth, but I needed to make sure she was focusing on the right things too.

"It's a good thing that you're getting stronger, but you still haven't finished your math homework, have you? Kurtz was complaining to me about how you haven't been turning in your assignments."

"Aww, but I don't need trigonometry to beat people up."

There definitely wasn't any way to beat someone up with trigonometric functions. *Also, now that I think about it, trig at age 10 is really pushing it. We probably need to revamp our curriculum.* That being said, Friede had a habit of slacking off on subjects that weren't martial arts or magic. Worst of all, Friede took too much pride in her strength. *I mean, there's nothing wrong with being proud of all your hard work paying off, but...* This was starting to become a problem. *How can I get her to change her perspective without hurting her pride?*

"Now that I can even beat Uncle Nib, I wanna go on a journey to hone my skills even further," Friede said wistfully, completely unaware of my worries.

“You want to visit the other cities?”

“Yeah! I’m pretty strong, even by werewolf standards! There’s no human that can beat me, but I want to try challenging Meraldia’s best swordsmen and martial artists!”

Hmm... I respected her drive, but her overconfidence was a bit worrying. Humans were a lot more terrifying than Friede realized. I debated lecturing her again, but then I thought of an even better idea.

“Friede. If you’re that confident, how about you try fighting me?”

“What?!” she yelped, suddenly looking worried.

“There’s no way I could beat you, dad. You even won against a Valkaan.”

“Technically, that’s not how that battle went down, but don’t worry, I’ll give you a handicap. I won’t transform, and I won’t use more than one Kite of magic.” In other words, I would fight her under the same restrictions as any human mage. “Not only that, but I’ll only use one spell during the fight. I won’t tell you which, but I promise that’s all I’ll need to win.”

“Just one? Is it some kind of super-strong spell?”

“Nope, it’s one of the most basic strengthening magic spells. You can use it yourself, and you’ll recognize it the moment I do.”

Friede laughed at that. “Come on, dad. Even if you are a legend, there’s no way you can beat me like that. Wouldn’t that put you at the same level as a normal human?”

“That’s right, I’ll fight you as just a regular human,” I replied with a smile. *You’re about to learn why you shouldn’t underestimate humans.*

Friede dropped into a stance and gave me a cocky grin.

“All right, let’s do this. I’m not so weak that you can beat me with just that.”

“One would hope...”

I too readied myself. But I could tell how this would end already.

“I’m going to cast my spell now. You get ready as well, Friede.”

“Hehe, okay. Here I goooooo!”

Friede cast a wide array of strengthening magic on herself, increasing her power exponentially. Master made sure all of her students could cast without incantations so that their spells were usable in battle. After she'd applied her buffs, Friede was stronger than both of the Garney brothers. She had the force of a tank with the speed of a falcon. Meanwhile, I hadn't transformed and was only using one meager Kite's worth of mana for my spell.

I hadn't buffed my kinetic vision, so I could barely even follow my daughter's movements. I didn't have enough mana to buff my endurance or strength either.

"Ahaha, you're so slow, dad!"

Friede rushed in at blistering speed, but instead of aiming for my face or torso, she went in for a leg sweep. *Too soft.* I jumped, using strengthening magic to increase my jumping power. But with the mana I was using, I could jump no higher than Friede's head.

Her eyes glinted as she saw her chance. "I've got you now!"

She finished the turn started by her leg sweep and jumped into the air while spinning. She used all of that momentum to launch a spin kick with her other leg. This one would hit me square in the chest if it connected. Werewolves didn't have wings, so if we jumped into the air we couldn't move until we landed again. That was why jumping was usually a bad strategy. But not if you were using magic.

Seeing an opportunity, I unleashed my trump card. This was the very first spell I had learned. My body instantly got much heavier, causing my momentum to shift. Most people underestimated this beginner spell. Making your body heavier just made it harder to move. Everyone thought it made you weaker, but they were all fools. There was no way a spell that casually allowed you to interfere with the laws of physics could be weak. Besides, this was the one spell that gave you aerial mobility options, albeit limited ones. By the time Friede's kick came out, I was already on the ground. Her leg sliced through empty air, and while she was off-balance, I tackled her.

"Whoa?!"

I almost managed to drag her down, but she was dexterous enough to

maintain her balance in the air.

“You little—”

Since the battle had gone from an exchange of blows to a grapple fight, Friede instinctively tried to throw me. But I didn’t move an inch. I was still extremely heavy thanks to my magic. Of course, I was only one Kite’s worth of mana heavier. If Friede used all of her strength, she’d still be able to toss me.

I only had one opening. I brushed my hand against Friede’s hair, and made it as heavy as I could. Nails and hair were part of a person’s body so they could be affected by strengthening magic. However, because they didn’t have blood vessels running through them, they had very little resistance to magic. This was something I had discovered only recently. Friede’s long hair made for the perfect target.

“Waaagh?!”

Friede’s head tilted back as her hair was pulled to the ground. I gently tapped my fingers against her exposed windpipe.

“You’re dead.”

Had this been a real battle, she would be bleeding out right now. Friede realized this as well, and she slid to the ground, blinking in surprise.

“Huh? What? Did I...lose?”

“You did.”

I released the spell I’d cast on her hair, and she got back to her feet.

“You died that easily, Friede. Your first day on your training journey, and you’re already a corpse.”

“H-Hold on!” Friede shouted hurriedly. “One more fight! Just one more! I won’t lose this time!”

“Would you be able to say that if this had happened to you on a real battlefield? In a fight to the death, there are no second chances.” I realized I was being unfair, but this was an important lesson she needed to learn. “Even a Hero who’s won a hundred battles will die if they lose a single time. That held true both for Friedensrichter and Arshes. This is what makes real battles so

scary, Friede.”

“Ngh... I see...”

Hopefully this gave her an idea of why real fights were terrifying.

“Also, don’t forget: any human who can use strengthening magic would have been able to do what I did. You’re neither immortal nor even the strongest fighter in the world. The moment you let your guard down, you’re dead.”

“Okay...”

I’d really knocked the wind out of her sails. Friede had a few dozen kites of mana, but that didn’t mean she was unbeatable for a human. People like Barnack the Sword Saint or Woroy would probably be able to outwit her. *Though, now that I think about it, she’s never really gone anywhere outside of Ryunheit.* Regardless of what she wanted to do in the future, she would benefit from seeing more of the world. Besides, I knew I had a habit of coddling her too much. It wasn’t such a bad idea to let her go on a trip to see the world. She’d just learned about how terrifying defeat could be, so this was a good chance for her to train her mental fortitude.

I gave her a gentle smile and said, “Friede, I can’t let you go right away, but if you pass your final exam in two years and graduate from the elementary division, I’ll talk to Airia about letting you go on a trip.”

Her face lit up.

“What?! Really?! You’ll let me go on my training journey?!”

“No, it’s going to be a study abroad trip. You’ll still have to do your schoolwork.”

I’m glad you don’t let anything get you down for long, but I’m worried you’re not taking these lessons to heart...

—Team Friede, Assemble!—

“Ah, there it is.”

Friede looked up at the rankings that had been posted outside. She’d scored third on the graduation exam. Naturally, that meant she’d passed.

“Third place, huh... Well, there was no way I was gonna take the top spot from Yuhette. And Shirin got second.”

Friede nodded to herself, satisfied with the results. Her two friends were cut from a different cloth, so she'd known from the start she wouldn't be able to match them academically. Everything from third place onwards had a marginal difference of just a few points between each person. Even so, Friede was glad she'd come out on top among the average students. All that studying had paid off.

“Yeah, this is pretty good.”

Just then, the two who'd scored first and second walked over. Yuhette, Bishop Yuhit's granddaughter, and Shirin, son of the Azure Knight Baltze. Both of them were academically gifted enough that they could choose to go into any field they wanted.

“Well done, Friede,” Shirin said with a smile.

“We all managed to graduate together,” Yuhette said cheerfully.

“I mean there's no way you two were going to fail...” Friede muttered, but Yuhette shook her head.

“My grandfather always says you can never let your guard down. I was pretty nervous until the results were posted.”

“There's no way you need to worry that much about—”

“It's when everything is going according to plan that you need to be the most cautious. That's another one of my grandfather's favorite sayings.”

“I see,” Shirin mused. Neither he nor Friede knew much about Yuhit's past. After a few seconds, he smiled at Yuhette and said, “Bishop Yuhit is a truly wise man.”

The symbol of the Sonnenlicht Order was embroidered on the lapels of his shirt. Shirin was the first dragonkin to convert to Sonnenlicht. Naturally, that had caused a stir among both the Sonnenlicht priests and the dragonkin, but ultimately, Veight and Yuhit had convinced everyone to let Shirin join. Veight was not only the Demon Lord's vice-commander, he was also a Sonnenlicht

saint. No one could say no to him. Besides, it would be a boon for the Sonnenlicht Order if the child of one of the demon army's most influential generals was a part of their religion. Numerous demons had already joined the Mondstrahl Church; the Sonnenlicht bishops were starting to realize if they didn't begin recruiting demons as well, they'd fall behind in influence.

Shirin wasn't aware of any of those political considerations though, and he squeezed the symbol on his chest. "I need to work harder so I can become a true knight worthy of this sacred mark."

Friede looked over at him and asked, "Are you training with Uncle Baltze today too?"

"Yes. Do you want to come watch?"

"Absolutely!" Friede exclaimed with an emphatic nod.

The demon army had a number of bases scattered throughout Ryunheit. It was at one of those that Shirin trained with his father every day.

"You did well when advancing forward, Shirin. But you were too late in pulling back."

Baltze fluidly shifted from offense to defense, wielding his twin swords like extensions of his arms.

"Shirin. On a battlefield, the barrage of attacks is endless. Even if your slash defeats one enemy, you must be in a position to immediately move or another foe will bury you."

"Understood, Father!"

Both of them were fighting with training swords that had their edges blunted. Their weapons clashed again, causing sparks to fly through the air. Seeing the four swords weave through the air made it clear why Baltze had christened this training method the Four Swords Dance.

"Uncle Baltze is an amazing swordsman," Friede said in a quiet voice to Yuhette, who'd also come to watch Shirin train.

"Do you want to try learning that style too, Friede?" Yuhette asked, and Friede shook her head with a sigh.

“I do, but you can’t unless you have a tail.”

“Really?”

“Dragonkin use their tails for balance. That’s why they can push in so far with a single step and still keep their center of gravity in the right place. They can also use their tails to turn on a dime.”

“You’d look really cute with a dragon tail,” Yuhette snickered. Friede didn’t take her eyes off of Shirin and Baltze’s sparring match as she talked.

“The Four Swords Dance isn’t a sword style, it’s a training method. Supposedly it teaches you both the yin and the yang of sword fighting. Yang is about striking first, while yin is about parrying and countering.”

“So right now Uncle Baltze is the yang and Shirin is the yin?”

“Yep. Shirin’s a lot better at yin than yang.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“I know, right?”

The two of them knew Shirin’s personality well. As father and son dueled on the training ground, another blue-scaled dragonkin in a white lab coat walked over. He was Kurtz, the demon army’s top engineer and Baltze’s older brother.

“You can keep sparring while you listen, Baltze. I’m just here to tell you we’ve finished analyzing number four.”

“Number four? Ah, you mean the Rolmund-made Blast Canes we confiscated the other day.”

“Please don’t spell it out for everyone to hear. The whole point of using code words is to keep things secret,” Kurtz said in an exasperated voice. Baltze easily parried another one of Shirin’s attacks and replied with a smile, “You don’t have to worry about keeping anything from Friede or the others. They’ve graduated from the elementary course and are now full-fledged students of the university.”

“And the fact that they’re students means they’re not yet adults.” Kurtz let out a long sigh, then flipped through his report. “No matter. Everyone here knows about the incident anyway. More importantly, the smuggled Blast Canes

that are part of the number four incident are much weaker and have a cruder design than the ones with the number three designation.”

“Now that’s surprising.” Baltze parried Shirin’s weak blow and thrust at his chest. “You’re wide open!”

“Wah?!”

Shirin staggered backwards, but he managed to just barely parry the thrust.

Baltze followed up with another flurry of attacks while saying in a thoughtful voice, “Rolmund’s technology and productivity has only gone up in the past ten years. Has something happened recently that would weaken their national might?”

“That was what I and the Demon Empress believed, but Veight is of a different opinion.” Kurtz adjusted his glasses as he spoke. “He believes the quality of these Blast Canes is lower because Rolmund is trying to make them easier to produce.”

“And are they?”

“I took Veight’s suggestion into consideration and had the two types of Blast Canes compared. I investigated how much both types cost to make, how much magesteel was in them, the quantities made, and how many days they took to produce.” Kurtz let out another sigh. “Veight’s hypothesis was correct. The latest Blast Canes are far more efficient to manufacture. They’ve lost about twenty percent of their firepower, but considering how many more can be made in the same amount of time, it’s a worthwhile trade-off.”

