

08

Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— Eastward Bound —

Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da

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Character

Veight

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



Parker

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



Kite

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



Natalia

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



Airia Lutte Aindorf

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



Eleora

The Empress of Rolmund. She has the backing of the demon army and the support of the populace. She's also a master of warfare.



Woroy

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



Ashley

Rolmund's crown prince. His gorgeous appearance and kind demeanor have made him popular. Was emperor for a time, but has since abdicated the throne.



Ryunnie

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



Ivan

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



The story so far

In order to keep Meraldia safe, Veight and his men headed north to Rolmund in order to make Eleora its empress. Some time after he suppressed the Doneiks Rebellion, Veight was visited by an unexpected guest—one of North Rolmund's most influential nobles, Lord Bolshevik.

Though the Bolshevik family had been the Doneiks family's stalwart supporters for generations, during the last rebellion, Lord Bolshevik was the first to betray Prince Ivan and surrender to Eleora. With the Doneiks family defeated, he was looking to build alliances with both Eleora and Ashley's factions. Lord Bolshevik's tenacity and cunning impressed Veight, though he knew he couldn't trust the fickle lord.

Indeed, Lord Bolshevik soon announced his engagement to Princess Dillier, the newly crowned Emperor Ashley's elder sister. But while everyone expected him to use this opportunity to expand his influence, he made no grabs for power. In the shadows, however, he incited peasants to revolt against Eleora's newly acquired lands in the north, and managed to imprison Ashley in his own tower. He brought assassins into the capital, planning to launch a coup, only for Veight and Eleora to discover his plans in time to head him off.

Eleora once again succeeded in stopping a revolt, earning her a Hero's reputation within the empire. Wanting to take responsibility for his failures, and seeing that Eleora had far more support than him, Emperor Ashley abdicated the throne and passed the crown onto Eleora.

Having finally succeeded in his mission,
Veight now heads home to Ryunheit.

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Chapter 8

After resolving Rolmund's political issues, I safely returned home to Ryunheit. Dealing with two rebellions in a row was a pretty exhausting ordeal, but I managed to get everything sorted out in the end. From here on out, I was confident Empress Eleora would remain friendly toward Meraldia. Plus, while the rebellions had been exhausting, they'd given me the opportunity to recruit more talented people into Meraldia's government. Rolmund was an advanced country, so having some of their brightest nobles working for us would be a huge boon. I was pretty proud of what I'd achieved, honestly.

My only failure was not being able to make it back in time for the summer solstice like I'd promised Airia. *I really need to make that up to her somehow...* But first, I had to get through the mountainload of work waiting for me.

A few days after my return, I called for a council meeting so I could give my report to the viceroys. This time, the viceroys of both Meraldia's southern and northern cities attended. During my absence, northern Meraldia had successfully been integrated into the commonwealth.

"The documents I passed out contain all the information I know about Rolmund's political and military situation. Though we won't have to fear any future invasions, Rolmund's military is still quite powerful."

A number of the northern viceroys nodded solemnly.

"I suppose that means we can rest easy for now. Thank you very much, Lord Veight," one of them said.

"However, there's no telling when the political situation in Rolmund might change. I still think it prudent that we strengthen our defenses on the northern border," another added.

I nodded and replied, "Yes. So long as Eleora is empress, we're safe, but she could die suddenly or be overthrown."

I'm praying that doesn't happen though. While I didn't wish for such an outcome, it was my duty as a councilor to prepare for every eventuality.

"I can send a few dragonkin units from the demon army north too, if you want. They're far less violent than giants and orcs, but..."

As expected, the northern viceroys were grimacing.

"We appreciate the offer, and honestly speaking, it would make things much easier. However, the people are still..."

While the viceroys of the north might have gotten over their fear of demons, the common people still hadn't. *Yeah, I figured that'd be the case.* After thinking about it a little more, I offered the only alternative I could think of.

"Then I suppose we'll need to recruit human soldiers. Do you think we could reorganize the mercenaries and knights that used to work for the Senate and incorporate them into city garrisons?"

"That should be doable."

"But it might strain our budgets a little..."

Unfortunately, standing armies were a huge money sink. The southern viceroys joined the discussion as well, and after a back-and-forth exchange it was decided that they would help pay for this army as well. A potential invasion of Meraldia was everyone's problem, after all. Still, that didn't mean the southern viceroys were happy about this decision. The friction between north and south hadn't completely disappeared, and plenty of them didn't like that their hard-earned money had to go to paying for the north's defenses. Once the northern viceroys left, the southern viceroys started openly voicing their complaints.

"I realize this is an important issue and I *do* want to cooperate, but my craftsmen aren't going to be happy when they hear their taxes are paying for the north's army," said Forne, Veira's viceroy, with a weary sigh as he massaged his temples. Veira was bustling with craftsmen and merchants, and was one of Meraldia's richest cities. However, that also meant it had a lot of expenditures. After mentally grappling with the problem for a few minutes he suggested, "Hey Veight, if we're paying for all of this, can we at least paint our logos onto

the shields and armor we'll be sending north? It'll make for good advertising at least."

We're talking about an army here, not a soccer team.

"Wouldn't the soldiers wearing that armor take issue with it if it had a southern city's logo on it?"

"I suppose so..."

Save that idea for a few hundred years down the road, when society's caught up to you. Petore, Lotz's viceroy, looked grim as well.

"The problem with armies is ya can't just hand 'em a lump sum and be done. There's maintenance costs to think about too. Adding another constant expense to our budget sheets is gonna hurt."

I sighed and replied, "I know. But the demon army doesn't have any funds to give. All we can do is dispatch personnel."

The demon army had no economic strength whatsoever. Meanwhile, Meraldia ran on a hard currency economy. Large-scale loans were done on a personal basis instead of by specialized institutions. Government bonds and military scrip didn't exist yet. I needed some way to increase Meraldia's revenue, or our newly minted commonwealth would start to flounder.

"If only we could trade with other nations..." Shardier's young viceroy, Aram, muttered. He'd been getting thinner lately, but he looked especially haggard right now.

"Incidentally, Aram, is it just me or have you lost a lot of weight?"

"It's no big deal. This is what I originally looked like." Aram awkwardly scratched his cheek. "I don't actually have that big an appetite. Before, I imported rock salt and ate until I was bursting to make myself look more imposing, but I'm thinking I don't need to do that anymore."

"I see..."

That explains a lot. That aside, Aram's got a point.

"As for foreign trade routes, we could open up with Rolmund. But since that's in the north, most of the money would stay in northern Meraldia. Besides,

there's no telling when there'll be another political revolt there."

Beluza's viceroy, Garsh, folded his arms and said, "We can't go west because there's a forest in the way. That just leaves the continent to the south...but that voyage takes months, so we'd only be able to trade non-perishable goods."

Melaine suddenly looked up and said, "What about eastward? Master told me there's a country to the east. If I recall correctly it's called the Nation of Wa?"

Petore and Garsh exchanged glances.

"There *is* a country to the east but..."

"That place is..."

Petore went on to explain that he and Garsh hadn't had much success in trading with the Nation of Wa, which lay across the Windswept Dunes. When the Senate had still been around, they'd forbidden trade with Wa because they feared the south growing too powerful. Naturally, Petore and Garsh had ignored the edict and smuggled goods to and from Wa multiple times. But the trade routes they'd built hadn't been very profitable. As Petore finished his explanation, Shatina, the young viceroy of Zaria, cocked her head and asked, "Zaria's finances are pretty tight too since we're trying to expand, but... Master, why can't we just do what Veira's doing to make money? Why do we have to trade with other countries?"

By "what Veira's doing" Shatina was referring to selling entertainment and goods to our own citizens.

I shook my head and explained, "There's a limit to how much we can make by selling to our own people. Let's say the average citizen only has ten bronze coins of spending money. That means that's all we can expect to make from them."

"I see..."

"But if we're trading with other nations, we can expect bigger profits. Of course if we're not careful we could end up losing a lot of money too, but the potential is huge."

As I lectured Shatina something suddenly came to mind, and I turned over to

Forne.

“By the way, are you still putting on those plays?”

“Of course. I heard all about your exploits in Rolmund from Kite,” Forne replied with a grin. “After capturing the fearsome princess of the frigid north, the Black Werewolf King travels to the Rolmund Empire. There he defeats many formidable foes and overcomes numerous insidious plots and succeeds in crowning Eleora empress.”

Okay, I guess I technically did do all of that. Forne’s voice took on a lyrical lilt as he got into the role of narrator.

“During his harsh trials, the Black Werewolf King found a sworn friend in Prince Woroy. And now that this esteemed prince has come to Meraldia, the next chapter of his epic begins. Find out more in our upcoming play, *The Journey of the Heroic White Tiger, Woroy!*”

You’re gonna do a play on him too!? I can’t believe you made a whole spin-off series in the few months I was gone! And you gave Woroy some weird nickname too. I couldn’t take my eyes off this guy for a second. Grinning in satisfaction, Forne returned to his seat.

“I really am grateful that you keep having so many exciting adventures. It helps build the council’s reputation in the eyes of the common people too, so keep them coming.”

“I can’t exactly have adventures on command...”

Please stop treating me like some kind of heroic epic generator. That being said, I knew Forne was just doing his best to keep the Meraldian economy running as smoothly as possible. He was thinking of more than just the prosperity of his city. Before a lull in the conversation could start, Airia brought out a new sheaf of documents.

“Speaking of Prince Woroy, he’s submitted a proposal for the amount of funds he’ll need to build his new city. After surveying the commonwealth he says this is the bare minimum he’ll need, considering the cost of goods.”

“Are you kidding me!?” Firnir shouted when she saw the sum Woroy was asking for. I’d run my own estimates a while back and they’d come out to

roughly this much, so I wasn't surprised. The Senate had neglected this particular stretch of land for close to a century, so I'd expected restoring it would cost a lot. It wasn't just construction materials and labor Woroy needed money for; he'd need to pay lawmakers and other bureaucratic officials to set up an effective administration too. The way things were going, I'd probably need to step in and help find a way to boost our finances.

"I'll see if the demon army can help bolster our revenue in some way. The demons living in the forest don't use currency, but we can still barter goods with them. I'll find some people to open a trade route."

If we expanded our economic bloc to include the demons in the forest, we might be able to expand the nearby cities' marketplaces. Once the meeting ended, I went to Airia's office to ask her something that had been on my mind.

"How much do you know about the Nation of Wa?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Their culture is different from ours, and we're separated by the Windswept Dunes," Airia said, shaking her head. "The nation is actually under a completely different cultural sphere than Rolmund, Meraldia, and the southern continent. As a result, it's proven difficult to establish diplomatic relations."

"I see."

As the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, it was important that I had a good grasp of all our bordering nations. But the real reason I was interested in the Nation of Wa lay elsewhere. The seasoning I'd found that was similar to soy sauce had come from Wa. Not only that, its manufacturing process was extremely similar to that of Japan's. As a reincarnated Japanese person, I absolutely wanted to know more. Especially since the nation was called "Wa." That meant nothing in the languages of this world, but in Japanese it meant "peace." Plus, Wa used to be the ancient name for Japan. Of course, it could just be a coincidence, but both the previous Demon Lord and I had come from Japan. It was possible some other people from Japan had reincarnated here in the past too. I definitely wanted to check it out. Besides, they could prove to be valuable trade partners.

"Is something wrong, Veight?"

“Not exactly...”

I wonder how Airia'd react if I told her I wanted to go to Wa? Would she get mad? After all, there was no need for me to go there personally. If all I wanted to do was investigate, I could send Kite. The last thing I wanted was to make Airia angry, so I decided to shelve the topic for now and focus on the paperwork I still had left.

After a few days of boring bureaucracy, some excitement finally entered my life.

“A messenger from the Nation of Wa?” I asked Fahn, who had come to relay a message.

I looked up from the Blast Rifle R&D form I was signing and cocked my head quizzically.

“And they want to meet with me? Not the commonwealth council, but me personally?”

Fahn shrugged her shoulders and said, “Apparently she’s interested in that shrine you made back in Beluza. She got here by asking for the guy who’d made it.”

Oh yeah, I totally forgot about that shrine I made honoring the Island Kraken.

“Dang it, I still have to finish this proposal by the next council meeting.”

I was hoping to organize a team to search for the treasure that the Hero Draulight had supposedly taken with him when he’d fled to Meraldia. According to what Eleora had told me, he’d stolen a lot of valuable artifacts from rich nobles before leading the slaves to freedom. I wanted to have a proposal ready by the next meeting so we could discuss who’d head the expedition and what kind of budget to give it. But if a messenger from Wa was here, I couldn’t afford not to meet them. I stowed my half-finished proposal in my drawer and got up with a stretch.

“Alright, I’ll go meet them. It’d be rude to leave them waiting after they traveled all this way.”

I really wish there were two of me. That way I'd be able to get all this work done. Actually, I could leave everything to the other me and just retire... That way I'd have all the time in the world to study magic and demon ecology. I'd be able to fulfill my dream of becoming a biologist. That's what I'd wanted to be back on Earth, but I'd never gotten the chance. Anyway, let's see what this messenger wants.