“Figures that Veight would realize that immediately.”

“He’s become the scourge of the engineering department. His insight is so keen that it makes the rest of us feel like we’re blind.”

Baltze laughed heartily. “Veight’s something else. Don’t bother comparing yourself to him. He has the same aura that Friedensrichter had.”

“Aura, you say? That’s not very scientific.” Kurtz took off his glasses. “But I’m inclined to agree. It’s both strange and somewhat nostalgic.”

“I know, right?” Still smiling, Baltze ducked low and kicked off the ground.

“Take that!”

“Ah?!” Shirin fell on his butt, his swords knocked out of his hands. One of Baltze’s blades was pointed directly at his nose.

“I-I surrender!”

“You’ve improved, Shirin. I wasn’t half the warrior you are when I was your age. Well done. Be proud of what you’ve achieved.” Baltze smiled at his son as he sheathed his sword.

While Friede watched on, Kurtz turned to her and said, “By the way, Veight was looking for you. He said he has some good news for you.”

“Really, what is it?!”

Just then, Veight walked out onto the training ground. Kite and Mao were with him.

“Don’t do this, Veight! It’ll be bad for her education!” Kite protested.

“Then why don’t you chaperone the group instead?” Mao asked coldly.

“If I could afford to take a break, I would. But developing man-made magesteel is a top priority for Ryunheit. If I leave Ryucco to his own devices, who knows what he’ll invent instead.”

“Well...I learned my lesson about that last time. It took half a year to recoup the money I invested in him...” Mao’s face fell as he said that.

Veight ignored the two of them and walked over to Friede.

“Friede, I told you to come straight home after you found out your results, didn’t I?”

“You did?”

“I did. Wait, did I?”

Veight cocked his head to one side, and Friede mimicked his gesture.

“Well, whatever,” Veight said with a dismissive wave.

“Yeah, it doesn’t matter.”

Like father, like daughter, Veight thought with a smile.

“First of all, congratulations on graduating. Third place is a very impressive score. I was thinking since you did so well, I’d allow you to go on a short field trip before the next semester starts.”

“Yes! Can it be a longer trip?!”

“If you get through this one without any trouble, I’ll think about sending you on a longer journey,” Veight said with a wry smile, then turned to Shirin and Yuhette. “By the way, you two are welcome to come on this trip as well. I already asked your parents for permission.”

Baltze took over from there and said, “The purpose of today’s sparring match was to test your skills. You’ve perfected the basics, so I think you’re ready for this field trip. And don’t forget to show proper respect to everyone you meet. That’s as important as being a good warrior.”

“Yes, Father! Thank you!” Shirin bowed, his eyes glittering with excitement.

Veight turned back to Yuhette and said, “Yuhit didn’t take much convincing, but Azul was quite worried about you. It wasn’t easy to persuade him to let you go.”

“I’m sorry my father’s such a worrywart...”

Mao and Kite opened their mouths at almost the same time.

“Your father is a design engineer, so it’s better that he’s more cautious than most.”

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing with this greedy merchant, but he’s right. Your father’s caution is a virtue.”

“Of course, in your case, it’s just proof you’re a coward.”

“Wanna say that again, you corrupt money-grubber?”

Friede ignored the two arguing adults and turned to her two friends instead.

“This is great!”

“Yeah, it is.”

“We did it!”

The three of them placed their hands together. Yuhette laughed and said,

“Team Friede, roll out!”

“Wait, why are we using my name for the team?! I only placed third on the exam.”

“That’s because you’re... Oh, forget it.” Shirin gave up on even trying to explain, and Friede cocked her head again.

“I don’t really understand, but... Ah, dad! Where are we going for our trip?! Bernheinen? Veira?”

Veight and Baltze exchanged glances, then grinned at each other. Veight turned back to the kids and declared, “Nope. You’re going to Doneiks. You know, the famous Battleball City.”

“Heck yeah! I love battleball! I’ve always wanted to see a real battleball stadium!”

“Doneiks is the busiest city in Meraldia right now. You’ll be able to learn things there that your textbooks will never— Hey, listen to me.” Veight put a hand on Friede’s shoulder to stop her from hopping up and down. “Woroy wants to see us as soon as possible, so go get ready. He said if we don’t show up on time, he’ll expand Doneiks until its walls touch Ryunheit’s.”

“Don’t worry, I’m already ready to go!” Friede exclaimed, giving her father a thumbs-up.

—The Battleball City—

The slaves who escaped from the Rolmund Empire centuries ago were the ones who built the cities of northern Meraldia. Adventurers who sailed north from Kuwol were the ones who built the cities of southern Meraldia. In the center of the Meraldian Commonwealth was a large plain that separated the north from the south. Before, it had been known as the Fetid Wastes. But that name hadn’t been used for over a decade now. Now, Meraldia’s eighteenth city sat smack dab in the middle of that plain. The city’s name was Doneiks—also known as the Battleball City.

Numerous carriages dotted the wide highway heading towards Doneiks.

“Ah, I can see it!” Friede shouted, her eyes sparkling in the swaying carriage. Her friends Shirin and Yuhette looked out the windows as well.

“I don’t believe it...there really aren’t any walls,” Shirin whispered in awe.

“The Viceroy, Lord Woroy, chose not to build walls to make it easier to expand the city,” Yuhette said with a nod. “That’s why it’s still growing even now.”

“But isn’t it scary to live in a city without walls?” Shirin asked.

Mao, who was also traveling with the group, explained, “Lord Woroy is an exiled noble from Rolmund. He’s not just any noble either, he’s a former prince. Everyone knows they have to be on their guard around him, walls or not.”

“I...see?” Shirin said hesitantly, and Mao nodded.

Friede spent a few minutes mulling over Mao’s words, then looked back out the window.

“Oh, hey. Someone’s standing over there waving at us.”

Mao glanced out the window and nodded. “Ah, that’s our guide for today. He’s worked for Lord Woroy for a long time now.”

The old man with a scar on his cheek introduced himself as Zeom, one of Woroy’s retainers. “All of Woroy’s bunch are an ugly lot, just like me. Sorry you kids are stuck with this old geezer for a guide, but you’ll just have to bear with it.”

While it was true that Zeom’s facial features made him look intimidating, his cheerful grin took the edge off of his appearance. He kept pace with the carriage on his own horse and chatted with Friede and the others as they made their way to the city.

“Me and most of the other boys working for Woroy are former bandits and mercenaries. Who knows what would have happened to us if we weren’t picked up by him.”

There was no gate, so the party was able to make their way straight into the city.

“This is Fourth Infantry Street,” Zeom said cheerfully.

“That’s a weird name for a street,” Friede remarked with a puzzled look.

“Don’t be rude, Friede,” Shirin chided.

But Zeom’s smile didn’t falter in the slightest and he replied, “Don’t worry, I think it’s weird too. But Woroy wanted to name his streets after his retainers, and a lot of them came from the fourth infantry squad.” Zeom scratched the scar on his cheek. “In fact, I was part of the fourth infantry when this street was named too. Now I’m the city’s infantry commander.” He pointed to the alleys branching off to either side. “This is Harnoff Lane, that’s Sabie Way, and that’s Bonoo Lane.”

“Those are all people’s names, right?” Yuhette muttered, catching on to the recurring theme.

Zeom smiled, his weathered face wrinkling up.

“That’s right. All of this city’s streets and bridges are named after Woroy’s retainers. They’re the names of our comrades who died in construction accidents, disease, or war. It’s an unbelievable honor that he’s bestowed upon us.” Zeom looked off into the distance. “If I’d died back then, one of these streets would be named after me. You know, many of us almost feel bad we missed our chance to die at the right time.”

Friede and the others exchanged glances, saying nothing. It was hard to say anything with the atmosphere the way it was. The first thing they’d heard upon entering the city was a tragic part of its history. But then Zeom pointed to the square and said, “Look. That’s the Black Werewolf Plaza.”

“Black Werewolf... Wait, is it named after my dad?!”

Zeom gave Friede a smile and replied, “But of course! It’s the one plaza with the honor of being named after Veight, the Black Werewolf King!”

“But my dad’s not dead yet...”

Friede gave Zeom a confused look, and his smile grew wider. “Indeed he isn’t! But you know, before this city was even half-built, Veight protected all of us so we named it in his honor.”

“My dad did?”

Shirin and Yuhette said at the same time, “It must have been the Draulight incident.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

After a few seconds of silence, Friede got the answer too.

“*Ohhh*. The Draulight incident!”

“Yeah, we already said that,” Shirin said with a sigh.

It seemed like this was the thing Zeom had been building up towards the whole time, and he said excitedly, “When that army of skeletons came, I thought I was dead for sure. A bunch of my comrades had already been killed, and we were getting cornered. But then Lord Veight dropped down from the moon.”

Friede exchanged glances with her friends again, but Zeom was too heated up to notice.

“He transformed as he fell and howled so loudly that most of the skeletons were blown to bits. Then we picked up our swords and cleaned up the rest of them.” Zeom flexed his wrinkled arms. “Woroy and Barnack the Sword Saint fought like men possessed back then! I’ve never seen such masterful swordsmanship! Man, that fight was terrifying to participate in, but it was also awe-inspiring.”

As the carriage approached the square, the coachman had to carefully weave his way through stalls and pedestrians.

“The materials that built this square are the same lumber and bricks we used as barricades when the skeletons attacked.”

Mao, who’d remained quiet until now, muttered, “During the incident, Kite was here as well. He went through a traumatic experience and has been scared to come back to Doneiks since.” He chuckled evilly to himself as he said that.

Friede and the others exchanged glances for the third time and fell silent again. It was clear to Friede that adults loved telling stories of the past. Butting in would only annoy them, so she decided to let them do all the talking. The other two kids seemed to agree, and they nodded to each other, letting Mao

and Zeom reminisce.

“I got hit by a skeleton’s arrow during the siege, and you can still see the scar here... Oh wait, wrong one. I think this is the right scar?”

“Ryunheit had it rough during the Draulight incident as well. Veight collapsed half of the sewer system, and I was the one who ended up paying for its repair.”

The carriage slowly made its way towards the stadium while the adults waxed nostalgic.

Doneiks’s stadium was a massive building surrounded by high walls.

“Here we are. Woroy and a few other viceroys are waiting for you inside. I need to go on patrol, so I’ll be taking my leave here.”

“Thanks so much for guiding us,” the three children said in unison, and Zeom bowed his head, blushing.

“Sorry if I bored you with all my stories. Hahaha.”

Zeom gave them a jovial wave, then galloped away. After he was gone, the party got out of the carriage and went into the stadium.

Shirin stroked the walls as he passed through the gates and muttered, “This is ostensibly a stadium, but it’s clearly also a fortress and an evacuation shelter all rolled into one. If something like the Draulight incident ever happens again, the citizens will be able to take shelter here.”

“In that case, why not just build a proper castle instead?” Friede asked.

“Oh, the adults have their reasons,” Yuhette said with a small chuckle.

“Is that what this is about?”

Friede had heard that reasoning more than a few times now, and she’d made her peace with the fact that even if she didn’t understand now, she would eventually.

They went through the corridor the players used and walked out onto the playing field, where a truly strange sight greeted them. A group of half-naked kentauros were galloping around the field, kicking up dust in their wake. While

kentauros were smaller than warhorses, they were just as powerful, if not more.

“Keep running, Fir! Don’t stop!” There was a beautiful young woman cheering one of the kentauros on from the stands. “Pass! No, not that way! Oh, forget it, just plow your way through!”

To her surprise, Friede recognized the woman. “Wait, isn’t that Shatina, Zaria’s viceroy?”

“By Zaria, you mean the Labyrinth City?”

“Yeah. She comes over to our house a lot.”

Whenever Shatina came to visit the Aindorf estate, she called Veight “Master” and minded her manners. Friede had never seen her this heated up. The kentauros she was cheering on was in the center of the action. She was the only girl, surrounded by a group of burly men. But she was also the fastest of the lot, and easily maneuvered her way around them. Friede had seen her before as well.

“Hey, it’s Fir,” Friede said.

“By Fir, you mean Thuvan’s viceroy, Lady Firnir?”

“Yep. She’s as fast as ever.”

Firnir, on the other hand, acted the same way in the Aindorf estate as she was here.

“Shatina, I can’t keep up with your complicated advice! I just have to outrun everyone, right?!”

“You moron! This sport’s not so easy that you can win without using strategy!” Shatina was lauded as one of the smartest viceroys in Meraldia, but right now she was acting like a kid. “How many years are you going to spend making the same mistakes?! Look, you’re being pincered! Hurry up and pass!”

“But that’s such a pain!”

“Shut up and do it! Don’t forget that I’m your team’s sponsor!”

“Yeah, but all the players are from Thuvan!”

“Keep complaining and I’ll never make my chickpea soup for you ever again!”