I met the messenger in my parlor.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Veight. My name is Mihoshi Fumino. I'm a member of the Nation of Wa's Chrysanthemum Court."



A young woman wearing what looked like a shrine maiden's outfit bowed to me. Her bearing was graceful, and she was surprisingly tall. I bowed back and replied, "My name is Veight, councilor on the Meraldian Commonwealth Council and Vice-Commander to the Demon Lord. I've heard the Chrysanthemum Court is an organization similar to our council."

Fumino nodded.

"Correct. We are Wa's governing body. Though since I'm the lowest ranking Kushin I'm basically the court's errand girl."

"Kushin?"

"It's a title similar to your noble. Incidentally our common people aren't referred to as peasants but as shomin."

Wait, does that mean her title is derived from the Kuge of the Heian period? Now my interest was piqued. But first, I needed to find out what our guest wanted.

"I was told you wanted to meet not with the council, but with me personally. May I ask what business you have with me?"

Fumino narrowed her eyes and carefully observed me.

"I saw a religious artifact in Beluza that looked quite similar to ones in my homeland. When I inquired about who erected it I was directed here. I wanted to meet with you to find out more about that shrine."

That much I'd heard from Fahn too. But I knew that couldn't be everything.

"And what do you plan to do with that information?"

Fumino smiled faintly at me.

"I've heard that werewolves can detect lies from a person's scent. Therefore, I'm afraid I cannot tell you."

"Meaning you can't give me an honest answer?"

"Correct."

Well at least she's honest about the fact that she can't be honest. Fumino nonchalantly added, "All I wish to know is where you learned to make shrines of

that nature and why you erected one in Beluza. That's all. If there are reasons why you can't tell me, then I won't press the issue."

"Hmmm..."

I folded my arms thoughtfully. Judging by what Fumino had said, there were probably Shinto-inspired shrines in Wa. Since I had no contact with Wa, and Beluza was more or less ignorant of Wa culture, she had good reason to wonder what a shrine like that was doing there. Either she suspected what my true identity was, or I'd committed some kind of religious faux pas by making that shrine. Regardless of which it was, I couldn't afford to tell her the truth.

"I am one of Demon Lord Gomoviroa's disciples, so I've studied histories from around the world. I believed a shrine of that nature would be the best way to honor the Island Kraken's memory, so I had it built. That's all."

Fumino scrutinized my expression for a few seconds, then nodded.

"I will let the Chrysanthemum Court know that's what you said. However, Lord Veight, I can tell you're hiding something."

"Perhaps, but so are you."

"Indeed."

The two of us nodded solemnly to each other. If Fumino wasn't going to be straight with me, I couldn't be straight with her either. I excused myself and went to the adjoining room to organize my thoughts. I also ordered one of the maids to bring up tea.

I didn't want to just send Fumino home, since I wanted to discuss opening trade routes to Wa with her. Moreover, I had a personal interest in her and her country. The problem was, in order to learn more I'd have to get closer to her. And I couldn't think of any way to do that right now. So long as we were playing coy with each other, things would remain deadlocked. *Maybe I should just make small talk and see where I can go from there?*

"Hey Veight, I heard a messenger from Wa came and—"

Parker casually walked into the room and started blabbing his mouth off. Before he could even finish his question I cut him off and said, "Don't you dare

show your face to her. You'll make things more complicated."

"I think you're making some fundamental misunderstanding about me, Veight."

"No, I think I understand you quite well, my beloved brother, which is why I need you to *shut up*."

If Parker joined the conversation now who knew how convoluted things would get. Sadly, Parker wasn't taking the hint.

"Well if you just don't want me showing my face, that can be arranged. See, all I have to do is take my head off and we're good."

"Yeah, see, this is exactly the problem. You could at least pretend to be a human for five seconds if you want to talk to a messenger."

"But if I'm not honest with her the conversation will just keep going in circles!"

I twitched as Parker addressed the exact problem I'd been grappling with.

"Goddamnit! How do you always manage to read my mind like that!? And why do you always come up with the perfect advice!?"

"Wait, did I just give good advice?"

"No, you didn't!"

I grabbed Parker by the shoulders and started shaking him. *Who let this guy in here?* Just then, I heard a strange noise from the adjacent room.

"Ahahahahahahaha!"

Parker and I exchanged glances.

"Who's in the other room?" he asked innocently.

"The messenger from Wa..."

That was definitely Fumino's voice, but why was she laughing? Parker and I slowly opened the door and found Fumino rolling around the sofa howling with laughter.

"I-I don't believe it... Th-This is what the fearsome Black Werewolf King is

like... Gahahaha! Amazing!”

Parker and I looked at each other again.

“It looks like she overheard our conversation,” Parker muttered.

“Yeah, but why’s she laughing?”

“Beats me...”

It was then that Fumino finally noticed we were staring at her. Her expression suddenly stiffened. Then, with unbelievable swiftness, she rose back to a sitting position and straightened her back. She also adjusted her loose collar and relaxed her face into a smile.

“Is something the matter, Lord Veight?”

“I’m the one who should be asking that.”

I sauntered over to Fumino and peered into her face.

“I can’t say I approve of eavesdropping, Lady Fumino.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Fumino asked, playing dumb.

Before I could reply, Parker poked his head out from behind my shoulder and said, “Hello there! Are you the messenger from Wa? I’m Parker, Veight’s older brother! Oh, I guess that would make you his sister.”

I quickly grabbed Parker and shoved him into the other room before he could cause a scene. Once he was gone, I turned back to Fumino.

“My apologies. That was just some random skeleton.”

“Sorry, but you can’t keep *this* skeleton in the closet!”

Damnit, can’t you stay gone!?

“Oh, yes I can! Just get out already!”

There goes my attempt at trying to look dignified. Parker clattered happily as he started reassembling himself.

“Why must you be so cruel to me!?”

“Why don’t you ask your heart that!?”

“Why, because I don’t have one, of course!”

“That joke’s getting old!”

Fumino started roaring with laughter again. *Ugh, this is a mess.* It took another few minutes before I could finally get Fumino to stop laughing and Parker to stop punning.

“I-I’m terribly...sorry...” Fumino wheezed, doing her best to regain composure. *It’s a bit too late for that.* Fumino looked down apologetically and said, “The truth is I actually have a bit of training in covert ops, and I overheard your conversation in the other room.”

“Covert ops, huh?”

“Yes. Such skills are necessary if you wish to learn information that others aren’t willing to give.”

So she’s a shrine maiden and a ninja. Well, she’s certainly interesting at least. Fumino’d probably been hoping I’d hold some top-secret conversation with my aides in the other room, but instead all she’d heard was us joking around like idiots. I couldn’t blame her for laughing, though I did question her sense of humor. *Maybe that’s just what people think is funny in Wa.* Either way, now that we were being more honest with each other, I felt like Fumino and I could get along.

Fumino explained that there was an organization known as the Heavenwatchers that reported directly to the Chrysanthemum Court. It was made up of a combination of astrologers and ninjas, and functioned as Wa’s intelligence agency. She then readily admitted that she was part of said Heavenwatchers.

“My affiliation isn’t a secret, so I don’t have to hide it...though the knowledge tends to make people wary of me.”

Fumino was trying her best to act serious, but I kept thinking back to how she’d been rolling around laughing a few minutes ago. I had to work hard to hold back a grin.

“Lord Veight?”

“Oh, don’t worry. My attitude toward you won’t change just because you told me you’re a spy.”

I think it’s too late to be worried about the image you’re projecting.

“If anything, I think I can trust you more now that you’ve been honest with me.”

“Truly?”

Though she tried to keep the excitement out of her voice, I could tell her eyes were sparkling. I replied, “Though our nations are separated by a desert, we’re still connected by sea. Honestly, I’d like to strengthen Meraldia’s relationship with Wa. I’m sure a trade deal between our nations could be mutually beneficial. Are you allowed to negotiate on your nation’s behalf, Lady Fumino?”

“I am. As a member of the Chrysanthemum Court, I do have some measure of authority.”

I had no idea how much “some measure” was, but Fumino didn’t bother to elaborate. Still, I was glad I’d managed to find a connection with Wa this soon. As I considered what doors this might have opened for me, an idea suddenly struck me.

“This is pending a discussion with the other councilors, of course, but I’m thinking perhaps I should travel to Wa and officially start business talks.”

“You would come visit personally, Lord Veight?”

Fumino looked surprised, but I wasn’t all that important to the council so it made sense for me to do all these odd jobs. I didn’t have the responsibilities of a viceroy, either. Smiling, I replied, “Of course. I mean just the other day I went to...”

“To where?”

“Err...”

In retrospect, telling a foreign diplomat that a Meraldian councilor had gone to the Rolmund empire and meddled in their politics was probably a bad idea. Besides, that was technically confidential.

“I mean, I went to Lotz to discuss a trip to Wa with Viceroy Petore.”

“Come again?”

“If we can establish a trade route between Lotz and Wa, I’m sure all of Meraldia will prosper.”

I hope that fooled her. Fumino peered into my eyes and asked, “You went to Lotz?”

“I did.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds.

“Not Rolmund, but Lotz?”

“Correct. Not Rolmund, but Lotz.”

Shit, she knows. What do I do? After a few seconds, Fumino grinned.

“Very well, then that’s what I shall report to the Chrysanthemum Court.”

“Ah, okay.”

I guess she’s implying that in return for not prying any further I should help her out if she needs anything? Fumino might look like just a merry ninja shrine maiden, but she was a shrewd negotiator. All that spy training probably helped. I cleared my throat and said, “There will be another council meeting in a few days, so why don’t you stay here in Ryunheit until then, Lady Fumino? I can have a room prepared for you.”

“Why, thank you...”

Fumino bowed to me in a very Japanese fashion. I had no doubt now that a reincarnator was somehow involved with Wa.

“Also, there’s a few other things I’d like to ask you. Would you like to join me for dinner? There’s this wonderful Beluzan restaurant that opened recently in Ryunheit. Perhaps some delicious food will make you feel a little more talkative.”

Fumino smiled confidently.

“I may be young, but I’m still a proud member of the Heavenwatchers. You won’t get me to talk that easily.”

“Hehehe, let’s see how long that bravado of yours lasts.”

I'll show you just how terrifying Beluzan cuisine can be.

That evening.

"I hate my asshole of a boss!" Mihoshi Fumino shouted as she pounded the table with her fists.

"Listen to this, Lord Veight, Lady Airia!"

Airia and I stared at the drunken shrine maiden we'd trapped ourselves with. Fahn and Mao, who'd elected to join us, looked a bit put off by her behavior too.

"I'm just a dainty little woman! But he told me to go investigate a foreign country all by myself! That's ridiculous! You guys agree, right!?"

"Ah, yes. Totally ridiculous," I replied reflexively.

"Indeed, it is," Airia said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as Mao and Fahn tried to escape to an adjacent table. *You're supposed to be backing up your councilors here, damn it!* Fumino downed her tankard of rum like it was water, then slammed it down. The plate of skewers sitting in the middle of the table rattled.

"But you know, he's really a good guy deep down! And he says some really cool things! When he assigned me this mission he said, 'Fumino, the Kushin of the Chrysanthemum Court have a duty to listen to others. You must go and listen to the stories of foreigners if you wish to understand them.' That's so cool, don't you think!?"

"Uh, yeah. It is," I muttered.

"Listening to your people is an important part of being a ruler," Airia added.

I was hoping I'd find out more about Wa's connection to reincarnation, but... After a while, Fumino grew tired of talking about her boss and started heckling Airia.

"By the way Lady Airia, what kind of relationship do you have with Lord Veight?"

“Huh?”

“It’s just, the way you look at him is so—”

“L-Let’s talk about something else, okay!?”

Airia’s face was as red as a beet. Though I felt bad for leaving her alone with Fumino, this was probably the only chance I’d get to talk to Mao tonight.

“Hey, Mao, how honorable are these Chrysanthemum Court guys?”

“They have so much integrity it’s sickening. I’ve never met a Kushin who could be bribed. Wa’s government makes sure all goods going in and out of the nation are inspected thoroughly, too.”

Oh yeah, didn’t you get chased out of there ’cause your boss set you up to take the fall for his smuggling operation? If the Chrysanthemum Court had been as corrupt as the old Meraldian Senate there wouldn’t have been any point in visiting Wa, but if they were a competent organization, then it would be best if I paid an official diplomatic visit. Though, even if they were competent, I had the feeling they didn’t hire very competent spies. *Actually, wait.* I told Fumino she needed to sober up a bit, then took her to the balcony.

“Lord Veight, please walk straight.”

“You’re the one who’s stumbling around, not me.”

Fumino staggered from side to side as she followed behind. Once we reached the deserted balcony I turned back to her and said, “There’s no one else here. Do you feel sober now?”

Fumino instantly straightened her back and looked up at me with clear eyes.

“I wasn’t drunk to begin with.”