“Noooooooo!”

Dumbfounded, Shirin muttered, “I can’t believe this is an actual conversation between two viceroys. Also, I know Firnir doesn’t look much older than us, but she’s one of the older veterans of the demon army, isn’t she? Why is she...”

“I know she looks dumb, but she really is one of the demon army’s strongest generals. Dad said so.” Friede smiled and added, “Shatina and Fir’s cities are next to each other so they’re good friends. I heard they used to go on adventures in the underground ruins beneath Zaria too.”

“I-Is this how good friends act towards each other? Or is this just how human-kentauros relationships are?”

“No clue...”

Shatina waved a fist in the air and shouted, “Get your ass over here, Fir!”

“No way, I don’t want a scolding. Ah, they stole the ball from me?!”

“See, what did I say?! Set up your defensive line so—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it back right away! Here I goooooooooo! Uryaaaaaaah!”

“Listen to your coach, dammit!”

Grinning, Firnir easily overtook her opponent. Friede and the others watched on, covered in the dust kicked up by the kentauros.

A few seconds later, a booming voice called out to them from behind, “Are you Veight’s daughter? I haven’t seen you in years; you’ve gotten so big!”

Friede hurriedly turned around and saw a muscular middle-aged man walking over to them. He looked like a veteran battleball player, but he was dressed in a viceroy’s formal garb. Mao gave the kids a brief introduction.

“That’s His Highness, Lord Woroy.”

“Come on, Mao, give me a break. I’m not a prince anymore.”

Normally, Woroy cut an imposing figure, but when he smiled he looked like an innocent child. It was hard to be scared of him when he was grinning.

Woroy stopped in front of the three kids and properly introduced himself.

“Welcome to Doneiks, friends. I’m Doneiks’s viceroy, Woroy Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund.”



He gave a formal introduction to them, affording them the same respect he would to an adult. Overjoyed, Friede and the others straightened their backs and bowed to him.

“I’m Friede Aindorf! Thank you so much for inviting us here to Doneiks! It has been far too long since your last visit to Ryunheit!”

She’d been practicing her introductions since the day they’d left, so she managed to say everything without tripping over her words. She breathed a sigh of relief, and Woroy let out a booming laugh.

“I see your dad’s pretty strict with you! But he clearly cares a lot about you too.”

“H-He...does?”

“Very much so. I can tell just by seeing how you’ve grown up,” Woroy said, still smiling. Shirin and Yuhette introduced themselves next, and Woroy had words for each of them as well.

“Baltze’s son and Yuhit’s granddaughter, huh? Man, it’s kinda nerve-wracking meeting so many of Meraldia’s future leaders at once.”

Despite his words, he didn’t look the least bit nervous. If anything, he looked excited. Friede had heard from Veight that Woroy was extremely strong, but he also knew how to handle things delicately when the time called for it. Veight also told her to learn from how Woroy did things. But to Friede’s eyes, Woroy looked very different from what Veight had described.

Mao started making small talk with Woroy, which gave the kids time to have a quick whispered conversation amongst themselves.

“This is, *that* Woroy we’re talking about, right? You know, the White Tiger, the Frost Prince, that guy?” Friede said.

“Those were all nicknames the plays gave him. But apparently, he has done everything depicted in them,” Shirin said calmly, then added, “He’s not just a star battleball player. I heard he defeated the Nue in Wa, exterminated the bandits plaguing Kuwol, and joined the expedition team in the Windswept Dunes. He’s like your father, a legendary hero.”

“But he doesn’t look like much of a hero,” Yuhette muttered, and Friede nodded in agreement.

“Dad always says the greatest people put on the least airs. The fact that he doesn’t look impressive is what makes him impressive, probably.”

Though they were still kids, Friede and the others were already learning how to size people up. Even if he didn’t act all self-important, Friede could see glimpses of what made him so great.

Woroy must have heard their conversation, since he turned to them with a smile and said, “Truly great men are those like your fathers. I’m still far too inexperienced. If I don’t grow with this city, I won’t be able to keep up with them at all.”

That wasn’t just him being humble or an attempt to flatter the kids; Woroy truly believed that from the bottom of his heart. Friede could tell from the smell coming off of him. *Yeah, he’s definitely amazing then*, she thought to herself.

Woroy led everyone to a nearby bench and got them some lemonade. Shatina and Firnir came over as well.

“I can’t believe Veight sent his daughter here now of all times,” Woroy muttered, and Shatina nodded.

“It’s because he’s a worrywart. But no matter how old I get, it feels nice to know Master’s worried about us.”

“Oh yeah, I know what you mean! I love it when he tells me I’m such a pain to look after.”

“Uh, you really should fix that, Fir,” Shatina said with a sigh, then smiled at the kids. “The thing is, there’s going to be a special council session here in a few days. And you all have permission to attend.”

“We do?” Yuhette asked, her eyes widening in surprise. Shatina nodded.

“That’s the main purpose of this field trip. It’s best if you get used to the world of politics sooner rather than later. You never know when you may have to inherit your parents’ positions. I ended up becoming viceroy when I was really young myself.”

Everyone knew that Zaria's previous viceroy, Shatina's father, had been assassinated by the Senate. One of the stories about the Black Werewolf King was how he'd crushed the old Senate to avenge Shatina's father. Of course, the truth was that Eleora had destroyed the Senate when she'd invaded, but the citizens all believed the true cause was that they'd invoked Veight's wrath.

A few days later, the council convened. By this time, Friede and the others had gotten used to living in Doneiks, and they were excited for the council meeting. They got ready for it in Woroy's manor, which was where they'd been staying.

"My heart's pounding..."

"Remember, Friede, you need to stay quiet during the meeting."

"I know, I know."

Doneiks's stadium doubled as an emergency shelter and as a fortress, but it also served as the perfect venue for a council meeting.

Shortly after Friede and the others arrived there, Woroy's aide, the Sword Saint Barnack, walked in and said, "Lord Myurei, Lotz's viceroy, has arrived." He carried himself like a warrior, despite his age.

"Oh, just on time. Let him through."

Woroy nodded, and a nervous-looking young man stepped into the room.

"Lord Woroy, my apologies for reaching the city so late last night."

Myurei's movements were stiff, but Woroy gave him a reassuring smile and said, "It's only natural for plans to go awry when you're covering such a long distance. Lotz is on the southern tip of Meraldia; it would have been perfectly understandable if you were late. Back when I was fighting with Veight, he messed with my plans enough to know how it feels."

"I'm sorry. I'll be sure to leave with more time to spare for the next meeting," Myurei said, looking relieved. Myurei had been part of Meraldia University's first graduating class, and his accomplishments had been so great that his portrait was hanging in the university library. During his time as a student, he'd

been fond of giving speeches, and his dashing good looks had made him popular with the ladies. But he was the youngest viceroy in Meraldia, so he was affording his elders a healthy amount of respect.

“You’ll need to learn how to act properly once you become a viceroy too, Friede,” Shirin whispered.

“But I already know how to act properly...”

“You really don’t.”

The two of them started arguing in heated whispers. Before they could cause a commotion, Yuhette put a hand on both of their shoulders to calm them down. Meanwhile, the other viceroys continued to trickle in, along with their aides. Some members of the demon army showed up as well. All told, there were forty people in the room. And then at the very end, the Demon Lord herself made her entrance.

“Her Majesty, Demon Lord Airia Lutt Aindorf!” a small canine shouted, announcing her arrival.

She stepped into the room, along with her husband and vice-commander, Veight. Behind the two of them were Kite, Kurtz, and a few other members of the demon army. They were all Veight’s friends, which meant Friede recognized them as well. But she hadn’t seen them ever look this serious before. It was a surprise to see this side of them.

Airia and Veight glanced over at Friede and gave her a brief smile, but that was all. They headed towards their seats, expressions still serious. She wanted to wave to them, but she’d been taught since she was little not to bring private affairs into a public space. So she fought the instinct and sat still. *I’m definitely going to play with them later though!* she thought to herself. And then, the meeting began.



Woroy announced the start of the meeting and Ryuunie, who was serving as the meeting's secretary, got to his feet. He was Woroy's aide now, and everyone assumed he would be the next viceroy of Doneiks once Woroy retired.

"As mentioned in the letters sent out to everyone, today's meeting is about the Holy Empire of Rolmund. There have been a number of rebellions in the past decade, and each one has caused Blast Canes from Rolmund to flow into Meraldia."

Friede and the others hadn't received those letters, so Mao gave them the context they needed: "Empress Eleora is known for being a merciful and kind ruler, but she has a policy of coming down hard on rebels. Most of them flee across the mountains when their revolts fail."

"I was told those mountains were impassable. Is it really feasible to march over them?" Shirin asked, surprised.

"Three hundred years ago, a bunch of escaped slaves made the journey on foot, in midwinter," Mao said with a smile. "There are a few man-made passes through the mountains, though they're still treacherous."

Ryuunie continued his speech while Mao whispered an explanation to the kids. "Ambassador Ashley has asked the empress to do something about these runaway rebels, but her response was 'they've been stripped of their imperial citizenship, and thus are not our responsibility.'"

Ryuunie gave a sardonic smile at that, and the councilors smiled back at him. Everyone knew that Woroy and Ryuunie had been stripped of their imperial citizenship for the same reasons.

Feeling a little self-conscious, Ryuunie added, "Lord Veight set a precedent by accepting exiled Rolmundians in the past, so it's difficult to request that Empress Eleora stop sending them our way."

Everyone turned to Veight, who awkwardly scratched his head.

"I just didn't want to let valuable human resources go to waste..."

"Seeing as we're trying to grow our population, I think it's for the best that

Meraldia places an emphasis on protecting refugees,” Airia said with a smile, backing up her husband. “So long as they respect our laws, I see no reason for us to turn away those fleeing Rolmund.”

The other viceroys nodded, respecting the Demon Lord’s opinion. Friede was making sure to keep pace with the conversation, but she also paid extra attention to how her parents were acting. They were never like this at home. When she’d been younger she had no idea what her parents’ jobs entailed, but now she was getting to see firsthand. It reminded her once again just how cool her mom and dad were.

The main topic of the meeting was how to deal with the problem Rolmund had dumped on Meraldia. It was mostly Woroy, Ryuunie, and some of the other exiled Rolmund nobles who did the talking; the viceroys stuck to asking questions.

Eventually, Veight stood up and said, “Until now, our relationship with Rolmund has been one of mutual non-interference, but there’s a limit to how long we can maintain that policy. At some point, we need to expand our diplomatic efforts.”

“Indeed.”

The northern viceroys nodded in agreement.

“The Empire is still Meraldia’s greatest threat...”

“We cannot continue to ignore each other. Our cultures and political systems may be radically different, but invading the Empire and annexing it isn’t a feasible solution. Which means...” Veight trailed off, sweeping his gaze across the room. “We need to work through our differences and build an amicable relationship. I think that’s our only viable option.”

The councilors nodded silently.

“I suspect Eleora is thinking the same thing,” Veight added. “It’ll be to our benefit if we’re proactive about rebuilding relations. Of course, it’s too soon to be thinking of signing a military alliance, or any large-scale trade deals, but we can at least start by relaxing border control on both sides and agreeing to cultural and technological exchanges.”

Woroy grinned and replied, “Good idea. Eleora’s a skilled mage as well as a genius engineer. She’s a scholar at heart, so there’s no way she’ll refuse a technological exchange.”

Woroy was Eleora’s cousin, and he knew her well. He was also Meraldia’s trump card when it came to negotiating with Rolmund.

His smile turned devious and he said, “I see you haven’t changed one bit, Veight. Always dangling juicy bait in front of your rivals to get them to do what you want.”

“It’s simply smart policy to suggest something that benefits both sides. Please don’t make it sound like I’m trying to trick her,” Veight said, sounding wounded, and everyone laughed.

Night came to the ever-expanding city of Doneiks. It was surprisingly quiet at this time.

“Once Friede gets started, she won’t stop talking. I had to foist her off onto Airia,” I said with a sigh as I walked into Woroy’s study. He was sitting at a table in front of the fireplace, a glass of whiskey in his hands.

He gave me a sympathetic smile and said, “That just shows how much she’s learned on this trip. Going to unfamiliar territory pushes people to grow.”

“I know that all too well.” I nodded a few times, and Woroy took a sip from his silver glass. *Reincarnating into a new world had been quite the ordeal...*

“This is Friede’s first time leaving Ryunheit, right? Ryuunie was a lot like her when he first got to Meraldia.”

“It’s been ten years since then. Time really flies. Now Ryuunie’s one of Meraldia’s young stars.”

“Yeah, you have no idea how proud I am. Anyway, take a seat.” Woroy motioned to the chair across from him and I sat down in it. “Want a drink?”

“I suppose I can since I’m done with work for the day.”

“You take your work far too seriously.”

I don’t wanna hear that from you, I mentally quipped.