“I thought as much.”

She didn’t look anything like the stumbling mess she’d been a second ago. It was obvious she’d just been pretending.

“Neither me nor Airia is foolish enough to get drunk when dining with a foreign dignitary, so please stop with the petty tricks.”

“I wasn’t trying to trick you into drinking more or anything.”

I had the feeling this girl was misunderstanding what I was after. “I just want to know more about Wa’s customs and traditions. I invited you here in a personal capacity; I promise I have no ulterior motives here.”

“I see... My apologies.” Fumino held down her hair as a gust of wind passed through the balcony. “I think Wa is a wonderful country. The water is clear, the trees are lush, and in fall you can see endless fields of golden rice stalks.”

“It sounds beautiful.”

Most of my memories of Japan had grown hazy by this point, but Fumino’s description was so similar it brought the nostalgia rushing back.

“I would very much like to visit Wa. Not just to discuss politics, but also to see the country itself.”

Fumino examined my expression for a few minutes, then smiled and bowed. “We would be glad to have you, Lord Veight. I’m sure you would enjoy your stay.”

“Well, I’ll see if I can convince the council to let me go.”

“Thank you very much.” Fumino chuckled and added, “Incidentally, everything I said during dinner was the truth. I was pretending to be drunk, but even so, I wouldn’t be able to tell lies in the presence of a werewolf like you.”

“I see. No wonder I couldn’t smell anything from you.”

“Besides...”

“Besides what?”

Fumino blushed slightly. “I have to act courteously at all times while I’m in Wa, so I quite enjoyed the opportunity to cut loose. Would it be acceptable if I continued pretending to be drunk when we return?”

“Feel free.”

Just don’t bug Airia too much, please. A few days later, we held our next council meeting. When someone mentioned that we should send a diplomat to establish trade relations, naturally I volunteered.

Unlike when I'd gone to Rolmund, I had no need to take soldiers with me this time. We'd be going by sea this time too, so bringing my entire werewolf squad would only complicate things. The cost of fare was quite expensive, and we'd have to waste precious cargo space on more food. Plus, werewolves needed to eat far more than the average human to maintain the energy and mana levels needed for a werewolf transformation.

"So that's why I'm only bringing a few people with me. You wanna come, Fahn?"

I'd decided to consult with Fahn about who I should add to my entourage, since she was basically the shadow don of the werewolves at this point. To my surprise, she made a sad face and said, "I want to come, but I don't think I'd be very helpful."

"Why not?"

Not even the Garney brothers, my squad's biggest troublemakers, dared oppose Fahn. It was thanks to her keeping everyone in line that we'd avoided any incidents in Rolmund.

Fahn looked down, conflicted. After a few seconds of silence, she finally replied, "I mean...you're not like a normal werewolf, Veight. I can never tell what you're thinking."

I could see that. My primary advisors were humans, or demons who used to be humans. I trusted my werewolves to have my back in a fight, but I didn't really go to them for advice. They didn't really understand how humans thought, after all. Sighing, Fahn offered me a wan smile.

"Since I don't know what's going on in your head, I'd just be holding you back. And I don't want that. That's why I haven't been yelling at you as much when you run off alone to do whatever."

"I see."

That certainly explains the lack of scoldings recently. Fahn rested her chin on her hands and looked out the window.

"You've always been a little weird, even when we were kids. But, I mean, it's thanks to your weirdness that we're all alive and happy now. So I've decided

not to get in your way.”

Werewolves tended to act before thinking, but it seemed Fahn had put an awful lot of thought into her decision. *I can't believe I was so focused on my work that I didn't realize this was bothering you. Sorry, Fahn.*

“Thanks, Fahn.”

“Don't mention it. And don't forget, you can still trust me to have your back!”

Grinning, Fahn patted my head like she used to when I was little. *Though I'm not a kid anymore... Well, whatever.*

“I guess I'll take you up on that offer. I'm planning on leaving most of the werewolves behind this time, and I want to put you in charge while I'm gone.”

I was worried Fahn might not accept the promotion to acting commander, but she nodded with a smile. “Roger. You don't have to worry about Airia either.”

“Thanks, I...”

Wait, what'd you just say?

“You're worried she's gonna get mad at you, right?”

“Well...”

I do feel like I'm pushing my responsibilities onto her too often these days. I cleared my throat and pulled a sheaf of documents out of my drawer. “Let's just forget about that. More importantly, the Demon Lord has decided to grant you an official moniker, Fahn.”

“Wait, what?”

“She's impressed by how you've managed the younger members of the werewolf squad, and is expecting great things from you in the future. That, and I put in a good word for you.”

Right now most of the demons in administrative posts were dragonkin. I was the only werewolf. Master didn't want the demon army to be too unbalanced, so she'd asked me to recommend a young werewolf I trusted to be promoted. Among the werewolves around my age, Fahn was the only one I had absolute faith in.

“But I don’t deserve a title...” Fahn backed away, looking flustered—a rarity for her.

I strode forward, cornering her against the wall. “My responsibilities within the demon army have been growing, and I’m part of the Commonwealth Council now too. I need someone to help me out, and you need a title if you’re going to be acting commander of the werewolf squad while I’m gone.”

You agreed, there’s no running away now. Just then, Master warped into the room.

“Veight, have you obtained Fahn’s assent?”

“Yeah, just now. Isn’t that right, Fahn?”

“Hang on a second!”

Sorry Fahn, but I need someone competent to help lower my workload, and you’re the best sacrifice for the job. Master looked from me to Fahn, then sighed.

“Fahn.”

“Y-Yes!?”

“If the demon army’s leadership is composed solely of dragonkin, they will always prioritize issues that pertain to them. That kind of bias is not what the previous Demon Lord wished for.”

Fahn’s nervousness grew tenfold since she was talking to the Demon Lord. In an attempt to help her relax, Master smiled gently and said, “More importantly, Veight is extremely busy working for both the demon army and the humans. He needs people who can support him.”

“I...you’re right.”

The tension drained from Fahn’s expression, and she smiled bashfully at Master. Satisfied, Master raised her staff and solemnly declared, “Werewolf Fahn. You have always strived to protect your comrades, at times using force, and at times using kindness. In recognition of your achievements, I award you the title Lunar Sentinel. May you illuminate the darkness that is the future with the bewitching light of the moon.”

“Th-Thank you!”

Fahn straightened her back and saluted Master. And thus, the demon army’s second werewolf general was born. *Good luck taking care of everyone while I’m gone.*

Now that there was a werewolf general who could be acting commander in my absence, I didn’t have to worry about taking everyone along. I picked just three squads to accompany me: Monza’s squad, which was skilled at covert ops; Jerrick’s squad, which had all the engineers; and Vodd’s squad, which had the best fighters and strategists. Though the real reason I’d picked Vodd was because he’d kept bugging me to take him along, so I’d just filled the final slot with his squad.