The two of us silently sipped our whiskey for a bit. It was a comfortable silence. We'd known each other for over a decade now. I could have brought up a topic to discuss, but I already knew what his responses to anything I might say would be. Woroy was probably thinking the same thing. We just enjoyed each other's company while listening to the crackling of the fire and savoring our drinks.

Back on Earth, I'd read somewhere that true friends were ones you could enjoy silence with. If that was true, it meant Woroy was a true friend. *Strange to think that we were once enemies.* I glanced over at him, and he gave me a knowing smile.

"Think we were thinking the same thing again?"

"I must be getting old if I keep reminiscing about the past. I'll never forget that one winter I spent in Rolmund."

"Me neither, Black Werewolf King."

He grabbed the whiskey bottle, and I wordlessly handed him my glass. Once he'd poured my drink, I offered to do the same for him, but he just poured his own.

"Don't worry, I'm getting old too. In fact, I'm thinking it's about time I retired."

"Are you serious? You're not even forty yet."

"Ryuunie's growth is staggering. I want to give him the position of viceroy sooner rather than later so he can build up more experience. Besides..." Woroy smiled. "He'll be more popular with women if he's a viceroy instead of a viceroy's aide."

"Do you not know anything about your nephew?" I asked, nonplussed. "He's the most eligible bachelor in Meraldia right now. Girls would kill for the chance to marry him. In fact, when I was his teacher, his popularity actively caused problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"All of my female students pestered me for advice on how to win his heart."

They were so persistent that I had no time for my research.”

They were probably hoping a married man would be able to give good romantic advice, but I was the last person you wanted to ask for dating tips.

Woroy grinned at me and said, “All Doneiks men are handsome. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised Ryuunie had the Meraldian ladies swooning over him.”

“You’re pretty popular yourself.”

At first glance, Woroy looked like a womanizer, and while he was fond of women, he took his relationships very seriously. The Doneiks family had strict values regarding loyalty to whoever you were courting. That said, Woroy wasn’t lying when he said the men of his family were all handsome. More than once had duels been fought because too many girls had fallen for the same Doneiks heir. *Though, Woroy’s still single.*

“Woroy, I’ve heard you still have quite a few potential suitors. Are you just not interested in any of them?”

“I want to focus on raising Ryuunie for now.”

“He’s in his mid-twenties now. He’s a fully-fledged adult.”

“Perhaps so, but I still can’t take my eyes off him. He has a penchant for getting into danger.”

Weren’t you just talking about how impressed you were by his growth? What an overprotective uncle. As I opened my mouth to argue, I realized something. Normally I’d never pry this deeply into someone else’s personal life, but we were close enough that I felt comfortable saying this. Still, I knew I had to be careful about how I phrased this.

“Are you afraid of getting married? Or rather... Are you afraid of finding happiness?”

Woroy’s hand stopped, his glass halfway to his mouth. I glanced at his face with trepidation, but he was just smiling sadly.

“I can’t hide anything from you. Did you figure that out with your werewolf nose?”

“Nah. Think of it as a hunch for a longtime friend.”

“I just can’t win, huh?”

Woroy scratched his head, looking like a child who’d been caught playing a prank. He put his glass down and looked out the window at the night sky.

“I’m a failure. I wasn’t able to protect my territory. My family. Or my honor...”

“That’s not as true as you think. You saved the lives of your nephew, many of your retainers, and the nobles who were part of your faction.”

“No, you’re the one who saved their lives.” Woroy shook his head. “If you weren’t interested in sparing us, we would have all died.”

“I mean, I was just acting in Meraldia’s best interests. It was a political decision.”

He smiled at that. “But you’re the one who made sure our survival would actually be of value to Meraldia, right?”

Can’t deny that, I thought.

Woroy fed another log to the fire and muttered quietly, “Hey, Veight, is there any value in me finding happiness?”

“Of course there is. Are you an idiot?”

“I am. If I was smart, either my dad or my brother would be sitting on Rolmund’s throne right now.”

Hearing his words, I wasn’t sure if that would be a good thing or not.

Woroy was probably thinking the same thing since he added, “I realize the Empire is at peace now, even if it’s not an ideal one. There haven’t been any famines in recent years either. I’m not going to say I’m glad I lost, but I don’t think Eleora’s done a bad job as empress.”

“Then isn’t it fine to just forget about the past? You’re a hero in Meraldia. No one’s going to fault you for living however you please.”

Despite my insistence, Woroy grinned and said, “I don’t want to hear that from you—the guy who’s achieved more than any man alive, but is content staying a vice-commander.”

Yeah, but I like being a vice-commander. I’d explained as much to people in

the past, but no one ever believed me, so I'd given up on trying to convince anyone. Instead I replied, "Back during the civil war, I sincerely didn't want you to die. It didn't matter if you were my enemy, or that you weren't even Meraldian. I thought it would be a waste if a man of your caliber died."

"Now you're just exaggerating."

"And now, I sincerely want you to be happy. What would have been the point of rescuing you if you're just going to keep denying yourself any joy in life?" I said it in a joking tone to take the sting out of my words. I grabbed my glass and took a sip while keeping an eye on Woroy's expression.

"In that case, tell me one thing, Black Werewolf King. Was I... Was I able to become a great man?"

Are you kidding me? Do you have any idea how much you've achieved?

"If you don't qualify as a great man, then no one alive does. Do you have any self-awareness?" I said in exasperation.

"You are the last person I want to hear that from," Woroy retorted, picking up his glass. "But I guess if you really think I've achieved greatness, then I suppose I can hold my head high as a member of the Doneiks family."

If you ask me, future historians are going to pay a lot more attention to what you did than your father or brother. So let your guilt go and be proud of what you've done. After that, the topic shifted to Friede's trip to Doneiks. Woroy had a lot to say about her and her friends.

"Never thought I'd see the day a dragonkin, the granddaughter of a Sonnenlicht bishop, and a half-demon would become best friends. It was heartwarming to see them all together." Woroy paused for a moment before continuing. "I think Friede's generation is the one where we'll truly see humans and demons come together to build a better future for Meraldia."

"Yeah. If you take just the human population, Meraldia's much smaller than Rolmund. But if you include demons into the mix, then we've got a sizable population. If Rolmund ever invades in the future, we'll be in a much better position to stop them."

We had plenty of new tricks up our sleeves—like the fungoid warriors' poison

spores—that Rolmund would never expect.

“I doubt Eleora’s interested in expanding Rolmund’s territory, but the Empire’s a complex beast. She might be pressured into fighting us someday. Besides, there’s no guarantee her successor’ll be as smart as her.”

“No matter what criteria you use to choose your successors, it’s hard to make a perfect system,” I said with a sigh. There were no absolutes when it came to dealing with humans. “But that’s exactly why I want to foster the kind of relationship that’ll make it difficult for us to attack each other. I want Rolmund to be a friendly neighbor to Meraldia a hundred or even a thousand years from now.”

Woroy let out a sigh of his own. “A thousand years from now, huh? The fact that you’re thinking that far ahead proves how different you are from the rest of us.”

I just happen to know how another world’s history went down. It’s not my fault I’m seeing parallels in this world. I shook my head and said lightly, “It’s something I’ve been thinking about since Friede was born. I want her to be able to choose her own path in life. My job as her father is to make sure she has as many choices and opportunities as possible.”

Some life paths could only be chosen if the world was at peace, and some jobs only came into existence when most of society was well-off.

“I think now I understand why your brother—why Ivan was in such a rush.”

Ivan had lost his wife, and he himself was struggling with a terminal illness. He’d been worried about the future of the Empire, and what would happen to his son, which was why he’d revolted. But his rebellion failed, and he ended up ruining the Doneiks name. The only surviving male members of the Doneiks family now were Woroy and Ryuunie. And both of them had been stripped of their right to the throne and exiled.

“Just looking at the results, you might be tempted to believe Ivan made the wrong choice...” I said pensively. “But if I’d been in his position, I might have made the exact same mistakes. It’s something I’ve been thinking about recently.”

Normally, parents die before their children. After which their kids had to survive on their own. This was why most parents wanted to do something to make sure their kids would be fine even after they were gone. Unfortunately, sometimes the actions they took backfired, like they had for Ivan.

Woroy stared at me for a few seconds, then said in a serious voice, "Please don't ever make those mistakes."

"I can't make any promises. After all, I've been making mistakes my whole life."

"Yeah, right," he said sarcastically as I took another sip of whiskey.

I smiled at him and said, "That's why I need you around to keep me on the right path, Woroy."

"If anything, you're the one always setting me straight, not the other way around..." he muttered. But then he smiled back and said, "Well, if you ever actually need my help, I'll be there. You can count on it."

He threw back his glass and downed his whiskey in one big gulp.

—The Empress's Command—

Friede and her friends were in the stadium, stuck listening to Myurei's stories like they had been for the past few days.

"So then, Ryuunie told the story of his past to the Kuwol Noble Council, and called for unity!" Myurei pumped his fist in the air, getting more heated with each word. "You know, his dad and his grandpa died in a rebellion, and he was exiled from his homeland. Normally that'd make you bitter and vengeful, right?"

Yuhette nodded solemnly. "Yes. The hearts of men are weak, after all."

Myurei smiled, glad that he'd gotten the response he wanted. "Exactly. But Ryuunie wasn't bound by the specters of his past. He's always been looking forward, thinking of how to make himself and the people around him happy. Amazing, right?"

This time Friede nodded. "Yeah!"

Meanwhile, Shirin just sighed. This wasn't the first time Myurei had told this story. In fact, he talked about Ryuunie every chance he got. Shirin had a better memory than most people, so being told the same story over and over grated on him quite a bit. But Myurei was too engrossed with his own performance to notice.

"The Kuwolese nobles had just been thinking about themselves, but the vagabond prince's pleas moved them. It was thanks to Ryuunie that they decided to work together to raise the newborn prince of Kuwol."

He grinned, proud of how he'd presented the story. Just then, Ryuunie walked over.

"Are you still telling people that story? Also, what you said isn't even strictly true." He sat down next to Myurei and said, "My appeal didn't work. In the end, it was Mao and Professor Parker who convinced them. Please don't distort the truth like that, Myurei."

Ryuunie glared at Myurei, but he was unfazed.

"Yeah, but now you'd be able to convince all of Kuwol's nobles to swear fealty to you if you had to."

"You think way too highly of me..."

"Surely you are going to be the next Demon Lord, after all," Myurei said casually. "Master Gomoviroa didn't stay Demon Lord for long, and Lady Airia doesn't plan to either. She even said it was about time she started thinking of who the next Demon Lord would be."

Ryuunie sighed and shook his head. "Obviously Veight's going to be the next Demon Lord."

This time Myurei sighed and shook his head. "No, there's no way he'll take the job."

"Yeah, I don't think dad's going to be the next Demon Lord," Friede chimed in, nodding along. Shirin nodded as well.

Myurei patted Ryuunie on the shoulder and said, "Which is why you're gonna be the next Demon Lord, Ryuunie."

“Well, I don’t want the job. Why don’t you do it instead?”

Myurei’s expression turned serious. “Because I want to be your vice-commander. The Demon Lord’s *Vice-Commander*.”

Ryuunie seemed taken aback by that, and after a brief silence, he changed the subject. “By the way, Myurei, don’t you need to head back to Lotz soon? Who’s taking care of things while you’re gone?”

“Don’t worry, I made sure things will keep running smoothly even in my absence. I told my substitute to pass along anything that needs my immediate attention by express kentauros mail.”

Ryuunie sighed and placed a hand on Myurei’s shoulder. “Well, go back tomorrow. If you don’t, I’ll tell everyone about the time you tried to drink from the Mejire river.”

“What?! Not cool! I...” Myurei started to protest, then stopped when he saw how intently the kids were listening. “I’ll go back tomorrow...”

“Good.”

Smiling, Ryuunie turned back to Friede and the others. “Now then, Friede, Shirin, Yuhette. The council has requested that the three of you join the delegation headed to Rolmund.”

The three children exchanged surprised glances.

“But, um, shouldn’t someone of higher standing go on a mission like this?”

“You’re the Demon Lord’s daughter, Friede. You are that someone of higher standing,” Shirin said, then turned to Ryuunie. “Lord Ryuunie, we’ve only just graduated from the elementary course. Our education is still incomplete, and we’ll likely just be a burden. Are you sure you want us to come?”

“The fact that you’re worried you’ll drag the team down proves the three of you are more than capable of handling yourselves. Self-awareness alone goes a long way.” Ryuunie laid a reassuring hand on Shirin’s shoulder. “This is confidential, but it’s actually Empress Eleora who requested your presence. She wants to meet the Black Werewolf King’s daughter and her friends.”

“Ah, so I’m just an extra,” Shirin said, breathing a sigh of relief. Meanwhile,

Friede looked shocked.

“Me? The Empress wants to meet *me*?”