“You could just take it easy in Ryunheit with the other old-timers, you know,” I said sulkily to Vodd.

He stroked one of the scars on his face and replied cheerfully, “I can’t take it easy when the grim reaper’s edging closer to my doorstep every day. I still haven’t fought my fill yet, and I’m gonna need more experience if I wanna fight off death himself.”

You really are a battle maniac, you know that?

“Besides, if I just sit on my ass doing nothing, you young’uns’ll catch up to me in no time. I’ve gotta keep getting stronger or I’ll get overtaken.”

Never thought I’d hear the Red Queen Hypothesis in this world. The rest of Vodd’s squad was of the same mind as him, so I had no choice but to bring them all along. Naturally, the Garney brothers and Skuje’s squad complained about being left out, but I really didn’t want to take any more people with me. If I got into any hairy situations, I was planning on running instead of fighting, so fewer guards was better.

“Veight, you gotta take us with you! We’re just as strong as that old geezer!”

“Yeah! Plus we need experience too, don’t we!?” Skuje and the elder Garney whined.

Vodd finished tying his pack and turned to the two of them with a smug grin.

“You kids’ll have plenty of chances later. But who knows how long I’ll be able to keep fighting for.”

“Yeah, learn to respect your elders, you brats,” one of his squadmates added.

“Damn it!” Skuje cursed and stamped his foot.

Before the argument could get any more heated, Fahn stepped in.

“Look, the decision has been made, so stop complaining. You all swore to listen to Veight’s orders, remember? Pack members who don’t listen to the chief can’t be trusted on the hunt.”

“Yes ma’am...”

“Fiiiiiiiiine...”

Nice, you’re already getting used to being in the shoes of a commander.

Honestly, I didn’t want to take any hot-blooded guys with me. If Wa really was like Japan, then diplomacy would be far more useful than aggressive intimidation. I finished packing my own luggage, then turned to Skuje and the Garney brothers.

“I’ll take everyone along the next time I go to Wa. But this is a preliminary trip, so I want to take as few people as possible.”

Aside from my 12 guards, I was just bringing Mao and Parker along. Mao was born and raised in Wa, so his expertise would be helpful. Of course, he’d been exiled from the country, but after talking it over with Fumino, she’d agreed to grant him diplomatic immunity. I was taking Parker because his mastery of necromancy might come in handy for studying reincarnation, and he was the perfect weapon for making Fumino laugh.

I would have preferred to take Kite and Lacy along too, but unfortunately, they were still busy chaperoning Woroy. Reliable as they were, I’d have to do without them for now.

Soon enough, the day of our departure arrived.

“Sorry for leaving you behind again, Airia,” I said apologetically.

“It’s fine. I’ll take care of Rynheit in your absence. And don’t worry, I’ll have

the rest of your werewolves to protect me.”

“Thank you. By the way, do you want anything as a souvenir?”

This time I didn’t make any promises about how quickly I’d get back, but I still felt bad about last time so I offered to get her a present. Blushing, Airia smiled and said, “All I want is for you to return safely... Please, don’t do anything reckless.”

“Gotcha, I’ll be as careful as I always am.”

“That’s not reassuring...” Airia said with a sigh.

Honestly, the last time I was in a life or death situation was when I’d fought the Hero, so I’d say I was doing a pretty good job at not doing reckless things. Once our farewells were over, we went with Fumino to the port of Lotz.

—Fumino’s Missive—

Enclosed within is my report on the man known as Veight. As our intel indicated, Veight is indeed a werewolf. My investigation has confirmed that werewolves can indeed smell lies from people. As a result, I have endeavored to be as truthful as possible when speaking with Veight. Anything that must remain confidential, I’ve told him up front.

Fortunately, this has earned me his trust. However, he has a circle of trusted demon advisors, all of whom are exceptional in their own way. The skeleton necromancer known as Parker’s diplomatic skills are of particular note. I will refrain from going into specifics here in case this message is intercepted, but I shall apprise you of the full details later. Listed below is the information I have discerned regarding Veight’s notable achievements.

-He led the mixed canine-werewolf unit that conquered the trading city of Ryunheit.

-He defended against an attempt to recapture Ryunheit by the industrial city of Thuvan and massacred the 400 soldiers of the invading army.

-He exiled the Sonnenlicht Bishop, Yuhit, who incited the attack on Ryunheit (though they later reconciled).

-He participated in the siege of Thuvan and was responsible for destroying the city gates.

-He helped Ryunheit declare independence from the Meraldian Federation.

-He defeated the fake Hero sent by the Senate and exposed their scheme to the populace.

-He recruited the trading city of Shardier, the pirate city of Beluza, the maritime city of Lotz, the labyrinth city, Zaria, and the city of craftsmen, Veira, into his new alliance. Around this time a significant event took place that shook the demon army, but whatever happened is top secret information, so I know of no specifics. All I know for certain is that there was a change of power, and a new Demon Lord was crowned.

-He defended Zaria from a Senate army 2,000 men strong. From what I've heard, he repelled them all by himself.

-He thwarted the Rolmundian princess Eleora's attempts to invade Meraldia. He then defeated her in a decisive battle at Ryunheit and took her prisoner.

-He was ordained a saint by the Meraldian Sonnenlicht church.

-He spent half a year in Rolmund on some confidential mission.

In other words, almost all the rumors we've heard about him are true. It's certainly unnatural for one man to have accumulated so many accomplishments in such a short span of time. Such cases occur only rarely in history. Incidentally, I have learned from the ninja in Veira that a play covering Veight's actions in Rolmund will debut soon. Though it has been rather dramatized in parts I suspect it will be for the most part accurate. If you wish to know more, I recommend asking the agent in charge of Rolmund.

Regarding Veight's abilities, I have learned that in addition to the standard powers all werewolves have, he is also a skilled mage. His magical talents lie mostly in ancient Meraldian-style strengthening magic and healing magic. Because of his magical aptitude, he's far more powerful than the average werewolf. Completely unarmed, he would still be a match for 30 elite troops. And if the stories I've heard are true, he could likely annihilate a platoon 100-strong by himself, but more dangerous than his physical strength is his

diplomatic skill. My investigation has revealed that almost all of Veight's former enemies ended up joining his side. Taking the above points into consideration, I find it highly likely that Veight is one of the Divine. For now, I intend to travel with him and continue observing him.