Ryuunie snickered and said, “You’re the daughter of one of the empress’s closest friends. Don’t worry, her interest in you is an extension of her interest in Veight. I doubt she’s expecting much from you personally. Oh, one more thing...” He stood up a little straighter and narrowed his eyes. “Empress Eleora wants to see just how serious Veight is about opening up this cultural and technological exchange. She wants to know if he’s invested enough that he’s willing to take his daughter if asked.”

Yuhette scratched her cheek awkwardly. “I guess that means Friede can’t refuse even if she wants to... Poor girl.”

Friede whirled around and exclaimed, “Hey, wait, you’re coming too! I’m not going alone, you hear?”

Yuhette grinned and replied, “Of course. The Sonnenlicht Order came from Rolmund; I would never miss a chance to visit the land of our origin.”

“I wish you’d say you’re coming because you’re my friend...” Friede muttered, and Shirin put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

A few days before the details of our trip to Rolmund were finalized, a rare visitor had come to Rynheit.

“Long time no see, Lord Veight,” Ashley, Rolmund’s prince and ambassador to Meraldia, said with a smile and a bow as he walked in. He had been Rolmund’s emperor, but he lost to Eleora in the political arena and abdicated the throne. Now he lived in Krauchen and worked as a diplomat.

Veight and Ashley sat down across from each other, both of them smiling.

“It’s nice to see you again, Ashley. Are your wife and daughter doing well?”

“They’re both in good health. My daughter has finally started learning how to talk. It’s so cute how she says ‘dwaddy,’” Ashley said cheerfully.

“Your wife is from the Kastoniev family, right?” Veight asked.

“Yes, it was a political marriage. The Empire’s way of keeping me on a leash.” Judging by Ashley’s candid tone, he didn’t seem to mind that. “At first I was wary of her, but then I learned she was a kind, intelligent woman who also loves horticulture. There was no escaping then. Not only has she cultivated new

species of crops, but she's also done extensive research on how best to cook and preserve them. I couldn't ask for a better wife."

"If you came here to brag about your wife then I'd be glad to brag about mine as well, but..."

Ashley blushed and replied, "I'm sorry."

Veight's expression turned grim and he said, "The previous Lord Kastoniev was a stalwart ally and a friend. But now, the Kastonievs are our political rivals." But then Veight smiled again and added, "That being said, I'm sure Lord Kastoniev was thinking of you when he picked out your wife. After all, you'd spent all your time buried in your agricultural research without ever attending any social functions."

"I always thought that married life was not for me, but..." Ashley trailed off, blushing even deeper. Veight smiled briefly, but then lapsed into thought.

"If relations between Rolmund and Meraldia deteriorate, it will hurt you the most, Ashley. After all, your wife is a distant relative of Eleora."

"Yes, it would be a rather uncomfortable position for me. I imagine that was what Lord Kastoniev was after," Ashley replied with a nod.

Veight nodded back and said, "For all intents and purposes, you're basically a Meraldian, but unlike Woroy, you haven't actually been exiled from your homeland."

Ashley had abdicated willingly, so he hadn't lost his status. Indeed, he was technically employed by Rolmund, not by Meraldia.

He gave Veight an awkward smile and said, "Which is why I would very much like it if you'd be willing to listen to my request."

"Of course. I have no desire to see your family torn apart." Veight let out a small sigh. "I'm just worried my daughter might not be up to the task."

Ashley patted Veight's hand reassuringly. "You worry too much. Woroy told me Friede is already a reliable young ambassador."

"I know. But it's a parent's nature to worry about their kids no matter how old they get."

“Hahaha, can’t argue with that. I’m as much of a worrywart with my own daughter.” Ashley took out a portrait of his daughter and showed it to Veight. “I hope that one day, this girl will become a bridge between Rolmund and Meraldia. For that to happen, though, we need Friede’s help.”

“All right. It’s going to be a big responsibility, but I guess I can entrust it to her.”

Veight looked up at Ashley, and the two of them smiled at each other.

Extra Chapter: The Secrets of Doneiks City

There have been a number of Rolmundians who have left their mark on Meraldia's history. One is Woroy Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund, the second son of Lord Doneiks, the ruler of North Rolmund. He was once an imperial prince with a claim to the throne, but because of his brother's rebellion, he was branded a traitor and exiled from his home. He went to Meraldia and became a councilor on the Commonwealth Council. To the people of Meraldia, he is known by many names.

The Exiled Prince. The White Tiger. The Spear Knight. The Black Werewolf King's Sworn Friend. The Lord of Expansion. But now there is one title that has become much more popular than the rest: The Viceroy of Doneiks, the Battleball City.

After the civil war in Rolmund, Woroy was exiled along with his nephew, Ryuunie. This is a story from his early days in Meraldia...

Woroy crossed his arms and looked up at the sky above Ryunheit. *I've visited all the cities in Meraldia, but they're all vastly different from Rolmund's.* The climate, culture, laws, technology, and economy of Meraldia was completely contrary to Rolmund's. But Woroy had been tasked with the monumental duty of building a new city in this new land. It would have been hard enough to construct a new city in his homeland, but it was nigh impossible to do it in a foreign country. However, Woroy was brimming with eagerness despite the difficulties that lay ahead. *I can't allow the Doneiks name to remain tarnished forever.*

Back in Rolmund, the Doneiks family name was synonymous with rebellion. From now on, Woroy, Ryuunie, and all of their descendants would have to live in Meraldia. But in Meraldia, the Doneiks name meant nothing. In the public eye, Woroy was just a freeloader living off of the goodwill of the Commonwealth Council. However, if he succeeded in building a city, it and the

surrounding land would belong to the Doneiks family. He would be able to regain his status as a noble, albeit in Meraldia. *Failure is not an option. But I've already lost fights I couldn't afford to lose. Will I finally be able to succeed this time?*

Just then, the Black Werewolf King walked over to Woroy. Everyone in Meraldia knew Veight to be a master general who'd served three generations of Demon Lords, as well as being the legendary Hero slayer. He was also the only man who'd ever defeated Woroy in a battle.

"Why do you look so glum, Woroy?"

Veight had succeeded in putting the pro-Meraldia Eleora on Rolmund's throne. Originally, Eleora had been dispatched to Meraldia to conquer it. But after defeating her, Veight had won Eleora over to his side, and ultimately made her empress. *Veight's the most terrifying man I know.* The only reason Woroy and Ryuunie were still alive was because Veight disliked needless bloodshed. But not only had Veight spared Woroy, he respected the exiled prince as well.

I don't think I'm worth half as much as Veight seems to believe though. He's a weird one. While they may have started out as enemies, Veight and Woroy were now good friends.

Woroy gave Veight a wan smile and said, "I was just thinking about how I'm going to make my city."

"You don't have to worry about funding. I'll negotiate with the council to make sure you have as big a budget as you need."

While that was reassuring to hear, it wasn't what was weighing on Woroy's mind. "I'm not even at the part where I'm worrying about money yet," he said with a shake of his head.

Veight sat down on the chair next to Woroy, a thoughtful look on his face.

"Then what is it?"

"Well..." Woroy sat down as well. "I'm a former prince of Rolmund. I'm sure all of northern Meraldia's viceroys are wary of me."

"They are, yes."

Veight didn't bother sugar-coating his words and gave Woroy the unvarnished truth. Woroy really liked that about Veight.

Veight let out a small sigh and added, "The people of northern Meraldia are descended from slaves who escaped from the Rolmund Republic, after all. Many of them are worried if Rolmund's influence grows they'll end up as slaves, just like their ancestors."

"It doesn't help that our tomboy princess Eleora is hard at work revitalizing the empire," Woroy joked, which got a smile out of Veight. The one who was responsible for that was none other than himself. But he didn't seem proud of the fact that he'd managed to put a captured princess on the throne.

Woroy also liked how humble Veight was about his achievements. Spending time with him was relaxing.

"Anyway, the point is I'm going to have to be very careful about what I say and do, especially if I'm going to be the leader of a new city. If I'm not careful about the layout, people will start to suspect I harbor a secret desire to conquer northern Meraldia."

Veight didn't respond immediately, taking some time to think about what Woroy had said. After he'd thought things through he muttered, "If you make your city too fortified, it could be used as a military base..."

"Exactly. If I build high walls and a fortified castle, the northern viceroys will feel as though there's a blade poised to strike at their throats."

But at the same time, Woroy had to make his city defensible. Bandits, beasts, and rogue demons would raid it endlessly if it wasn't. No one would want to live in a city that wasn't well-protected. Yet, if he made his city as fortified as the average Rolmund settlement, people would think he was plotting rebellion. A well-planned, well-fortified city could withstand a siege for years.

Veight folded his arms and said, "Your city is going to be built in the buffer zone between northern and southern Meraldia. If you ended up allying yourself with Rolmund, northern Meraldia would be caught in a pincer attack."

"Yep. Of course, I have no plans of doing that, and an exiled prince like me doesn't even have the authority to command Rolmund's armies. I doubt Eleora

has any desire to invade again either. It's highly unlikely that northern Meraldia's going to get attacked, but..."

"It's human nature to be suspicious, right?"

"Correct."

Despite being a werewolf, Veight had a very good grasp of what humans were like. That was part of what made him such a terrifying man to fight. Woroy had that lesson beaten into him when he'd faced Veight on the battlefield. *I wonder if he can tell what I'm thinking about right now... Well, he can probably tell and is just pretending not to have noticed, knowing him.*

"Seeing as you've already given this quite a bit of thought, I imagine you've come up with a solution," Veight said nonchalantly.

You can see right through me, huh? Woroy's problem wasn't that he hadn't been able to come up with a solution. He just wasn't sure his solution was a good one. He scratched his head awkwardly and came clean to Veight.

"Yeah. I was thinking of making the city garrison as small as possible and focusing on commerce."

"That's not a bad idea."

"The more fortified I make the city's defenses, the harder it will be for merchants to come and go. In which case, it might be better to just forgo defense entirely and go all-in on trade."

Veight smiled and said, "If you establish yourself as a major trade center, the northern viceroys will be forced to do business with you or miss out on profits."

"Exactly. But I'm pretty sure the number of trade routes in Meraldia will increase with time. If all I have going for me is that I'm the midpoint between one of them, my city won't stay relevant for long."

The addition of even a single highway radically changed the trade landscape of a nation.

"There's no denying that." Veight nodded, acknowledging Woroy's concern. "The council's going to be embarking on a major infrastructure overhaul in the near future too."

“Yeah, and that’s why I’m worried about how to plan out my city.”

“You always ask for advice on the toughest problems,” Veight grumbled, running his hand through his hair. “If you really want advice, I recommend asking the southern viceroys. They all managed to find unique solutions to the roadblocks the Senate placed in their way.” Veight folded his arms. “Actually, I know the exact person you should go to. Forne managed to make Veira into an economic powerhouse despite his city being in the middle of nowhere.”

“Forne is the one who wears those funny outfits, right?”

And talks in a high-pitched voice, and wears jewelry, yes, Veight thought. But he also knew that Forne had continued to expand Veira, even under the immense pressure the Senate put on him. In fact, part of the reason he dressed himself up so flamboyantly was to advertise Veira’s wares. He’d once told Veight, “If these clothes and accessories can even look good on men, they’ll definitely look good on women.”

“Despite his outward appearance, Forne is a man among men. I think you’ll learn a lot from him,” Veight said firmly.

And so, Woroy ended up traveling to the city of craftsmen, Veira. Back when the Senate controlled Meraldia, Veira and the other southern cities were put under a lot of unfair restrictions. The southerners came from different ancestry than the northern ones, and the Senate was primarily made up of northern Meraldians. However, despite the restrictions, Veira had managed to build two sets of walls and numerous forts. It was the most well-defended city in the south.

“Those are some impressive walls, Lord Forne.”

“Oh, please. These aren’t walls, they’re art. A massive mural depicting Meraldia’s history,” Forne said with a chuckle, causing Woroy to grin.

“So that’s how you got the Senate to approve their construction?”

“Indeed. Those buildings scattered outside the city are open-air theaters, not forts or lookout towers.”

“I saw them on my way here and I must say, it’s a sturdy defensive line. If

anyone tried to invade, I imagine Veira would be able to give them a rousing performance.”

Any potential invader would need to capture all of the “open-air theaters” around the city or they’d be constantly harassed from the rear. But if they focused their efforts on the forts one at a time, soldiers from the city and from the other forts could incessantly raid the invading army. It was a cleverly designed layout.

Forne stared at Woroy for a few seconds, then asked, “Is something on your mind, Prince Woroy?”

“Please, drop the title and just call me Woroy. I’m no prince anymore.”

“Heh, all right. So what’s on your mind, Woroy?”

Woroy went on to explain his worries regarding the city he’d been tasked to build, trying not to get distracted by the scent of Forne’s perfume.

“I see, that is quite a difficult position you’re in,” Forne mused, crossing his arms. “There are two ways to make a city prosper. One is through the trade of tangible goods, while the other relies on selling an abstract concept.”