P.S. I highly recommend not prying too deeply.

I stowed my pen in my desk, not bothering to cancel my transformation. Fumino's missive was written in Old Dynastic, the official language of Wa, but deciphering it was an easy task for a mage like me. The missive mostly contained information that was publicly available, and was simply affirming that the information was true. That being said, as there was no television or internet in this world, it was important to have agents who could confirm or deny the veracity of any rumors.

The important thing wasn't *what* Fumino had discovered, but that she'd managed to find all this out without being noticed by anyone on the council. Fortunately, she hadn't found anything out about the true Hero, Arshes, or that the demon army was using gunpowder; nor had she learned about our Blast Rifles. Those three things were actually confidential information. It seemed the demon army and the Commonwealth Council were doing a good job keeping a lid on that information and only telling it to those who absolutely needed to know.

Of course, it was possible Fumino had discovered some of these things and not put them in her missive. I'd need to keep a closer eye on her. That aside, I was surprised to learn Wa had a spy in Veira. *Though, come to think of it, there's that music troupe that plays Japanese-style instruments in Veira. Wa's spy would probably have an easy time fitting in there.* Of course, it was also possible the spy had mixed in with the silk and washi traders in Veira. I'd need to talk with Forne before drawing any meaningful conclusions.

Pretending not to be surprised by the usage of the term "ninja," I turned to Fumino and said, "You're a spy through and through, huh?"

"I am." Trembling slightly, Fumino looked up at me. "But how did you know I was writing this letter?"

“It’d be stranger if I didn’t notice, considering I’m having you watched. Did you really think I wouldn’t post someone to keep an eye on you?”

I grinned, showing her my fangs. We were currently in one of Lotz’s high-class hotels. While it looked innocuous, this hotel had actually been designed by Petore to catch spies. The walls between rooms were thinner than they looked, making it easy to eavesdrop on the adjacent rooms. I’d put Monza’s squad in the room next to Fumino’s, and they’d come to me when they’d heard her start writing something. Pretty simple, really. I stopped smiling and brought my face extremely close to Fumino’s.

“Now it’s my turn to ask questions, Mihoshi Fumino. What exactly is a Divine?” Though she was still trembling, Fumino didn’t reply. Seeing her silent resolve, I decided to threaten her a little. “So you have no intention of answering?”

Fumino twitched, but she kept her lips sealed.

“I-I won’t tell you anything.”

“There’s plenty of ways to make someone talk. The easiest of them would be to just kill you and get my answers from your spirit instead.”

I had no intention of doing that of course, but with Parker’s help, it was technically possible. Killing her would be a piece of cake, too. Fumino paled, but she still didn’t break.

“D-Do your worst. I won’t talk, no matter what.”

“I see you’ve resolved yourself to your fate. But really, answering my questions would be the most peaceful way to resolve this predicament.”

We can get the intel out of you one way or another, so you may as well confess and save yourself a painful death. But to my surprise, Fumino said in a flat voice, “Members of the Chrysanthemum Court are ensorcelled never to reveal their secrets, even after death. If you don’t believe me, just try it. That will at least mean whoever succeeds my post won’t have to suffer the same fate.”

I smelled no lie from her. She was telling the truth. Though she dressed like a shrine maiden, she acted like a ninja and had the spirit of a samurai.

“I respect that resolve of yours.”

My past life self would have spilled the beans in an instant if a werewolf had been threatening me. Professional spies really were well-trained.

“Alright, I’ll be honest. I have no intention of killing you. If you refuse to talk, then I’ll just have to wait until you change your mind. Feel free to send this letter back to your bosses too.”

Fumino gave me a dubious look. “You’re really okay with that?”

“Yep.”

If I had someone tail her when she sent it, I’d be able to learn more about who was in Wa’s spy network. As for the contents of the letter, it was all information that was either public or would be public soon. So I didn’t really mind Wa learning any of it. Moreover, I’d more or less surmised that the word “Divine” referred either to reincarnators, or people somehow related to them. There was no need to ask just to confirm my hypothesis.

I canceled my transformation and said, “You seem to be trying to sniff out my true identity, but I’m afraid you’ll never find out.”

“How can you be so sure?”

I smiled wryly and said, “Because I’m not sure of it myself.”

“What do you mean?” Fumino asked, looking genuinely confused. *Welcome to the club.*

Honestly, there were times where I was unsure of who I truly was. My body was that of a werewolf, but my soul was human. I was a vice-commander in the demon army, but I was also on the Commonwealth Council of a human nation. I’d lived most of this life in Meraldia, but it was Japan’s culture that was still ingrained into my mind. Was I a werewolf or human? Warrior or bureaucrat? Meraldian or Japanese?

Until now I’d always prioritized my responsibilities as the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, but in my heart, I always wondered. Since meeting Airia, I’d had to deal with Yuhit’s scheme to recapture Ryunheit, confront the Hero Arshes, stop

Eleora's invasion, then fight the Doneiks family. Each and every one of those events had forced me to make difficult decisions. Somehow or the other I'd made it through all of those ordeals alive, but it was all due to luck. I hadn't done anything deserving of merit.

Lord Bolshevik's case had been an especially tricky decision to make. As the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, sparing someone who'd given demons safe haven was the right thing to do. But as Eleora's aide, letting him live was less than ideal. There was no guarantee he wouldn't come back to cause Eleora problems later in her rule. And I still wasn't sure if that had been the right decision to make as a Meraldian councilor. However, as a former Japanese man, I was just glad to have avoided bloodshed.

The more I achieved, the more complicated my responsibilities became. It had been hard enough when I'd been juggling my responsibilities as a demon and my ethics as a human, but now there was so much more I needed to take into consideration for every choice. At the rate I was going, I knew I'd make a mistake eventually. The more I thought about it, the more scared I became of that eventual miscalculation.

But of course, I didn't tell Fumino any of that. I simply smiled at her and said, "If you manage to find out what I am, please let me know. I'm quite curious myself."

"U-Umm, Lord Veight?"

I turned my back to her.

"Sorry for barging into your bedroom. I'll leave you in peace now."

If only the old Demon Lord was still alive, I could have asked him what I should do. I can't believe you just went and died on your own like that. Sighing, I walked out of Fumino's room.

The next day, we boarded a boat and departed Lotz. The ship's white sail billowed in the wind, and its prow cut through the waves.

"Traveling by ship is nice. You can sit back and relax until you reach your destination," I said with a languid smile as I watched the waves from the main

deck. No one was getting seasick this time either, so I didn't have to run around healing people. Ships in this world always sailed in sight of land, but the land we were passing by was just sand, sand, and more sand. The wind was strong too, and the dust made everything look hazy.