“Veira does both, correct? You sell high-quality craftwork as well as immaterial things like plays.”

“Yes. Though it’s mostly thanks to Veight that our plays took off.” Forne awkwardly scratched his cheek. “That being said, I’m not sure what industry you can kick-start in the Fetid Wastes. Part of it’s going to depend on the location you choose, but the demands of the region and the personnel you manage to recruit matter as well.”

“That’s a good point. I still haven’t thought about who I want on my staff.”

Woroy had no idea what the demands of the region were. He’d done a fair amount of research on the hobbies and interests of people in Meraldia, but the country was evolving so fast that there was no telling what the next big thing was going to be.

“Well, as it is now, there’s a decent demand for entertainment in Meraldia.

Furthermore, since that's an immaterial product, you can work something out just by recruiting the right people. If you ask me, that's your safest bet," Forne said after giving it some thought.

"Hmm, entertainment, huh? I figure there's a demand for food, lumber, and ore as well, but starting up a mine or logging operation from scratch won't be easy."

Creating farms required first inspecting the soil and cultivating arable land. With mines and lumber mills, you had to worry about how you were going to transport the raw resources you extracted to actually sell them. Moreover, if there was low demand for the resource you chose to harvest, it wouldn't be very profitable. No matter how efficient you were, it would take at least a few years to get established in the resource trade. But entertainment was something you could sell to all of Meraldia in the span of a few months. Veight and Forne's little experiment with the Black Werewolf King plays had proved that.

"Entertainment..." Woroy muttered.

The only hobbies Woroy had dabbled in were those of the nobility. But hunting and horseback riding weren't exactly activities you could market to the common people. *I could start selling shougo boards and pieces, but I'm not sure I can really turn that into a business.* No other ideas came to him, and he let out a long sigh.

"The only thing I can think of that commoners might enjoy is gambling."

"There's no way our straight-laced friend is going to let you open a gambling den."

Veight didn't crack down on small, private-run gambling operations, but he didn't want the practice to spread, and he almost certainly wouldn't allow a state-run casino.

"He's definitely one of those no-fun-allowed types of scholars."

"The guy takes everything way too seriously. I'd be making a killing right now if he wasn't such a hard-ass."

Neither of them had said Veight's name out loud, but everyone on the council

knew how much of a stickler he was for the rules.

“So, what should I do?”

“Come up with some plays of your own?”

Woroy shook his head and replied, “No, that would cut into your profits. There’s a limit to how much the average person is willing to spend to go see plays. It’s not worth trying to compete for the same market.”

“My, you’re so considerate.”

“Besides, I have no way of recruiting top-class actors and playwrights.”

“Hehe, that is quite true.” Smiling, Forne added in a suggestive tone, “Meraldia’s southern citizens love plays and music. But the people of the north have a slightly different culture. I’m sure you must have noticed.”

“Yeah, I have. Jousting tournaments and other contests of strength are pretty popular in the north.” Woroy knew this because he’d signed up for Vongang’s jousting tournament and won the whole thing. “That reminds me, Rolmund used to have gladiators back when it was a republic. People loved watching duels at the arenas.”

Rolmundians loved duels even now. That was why when Veight had taken the dueling world by storm, the nobles had actually been excited, despite their outward displays of annoyance. Northern Meraldians shared cultural roots with Rolmundians, so it wasn’t surprising they also loved watching fights. *Instead of a theater, I could build a coliseum... That way I wouldn’t be overlapping with Veira. But at the same time, I need to come up with something that won’t overlap with Vongang’s jousting tournament either.* Woroy started mulling over the options in his head.

“Thank you, Forne, for pointing me in the right direction. I’ll let you know what I come up with.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Forne said with a smile.

Woroy now had an inkling of what he wanted to do, but there were still a lot of details he needed to hash out. On Veight’s recommendation, he had now

come to Zaria to ask its viceroy for advice.

“G-Good afternoon, Prince Woroy. It’s an honor to have you in our city,” Shatina said, her nervousness written all over her face. After her father had been assassinated by the Senate, she had no choice but to become a viceroy, despite how young she was. Fortunately, Veight agreed to teach her, and she had received a lot of helpful tips from him.

“Thank you for letting me in despite the suddenness of my visit. Sorry I came on such short notice, by the way. I figure since Veight told you to talk to me, you couldn’t refuse him?”

“O-Oh, no, I really do think it’s an honor you’re here! I’ve just never hosted a prince before so I’m a little nervous.”

“I’m no prince anymore, Shatina. Just a wandering exile living in disgrace.” The reason Woroy had come to Zaria was to learn from how the city had structured its defenses. “By the way, I heard from Veight that Zaria suffered the most under the Senate’s rule?”

“Indeed so. We weren’t allowed to build walls, which is why we had to design such an intricate and complicated city layout to keep it safe from beasts and bandits.”

Zaria, the labyrinth city, was a collection of tall, multistory buildings that crowded together. The upper floors of each building were made of sun-dried bricks, while the lower floors were sturdy stone. As they walked through the city, Shatina pointed out various parts of it to Woroy.

“The streets on the ground level are built like a maze to confuse intruders. The residents rarely use them. The upper levels of the buildings are connected by bridges, like the one we’re walking on right now.”

The ground below looked like the depths of the abyss. It was too dark to make anything out.

“There aren’t any regular entrances on the ground floor, only hidden ones and rope ladders leading up to the higher floors. The hidden entrances are all disguised so that only the citizens know about them, and there are numerous traps in place to repel invaders.”

Shatina puffed her chest out as she said that last bit. She was clearly proud of her home city.

Smiling, Woroy asked, "It sounds rather inconvenient. Doesn't it get in the way of people's daily lives?"

"It does, but it's a necessary evil. With no walls and a very small garrison, this is the only way we can defend ourselves."

"I see. Sorry for asking such a rude question, I was simply curious."

As he looked around at Zaria's labyrinthine layout, Woroy thought, *The city itself is one big fortress, of a sort. Luring enemies within and using the lay of the land to exterminate them is a solid strategy. But this also restricts people from coming and going too frequently. It's going to hurt growth in the long term.* There was no point in constructing a city like Zaria now. It had only been made because of the Senate's tyranny. With Meraldia the way it was now, building regular walls made more sense. But then Woroy thought back to what he'd seen in Veira.

Wait, I don't need to make all the buildings serve a defensive purpose. All I need is a single structure that works the same way as Veira's "open-air theaters." As long as it's big enough to house all the residents in times of crisis... Wait, I've got it! I just have to make the coliseum I'll build into a proper fortress! Woroy didn't want to surround his city with walls. That way, he could expand as necessary. He wouldn't have the development problems other fortress cities did. The coliseum would serve as an entertainment hub in times of peace, bringing wealth to the city. But in wartime, it would be a castle that could protect the citizens until reinforcements arrived.

It's cheaper to build a single castle than it is to erect miles of walls too. Plus, walls don't make any money whereas a coliseum will pay for itself. Best of all, a coliseum wouldn't make the northern viceroys wary. Woroy took in the view from Zaria's rooftops, glad that he'd found an elegant solution to all of his problems.

"I'm happy I came here today. Thank you for your advice, Shatina."

"U-Umm, I didn't really do much..." Shatina muttered, still a bit overwhelmed by how intimidating Woroy naturally looked. Still smiling, Woroy abruptly

changed the subject.

“By the way, how’s the Black Werewolf King, as a teacher?”

“Umm, I feel like he’s strict and lenient at the same time. It’s kind of hard to describe.”

“Hahaha, looks like he’s already mastered the art of teaching!”

The two of them continued talking about the things they liked about Veight, as well as all the complaints they had about him.

After leaving Zaria, Woroy prepared to go to Wa at the behest of Lotz’s viceroy, Petore. He was taking his loyal retainer, the Sword Saint Barnack, with him.

“My lord, is it really necessary to go all the way to this country on the other end of the world?” he grumbled.

“Yes, it is,” Woroy replied, packing as quickly as he could. “Meraldia’s climate is very different from North Rolmund’s. My city is going to be built in a pretty warm area where there won’t be much snow. I need to learn how cities in that climate are planned and built.”

“But surely visiting Meraldia’s southern cities should be enough for that?”

“That’s what I thought at first, but Veight said that Wa’s architecture is amazing.”

“You put too much stock in Lord Veight’s opinions, sir,” Barnack said with a sigh, but Woroy brushed him off.

“Of course I do. Men like him only show up once every hundred—no, every thousand years.”

“I will admit that he’s brave, intelligent, and kind, but...” Barnack trailed off and gave Woroy a wan smile.

Some time after Veight had been in Wa, Woroy departed as well. The land of Wa was full of novelties for Woroy. First, he helped some farmers plant rice, then after washing the mud off his clothes, he visited a local lord’s manor with

Veight. It was the largest building in the town, and after the two had eaten lunch they went out together to the front porch.

“It’s been a long time since I planted rice. It’s more tiring than I remember.”

I didn’t know Veight had experience growing rice, Woroy thought. Actually, wait, he did mention he tried growing some in Meraldia, didn’t he? It’s amazing how he knows so much about these mundane things despite being a skilled warrior.

“I spent all my time training and never once thought to learn about farming. Now that’s coming back to bite me. It was a valuable experience, going down and planting seeds, feeling the dirt for myself.”

“You really take everything you do seriously, huh?” Veight said with a chuckle.

“Like you’re one to talk.”

Woroy sat down on the floor and looked up at Wa’s blue sky. When he’d first come here, he’d been unwilling to sit on the floors, but he’d since learned that the people of Wa took their shoes off indoors and kept their floors clean.

“This is a very fertile land. Southern Meraldia is as well, but Wa has even more water than it does. Wouldn’t you agree, Veight?”

“Yeah. You can tell the architects took that into account when planning their cities too. Look at this wall over here, Woroy,” Veight said, beckoning to him.

“This mud wall looks crude at first glance, but it’s what keeps the rooms inside at a comfortable temperature.”

“How so?”

“In summer, it rains a lot, making it humid. However, the mud wall absorbs a lot of the moisture, and when it’s drier in the winter, that same moisture comes out to regulate the cold.”

Veight made it sound like casual trivia, but Woroy found it fascinating. “I see. So there’s a meaning to everything here.”

“Well, probably. I’m sure the local residents spent years figuring out what works and what doesn’t, after all. That being said, these designs can probably be optimized even further.”

“It’s so like you to immediately think about how to improve something.”

Veight valued traditional solutions to old problems, but he saw them as things to learn from and build on. He didn’t let himself be bound by the past or the present. He was always looking forward to the future. It was why Woroy was so drawn to him.

“Meraldia is a good deal warmer than Rolmund. Moreover, we get seasonal wind storms and lots of rain in the summer. You’ll need to design your city with all of that in mind,” Veight added.

He talks like a scholar... Well, I guess he is a scholar. Woroy mused while Veight kept talking.

“But at the same time, all the nobles who fled from Rolmund will be living there as well. I imagine you’ll want to make it look as Rolmundian as possible. I hope you can turn your city into one where everyone can be proud they live there.”

“Veight...” Woroy couldn’t believe that Veight had already thought that far ahead. Having been exiled from his homeland, Woroy was happy just to have a place to live, regardless of what it looked like. But Veight was considering whether or not Rolmundian architecture would make them feel less homesick. *He really does think of everything. This reminds me of the discussions I used to have with my dad.* Woroy’s heart was in the right place, but he had a tendency to overlook important things, which was why he valued Veight’s insight so much.

Seemingly realizing something else, Veight went on to say, “You know how roofs in Rolmund are sloped to keep snow from piling up on them? That’s something I’d like Meraldian architecture to adopt. So if you bring Rolmund styles over, that’ll be a boon for us too.”

“Will it really?”

“In Rolmund it’s done for practical purposes, but in Meraldia it’ll probably look like a stylish design choice. I think, anyway.”

“You’re not sure?”

Looking a little embarrassed, Veight replied, “I don’t know anything about art.

I'm one of those people who only cares about functionality."

"Hahahahaha!"

"Hey, don't laugh. Everyone's got things they're not good at."

"Yeah, I guess so. Sorry about that." Woroy stifled his laughter and turned to Veight. "You know, that's what makes you truly strong. You're willing to admit your weaknesses and listen to the advice of others. Honestly, it's amazing how open-minded you are. Even if I reincarnate after death, I don't think I'll ever hold a candle to you."

Veight awkwardly scratched his head and replied, "That's my line, Woroy."

He's good at most everything else, but he's awful at telling jokes, Woroy thought to himself.

As Woroy ran around the continent trying to learn as much as he could, he became keenly aware that his status as a foreigner would be a big obstacle.

"I'm terribly sorry, Sir Woroy, but we won't be able to dispatch our architects to your city."

"All of our construction workers are busy with other plans, so we have none to spare. My dearest apologies."

After a council meeting, Woroy asked the northern viceroys for help in recruiting personnel, but they all turned him away.

"I do want to help, but it's just not possible."

"It's fine, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to lend me your personal architects. There's no need to feel bad."

Though Woroy was all smiles during the meetings, he was getting more and more depressed on the inside. *They're all wary of me.* The northern viceroys were terrified Rolmund would invade them again. Though Woroy had been exiled, he still had contacts within the imperial family. The viceroys were all worried he might end up leaking their intel to Rolmund. Architects capable of large-scale urban planning tended to work directly under their respective viceroys for high salaries. They were important because they knew all of the

structural weaknesses of their cities.

Fortunately, Woroy was able to order raw materials with ease, even if he was having trouble securing personnel. The viceroys weren't so petty that they'd begrudge him material resources. Besides, as long as they were part of the Commonwealth Council, they couldn't go against the council's decisions. *There are independent architects who I could hire to build houses and shops and such, but I'm going to need someone with a lot of expertise to handle the bigger buildings like the coliseum, or general urban planning.* Only architects who had a deep understanding of economics and military affairs had the know-how necessary to plan city layouts.

Back in Rolmund Woroy could have easily found a dozen such people, but here in this foreign land, he didn't have the connections he needed. Veight and the others in the demon army had never built a city, so they had no urban planning specialists on hand either. Judging by their expressions, the northern viceroys did feel guilty about refusing to help, but they had their reasons.

"If you didn't need someone who also had an understanding of military affairs, I might have been able to find someone. But I'm afraid I can't dispatch anyone who meets your specifications."

"It's fine, I understand. If I was in your position I would do the same. There's no need to be sorry," Woroy replied with a sad smile. Just then Kurst, the viceroy of the agricultural city of Welheim, walked over. He was known to be a fair man, and was good friends with Forne.

"What seems to be the problem, Lord Woroy?"

"Oh, I'm just looking for architects to help me plan my new city. I've searched everywhere, but as expected, they're quite hard to find."

Kurst smiled and said, "In that case, why don't you take Welheim's architects?"

"You don't mind?" Woroy asked, surprised.

Kurst was a northern viceroy as well, and he wasn't particularly close to Woroy. In fact, Welheim was one of the cities that suffered the most when Eleora had invaded. Kurst had more reason to be wary of Woroy than most of

the others.

But he just smiled and said, "I've heard that you're a close friend of Lord Veight's. If our Black Werewolf King trusts you, then so do I."

So that's why. Kurst didn't necessarily trust Woroy personally, but he had faith in his guarantor, Veight. There was no one in Meraldia as famous as Veight. Moreover, everyone knew he was trustworthy.

"Thank you so much, Lord Kurst."

"Don't mention it. I owe Lord Veight a large debt, and this is just one way of repaying it."

"Oh, you too?"

"Yes. When Empress Eleora invaded Meraldia, Welheim was caught between the Empire and the Senate. Both sides were pressuring us to support them, but..."

"That must have been awful. Allow me to apologize in Eleora's stead."

Goddammit, Eleora, why did you have to be so good at your job?

"At the time, Lord Veight sympathized with our plight and advised me to join Rolmund's side."

"Oh?"

Normally, it was a foolish move to tell a neutral party to capitulate to the opposing side. Woroy knew a bit about negotiations from his upbringing. The only way you'd make a concession that big would be if you were getting something huge in return. But according to Kurst, Veight hadn't made any demands of either Rolmund or Welheim.

"That guy's unbelievable," Woroy muttered when he heard that.

"Hahaha, I know, right? I was surprised at first too. But..." Kurst gave Woroy a smile. "It was his generosity that moved me. That event was what convinced me he really is trying to look out for all of us."

"That's for sure. He has a knack for understanding other people's problems and working with them."

“I see you understand as well.”

Woroy nodded in response. “Of course. By all rights, I should have been executed and my corpse paraded around the capital as an example of what happens to rebels. It was Veight who saved me, using methods I didn’t even think were possible.”

Woroy knew Veight had gone out on a limb to save him. At that point, it would have been convenient for everyone but him if he’d just been executed for abetting his older brother. But Veight had gone out of his way to convince Eleora, Ashley, and his own council back in Meraldia that letting Woroy live was for the best.

Kurst’s smile grew wider and he said, “I see that Veight’s eye for people is as sharp as always. I’m afraid my architects are better at planning irrigation ditches and farmland than they are city walls, but I’m sure they’ll be of some use to you at least. Feel free to borrow them for as long as necessary.”

“Thank you so much,” Woroy said, bowing. His thanks was meant as much for Kurst as it was for Veight, who was off on another adventure.

Slowly but surely, materials and personnel started flowing Woroy’s way. He also decided on a site, allowing the building to start in earnest. First, the ground needed to be leveled and all the materials brought to the worksite. But as always, Woroy kept running into problem after problem. As a member of the Commonwealth Council, Woroy was granted a salary, just like all the other council members. That also technically made him a Meraldian noble, giving him the right to hire his own retainers and personal employees. Unfortunately, the retainers he’d chosen to employ were the problem.

“Wanna take this outside, ya bastard?!”

“You want a fight? You got one!”

Two heavily scarred men glared at each other, and the crowd—which was also made up primarily of rugged, scarred men—cheered. They were all former criminals or broke mercenaries—men who’d been shunned by Meraldian society. Woroy had met all of them while touring Meraldia. Some of them were even bandits who’d thought Woroy was an easy mark, only to have the tables

turned on them. They were now Woroy's sworn disciples. But the whole reason they hadn't been able to fit in normal society was their belligerence, and working for Woroy hadn't changed that. Woroy, who'd been inspecting the latest shipment of raw goods, ran over to mediate when he heard the two men's yelling.

"Hey, cut it out."

The two men calmed down at once.

"Oh, hey, boss. Look, this son of a bi—"

"Wait, boss, hear me out!"

Before the two of them could start arguing again, Woroy grabbed them both by the shoulders.

"Listen up, I'm not your bandit leader, and I'm not running a gambling den here either. But I am your employer. I'll hear you both out, but if either of you draws your weapons, you're both dead."

Woroy said those last words with such force that the room fell silent. To these men, violence had always been the first resort, not the last—that was why they'd been shunned from proper society. Woroy's retainers knew better than anyone just how strong he was. Some of them had personally had their asses handed to them after trying to rob him, and many others had learned after sparring with him.

The two men meekly explained their situation, taking care not to raise their voices. Woroy patiently heard them out, and when they were done he sighed.

"So it's a problem of honor."

"Y-Yeah," one of the men said, bowing his head. Honor had more value than gold to people who lived on the fringes of society. These men's honor determined how they would be treated by their peers, and it also served as a form of emotional support. If they lost their honor, they were worse than dead. Still, that wasn't a good enough reason for Woroy to allow a fight. He clapped both men on the shoulder.

"A man's honor is important. Gelan."

“Y-Yeah.”

“Back when you were a bandit, maybe you could have resolved this with a fight, but now you’re working for me, a member of the council.”

“Yeah, and that’s a real honor too, but...”

“Precisely. And if you start a fight with your comrades now, you’ll besmirch that honor. Now that you’ve become a proper warrior, patience and grace are what will uphold your honor, not violence. You’re not a bandit anymore.”

A military officer protected his honor in a very different way than a bandit. Woroy needed to drill that into everyone’s heads.

“And Parthis.”

“Yes, boss?”

“In a gambling den, seniority confers authority. But for a noble’s retainer, the pecking order is different.”

“I-I didn’t know that.”

Woroy brought his face closer to Parthis’s. The man had handled a gambling den’s accounts before coming to work for him.

“Gelan is a platoon sergeant, and you’re a paymaster. As far as rank is concerned, you’re both equal. In other words, you need to afford each other an equal amount of respect. Don’t embarrass yourself in front of your men. Prove that you deserve your title by showing deference.”

“O-O-Okay!”

These men had all lived in extremely restrictive hierarchies up until now. But here, they had to work under a common system, instead of the narrow confines of whatever illegal group they’d been a part of. It was Woroy’s job as their leader to rehabilitate them.

After both men apologized, Woroy grinned and said, “Good. I knew you’d live up to my expectations! Once work’s done for the night, let’s drink! I’ll give you a taste of Rolmund’s famous booze!”

With that, Woroy hurried back to finish inspecting the latest shipment. In

Rolmund, when someone was building a city, they had the building materials laid out like a temporary fort. Woroy needed to make sure everything got put in its proper place to protect both his people and his lumber.

As Barnack followed behind him, the Sword Saint sighed and said, “None of your old retainers would have caused such an unsightly scene.”

“Don’t be too hard on them. They’re still rough around the edges, but they’re good, loyal men. They just don’t know how to integrate into society properly.”

Woroy hadn’t just gone and recruited every outlaw he ran across. He’d only selected the men he believed were truly good inside, and could potentially be rehabilitated.

“If you only recruit people who are easy to boss around, you won’t make for a good leader. A good general knows how to unite people with different mindsets and backgrounds.”

“It’s as you say, My Lord. You sound more like your father every day.”

“Hahaha, you think so?”

I wonder if dad went through these kinds of trials too? Woroy thought as he looked up at the sky. It was the same clear blue sky he’d grown up seeing in Rolmund.

Unfortunately for Woroy, his troubles were never-ending. Just as he’d gotten a handle on his men, calamity struck.

“An army of undead?!” Woroy exclaimed.

“Yes, sir! It appears something has happened in the Boltz Mines to the northwest!” the messenger knight said. He was one of many that had been dispatched by the council to tell everyone of the undead threat. Along with the messenger was Kite, Veight’s trusted vice-commander.

Woroy mentally compared his command of a few hundred men to the army of undead that would be at his doorstep in a few hours.

“How many skeletons are there?”

Kite looked up at Woroy. He’d never ridden a warhorse before, and the

journey had left him pale and clammy. But it wasn't just motion sickness that was making him pale.

"I saw thousands when I was fleeing, but there are probably more. They were pouring out of every single mine shaft in there. I'd say there are probably hundreds of thousands of them now."

We're doomed. There was no suitable location to hole up in. Woroy could build a makeshift fort with the raw materials lying around, but it wouldn't last long in a siege. Besides, holing up only worked if reinforcements were coming. There was no guarantee anyone would be coming to save him. Every city was under attack.

"Kite, what can you tell me about these skeletons? What's their marching speed like? Do they need rest?"

Kite answered immediately. "Skeletons only run while in battle, but they need no rest. They can march for days or weeks on end since they don't tire."

"So once they reach us, there's no escape. If we want to retreat, now's the only time we can."

However, Woroy's men refused to abandon their half-built city once they learned someone from the Senate was behind the skeleton horde. It was the Senate's draconian policies that had driven them out of society, and they still harbored a deep resentment over that. *Once they get like this they won't listen to reason...* As their commander, Woroy could have forcefully ordered them all to retreat, but instead, he started thinking of tactics he might be able to use. Hopefully, his men had some good ideas there.

Before he could go around and ask, Barnack walked over and said, "Everyone's tired from the day's labor. If we attempted to flee now, we'd be forced to make camp before long."

"Yeah, there's no guarantee we'd be able to get away."

It was entirely possible that they'd collapse from exhaustion in the middle of nowhere, and then be overrun by skeletons. Honestly, it seemed like weathering the storm here gave everyone a better chance for survival. *The question is, are reinforcements coming?* With the resources he had on hand,

Woroy could only hold out for a day or two. It was unlikely that reinforcements would be able to reach them in that time.

Am I going to fail my men for a second time? Memories of his bitter defeat at Rolmund floated to the surface of his mind. He'd faced off against Eleora's troops, led by Veight, and had attempted a do-or-die charge to take Veight down. But in the end, he'd lost to Veight in single combat. His men had died for nothing. Even a seasoned war veteran was bound to lose some battles, but Woroy still felt guilty about leading his men to their deaths.

This is no time for a pity party. I need to make a decision—and fast. These men are looking to me for leadership. Woroy knew that delaying a decision was the worst thing he could do. He pushed down his misgivings and made up his mind.

Picking up his cross-spear—the one he'd learned to wield in Wa—Woroy turned to his men and shouted, “We’re in luck, boys! This is our chance to go down in history! Make it through this fight, and you can brag to all the women in Meraldia that you’re real men who protected a half-built city from an army of a hundred thousand skeletons!”

“YEEEEEEAH!” Woroy’s ruffians rallied, picking up their axes and warhammers.

You guys better not die on me. Thanks to Woroy’s efficient leadership, they got the makeshift fort built in no time. Stone and lumber were used to create walls, while food and other less sturdy materials were secured inside. So long as they protected the few entrances, Woroy and his men would be able to hold out for a day or two.

“No way I’m dying here to a bunch of skeletons summoned by those damned Senators! Ain’t that right, Gelan?!”

“You bet, Parthis! Guess you’ve got some balls after all! We’ll show them the mettle of Woroy’s warriors!”

It was a few hours later that the army of undead arrived.

After a long, fierce battle, dawn finally broke. The light of the sun bathed Meraldia’s flat plains with a warm glow. Thanks to an unbelievable display of power by Veight, Woroy and the others had been saved.

“Don’t slack off on your watch! Everyone who’s free, look after the injured! The council’s healers will be here later today; keep everyone alive until then!”

The skeletons had inflicted heavy losses on Woroy’s band of a few hundred misfits. Close to fifty were dead and more than double that number were injured. Veight had given emergency first aid to the most heavily wounded so things weren’t too bad, but now that the threat had passed, Woroy was determined to keep the list of dead from growing.

“All the materials we bought are ruined now,” Barnack said jokingly as he patted a block of stone. He’d made it through the battle no worse for the wear. But the stones they’d used as walls were nicked and dented from arrows and spear thrusts.

Woroy sat down on the block next to Barnack and said with a smile, “Come now, scars are a warrior’s pride. If Veight were here, he’d say future generations would see these stones as historical artifacts.”

“Hah! He certainly would.”

Woroy broke the silence that followed with a long sigh. “I let so many of my men die again... And once more, I needed Veight to save me.”

“It’s thanks to your capable leadership that so many of us survived, my lord. It’s only because you kept morale high and gave such precise orders that we were able to hold out until reinforcements arrived.”

Those reinforcements had been just a single man. But that one man had been the Black Werewolf King, and he was stronger than an army.

“Reinforcements, huh? All Veight did was let out a howl, and most of the skeletons crumbled to dust.”

“I had an opportunity to see Lord Veight’s fighting up close when he saved me back in Rolmund. He’s far stronger than us mortals.”

The night the Doneiks manor fell, Barnack had fled with Ryuunie and tried to bring him to safety. But he’d been surrounded by a score of assassins, and it was Veight’s timely arrival that had saved his life.

Barnack looked off into the distance as he reminisced about his past.

“My lord, sometimes I think...” He straightened his back, eyes glowing in the early dawn light. “This world is simply unfair. The longer you live, the more you’ll run into hopeless situations with no good way out. You cannot expect providence from God, yet your own power isn’t enough. However...” Barnack smiled awkwardly, aware that what he was about to say would sound extremely cheesy. “If there is such a thing as divine providence, then it is in the form of Lord Veight. If God truly is real, then Veight is undoubtedly his messenger. None of the horrors of this world can hope to match him and his benevolence.”

“I never imagined I’d hear those words from the mouth of Barnack, the Sword Saint who even the emperor feared.”

Woroy turned and went to patrol the perimeter. As he continued listening to a stream of reports from his men, he confirmed that there were no skeletons in the vicinity. Thanks to Veight, this region was safe for now.

“All right, we still have enough food and water. All that’s left is to find bedding.”

“We probably won’t need that just yet. The men are in high spirits and raring to strike back at the Senator who sent this army.”

The undead were pouring out of the Boltz Mine to the northwest. Everyone who could still fight wanted to march there.

“Yeesh, these guys are way too hot-blooded.”

“They get it from you, my lord,” Barnack said with a smile. Woroy smiled back, but after a few seconds, his expression turned grim.

“We need to make this city the best it can be, for those who died protecting it.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Back when northern and southern Meraldia had been at odds with each other, a buffer zone had been created called the Fetid Wastes. Contrary to what the name implied, the Fetid Wastes were a fertile plain. And it was in the center of this plain that Woroy was building his city. First, he leveled the ground the city would be built on. It was long, boring work, and a number of temporary

houses were built for the people doing it. Despite being temporary, they were quite sturdy, so they would be defensible if another crisis like the undead invasion occurred.

Soon after merchants came to sell their wares to the construction workers, and a miniature town began to form. Some time after that, farmers from other cities started to trickle in with their wagons. They'd heard rumors of the new city, and sensed an opportunity. Upon reaching Woroy's city, they dismantled their wagons and built huts out of the wood.

"Lord Woroy, shouldn't we be chasing away these squatters?"

"We certainly can't ignore them. Tell them the city's fields are going to be to the south, so if they want to plant something, they should do it there."

"Wait, you're going to take them in?!"

"I can understand wanting a fresh start in a new land. So long as they follow the city's laws, I see no reason to turn them away. It's no different from how I hired all of you guys."

"Hahaha, fair enough."

Woroy accepted any and all immigrants, and granted them land to use. He even had some of his builders help them get their farms started. Slowly but surely, the city began to grow. Thanks to Veight's advice, designing the coliseum was going smoothly as well. Though rare, people did occasionally die during jousting tournaments or melees, so Woroy had decided to make his city's main spectator sport battleball, which was much safer.

After he solidified the rules for the sport, he was able to finalize the coliseum's design, and soon after, construction began. Woroy and his retainers were all hardcore battleball fans, and whenever they had time they came to watch matches. Sometimes, Veight even came to play.

"This is an amazing sport, Veight! It's great for training soldiers too!"

"I just gave you the idea, you're the one who actually designed it. The credit belongs to you. Here, pass!"

"Got it! All right then, I guess that means I deserve half the credit for this

sport, then!”

“No, *all* of it belongs to you...”

As the seasons passed, the city continued to grow. One of the larger houses the construction workers had been using was expanded and turned into Woroy’s manor. Other mansions were built nearby to house his highest ranking retainers. The entire area became the administrative district of the city. Once the coliseum was completed, stalls and shops appeared around it almost overnight. Battleball became the subject of a number of plays, and soon everyone in Meraldia had heard about the sport. The battleball committee that had initially been formed to spread awareness of the sport evolved into a fully-fledged association. It became a massive organization that had representatives from every city in Meraldia. Matches between cities began, and the citizens started getting attached to their home teams.

Battleball was a form of entertainment that couldn’t be found anywhere else, and Woroy was known to be a fair and generous viceroy. Many Meraldians moved to the city in the hopes of finding new opportunities. The Doneiks faction nobles that had been exiled also started flocking to the city, since Woroy was the man they’d served before. They got absorbed into Woroy’s staff, and lent their expertise to the city’s development. What had started as a small town in the middle of an empty plain was now a bustling city.

Ten more years passed, and now Doneiks, the battleball city, was an established part of Meraldia. Not only was it the birthplace of battleball, but it was also a key relay point for traders going along the north-south highway. Today, too, travelers were making their way to the famous battleball city.

“Is it true the city has no walls?” a young girl riding in a carriage asked.

In an exasperated voice, a boy replied, “Are you seriously asking that? We learned it doesn’t in geography class, remember?”

“I know, but I can’t imagine a city without walls.”

Another girl said in a calm tone, “Well, you won’t have to imagine it since we’ll see it soon enough.”

“I can’t wait! I want to try playing battleball!”

“You know we’re not going there to play, right?”

“B-Battleball is an important cultural artifact that we need to experience!”

The carriage slowly wound its way north. Doneiks could just barely be seen on the horizon, a small speck on the endless plains.

Afterword

Hello, everyone, Hyougetsu here.

Thank you so much for reading all the way to volume 12. This volume is mostly about Veight's struggles with childcare, which I can easily relate to since my two daughters are quite a handful. I studied education in college, but that didn't prepare me at all for raising a child. I'm having as much trouble as anyone else would. It turns out teaching at a school and teaching your kid are totally different things. I'm basically flying blind.

Oh, but I did do some research to make sure all the childcare tips Veight gives are accurate. That being said, it's not like he's perfect even when it comes to raising a child. In the same way that there's no perfect person, there's no such thing as a perfect parent. Most of my research was making sure it was reasonable for Friede to have the personality she does based on how Veight tried to raise her. Kind of like a cause and effect thing. Friede's personality is in part because Veight is an accepting dad who's willing to give her a lot of freedom. That has its pros and its cons, but I hope everyone liked how Friede turned out.

That reminds me, my two daughters helped me a lot with the writing of this book, so I want to thank them for it. Without them, I wouldn't have been able to write about Veight's happy family life as well as I did. But girls, please stop kicking me when I'm sleeping, or breaking the space key on my computer. I'd also like to thank my wife, who helped a ton too. I work from home, which makes it hard to manage a proper work-life balance, and I definitely wouldn't be able to write at such a consistent pace if it wasn't for my wife. Thank you so, so much.

I'd also like to thank Teshima-sensei, who's taken over the art for the epilogue volumes. He's done a great job of building on the wonderful base Nishi(E)da-sensei left for us, and really made it feel like we've advanced to the next generation. Thank you again for everything. I really appreciate how much time

you spent refining Friede's design until you got it just right. She looks as cute as I imagined her (I don't want to write too many details about my personal life, but she kind of resembles my oldest daughter). I hope you keep it up for volume 13 as well.

And naturally, a big thank you to my editor, Fusanon, as well. You've been supporting me since the very start of the series. All I'm good for is writing. You're the one who always helps me pick out what font to use or how to design the book layout, and all sorts of other things. I'm eternally grateful for all of your help. Of course, I'm also grateful to all the specialists and proofreaders who fixed up all the small details and turned my words into an actual product. Thank you all so much.

After helping people out, being helped in turn, helping them out again, etc., etc., I've started to realize that human relationships are pretty complicated. Veight's going to have to deal with that complex web of relationships as well, for as long as he lives. It'd be nice if I could coast through life looking as cool as he does, but I don't think I've got it in me.

Anyway, let's meet again in volume 13 where Friede hopefully(?) embarks on her first big adventure...!

Airia



Veight



Friede at
age 10



Hello, everyone, Tejima here.
It's an honor to work on an established, long-running
series like this! I'll do my best for all of you!

At the time I'm drawing this image, I still haven't had a chance to see what Friede's official illustrations look like. I apologize if my rendition of her doesn't match up with the novel's.

I was thinking of giving her wolf ears and a wolf tail, but apparently she doesn't have a werewolf transformation, so I decided against it.

Then again...maybe it's precisely because she won't have them in the official art that I should have given them to her here. Oh well, it's too late to worry about that now. At any rate, congratulations on making it to volume 12, Hyougetsu-sensei!

I'm amazed you've been able to keep coming up with fresh ideas despite going on for so long. Personally, every time I thought about making something, I just put it off. And once the motivation finally did come, I'd forgotten all of my original ideas. Even though I feel like they were really cool ideas too... The lesson here is to start writing the moment inspiration strikes, regardless of how unmotivated you're feeling at the time. Also, it's important to stick with what you start, or you'll end up giving up halfway.

Until now, I thought I was living life doing whatever I wanted, but before I realized it, circumstances forced me to—never mind, this is getting way too dark! I guess if I wanted to draw wolf ears and a wolf tail I just should have—wait, no, that's not what I wanted to talk about either!

Sorry, I got off topic... But one last word before I go: please check out the manga if you get the chance!


Kosumi Gumiichi

Congratulations on
the release of volume 12!





Bonus Short Story

My Father Is the Black Werewolf King

My father is the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander. He said that being a vice-commander is basically like being someone's assistant, or something like a maid, apparently. My mother is the Demon Lord. She's kind, pretty, and smells nice—but I can tell she secretly hates carrots.

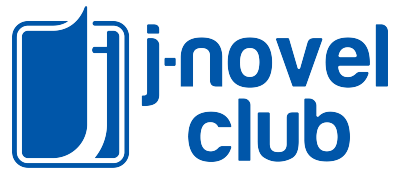
Anyway, I want to talk some more about my dad. Typically, he stays at home, but sometimes he has to go out for work. When he's at home, he wears these tattered shirts instead of fancy clothes. And he's always reading or writing something. Mom says she likes seeing him in his natural state, but I don't know if I agree. Also, when she thinks no one's looking, she gets all clingy around dad and acts like a kid.

Mom got angry at me for writing that, so I'm going to go back to talking about dad. He gets scolded by mom a lot; even the maids scold him. But despite that, he's always smiling. I really love that about him, and so does everyone else.

Dad is super smart, and he teaches me a lot of stuff. But sometimes his stories get really long, just like Granny Movi's. When the two of them are together, their stories get really, really long. Dad also knows a lot about the past, and about all the other countries in the world. But he doesn't know what happens to people when they die, what we're having for dinner tomorrow, or even why mom gets mad at him sometimes. So he keeps studying. I can't believe you have to study even when you grow up. I guess I should work harder at my studies. But only a little.

Dad really loves mom and books and meat, but he hates fighting. Whenever he sees people fighting, he transforms and forces them to stop. But now that I think about it, that's a kind of weird way to stop fights. Apparently, people call him the Black Werewolf King because he's super strong. When I was younger, he beat up a bunch of bad guys to save me. That was when I learned he was

super strong. But I like him more when he's relaxing at home than when he's fighting. I want to be able to help mom, or whoever becomes the next Demon Lord, with their work, so dad can get more time to relax. But to do that, first I need to study a lot more. Or at least a little more...



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 12

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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