"That's the Windswept Dunes," Mao said, noticing what I was looking at.

"It's a massive desert that's existed ever since Wa was formed, long before Meraldia became a nation."

Mao was from Wa, so I wasn't surprised he knew so much about the desert.

"Did you cross the desert when you came here?"

"Most definitely not. The desert is full of dangerous beasts like giant sandworms. Only a scant few caravans know the safe routes through the dunes, and they don't tell them to outsiders."

"So you came by ship then?"

"Yes, I effectively smuggled myself out with the help of a kind sailor. Though my real hardships started after that." Mao sighed as he reminisced on his past. "It was then that I learned it was very difficult to tell a trustworthy person apart from someone who wasn't. Or rather, people you can trust one day might suddenly become untrustworthy the next. It's human nature."

"I understand completely."

I'd had a similar experience in my past life, and I'd often done things that had lost me the trust of others too. Though I'd tried to avoid it in this life, I had no doubt I'd unconsciously broken the trust of someone somehow at least once.

Mao turned to me and grinned. "I'm trusting that you won't hand me over to the Chrysanthemum Court."

"Who knows? If offering you to them will help strengthen diplomatic ties, I wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice you."

I grinned back at him. But Mao's smile didn't waver, and he said, "Then I'll just have to prove myself so useful you won't want to lose me. Once we make landfall, I'll show you one of the best seafood restaurants in Wa."

"Damn, guess I can't hand you over to the Chrysanthemum Court after all

then..." I replied with feigned reluctance. The two of us stared at each other for a few seconds, then broke out laughing. Playing the villain really was too much fun.

With the desert to our left, our ship continued eastward. I was worried something like the Island Kraken might come out to attack us, but hopefully another one wouldn't show up so soon after I'd killed the last. *Though I bet I'll have to kill another one in a few years or so.*

—The Fugitive's Homecoming—

The closer we get to my homeland, the more nervous I become. It's been years since I was exiled for smuggling drugs, but I can still be executed by the authorities if they decide to dredge my crimes back up. Fortunately, I have the might of Meraldia backing me up now. To be more specific, I have the support of the Meraldian councilor Veight. On top of being a councilor, he's also the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander and a skilled mage. I'm confident even a hundred of Wa's bureaucrats wouldn't be able to stop him.

I know Veight is a man of his word. He promised he wouldn't abandon me, so I can count on him to have my back...I hope. Either way, there's very little he stands to gain by throwing me to the wolves. If anything, the cons outweigh the pros. The whole reason I've worked so hard for him until now was to prove I'm a useful ally to have.

Though honestly, working for him is so fun I've stopped worrying so much about whether it makes good business sense to support him or not. Well, if he's planning on selling me out, that might make for an enjoyable game in and of itself...but I probably shouldn't be thinking like that. Honestly, I'm amazed by how nonchalant I am about all of this. Granted, once we reach Wa, I'll need to take my dilemma a little more seriously. Regardless of how Veight's visit goes, I'm sure I'll end up confronting my past in one form or another. The thought makes my palms sweaty.

Veight seems to notice my nervousness and turns to look at me. "Don't worry," he says with a confident grin. Somehow, that's all it takes to make my worries go away. Good grief. He's so nice it makes it hard to do business with

him around.

After a few days, our ship reached Wa's waters, and we made landfall at the nearest port. *We're finally here, huh?* Sadly, my first taste of Wa left me a little disappointed. The country was definitely modeled after Japan. People walked around in clothing that resembled kimonos, and the buildings were all made of wood. The scenery was authentic enough to impress even a pure-blooded Japanese guy like me. The problem was that it looked like the Edo period, not modern-day Japan. Of course, I was just comparing it to what I'd seen in period dramas, since I hadn't actually lived through the Edo period myself.

Regardless, this definitely felt like Edo-era Japan. That wasn't necessarily a problem, but it meant this country hadn't been founded by a modern-day reincarnator. If it had, the style wouldn't be so ancient. That being said, Ryunheit looked like an old European tourist attraction, so it might be too soon to jump to conclusions. I kept my thoughts to myself for now and disembarked with the others.

"It's been so long since I was last here... This is Nagie. It's a port town much like Lotz. They even produce salt here," Mao said with a nostalgic smile.

Fumino turned back to me and added, "We could take a ship all the way to the capital, but the weather this time of year would mean we'd need to make a long detour. It's only a two-day trip on horseback, so I suggest we go by land."

"Sounds good to me. Can we count on you to procure lodging and transportation for us?"

"But of course," Fumino replied with a grin.

While her mission technically put us on opposite sides, I had the feeling she was fundamentally a good person. Old Dynastic was the official language of Wa, and it was spoken by all of its citizens. Master had taught all of her disciples the language so Parker and I could hold a conversation in it, but the rest of my werewolves couldn't understand a word.

I didn't want any of them accidentally causing a scene, so I had everyone wait at the pier while Fumino booked an inn for us. The pier was quite lively. Sailors and dockhands loaded and unloaded cargo while merchants struck deals and drew up contracts. Fishing boats bobbed in the water nearby, and the smell of

the sea pervaded everything. It felt like I'd walked into the middle of a historical play.

As I was taking in the sights, I sensed someone approaching me from behind. Instantly wary, I took a half step forward and turned around.

"Whoa... Sorry about that."

Standing behind me was a young man clad in a kimono. There was a fake smile plastered on his face. I didn't like his scent one bit; he had the smell of a consummate con man. Taken aback by the intensity of my glare the man gave me a flustered bow and hurried away. But in his panic, he ended up bumping into Mao next. The moment before he made contact, Mao lowered his center of gravity and planted his feet firmly in the ground.

"Hmph!"

Wait, what? I reflexively enhanced my kinetic vision with magic and watched as Mao grabbed the man's right wrist, stepped forward, and pushed the man back while twisting his arm.

"Gaaaah!"

The man screamed and tried to break free, but Mao's hold on his arm was absolute. The only part of his arm that the man could move was his shoulder, and when he tried to twist, it only made the wristlock Mao had him in even more painful. I hadn't been able to follow everything perfectly, but it looked like Mao had just used an aikido move.

"Oh, what's going on over here?" Vodd asked, getting up from the crate he was sitting on and casually walking over. Though he looked relaxed, there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. However, he didn't even need to step in, since Mao had the man firmly under his control.

"Lord Veight, this man is a pickpocket. He just tried to steal my wallet."

"I see."

Come to think of it, he was trying to get strangely close to me a second ago. Moreover, the man had Mao's wallet in his right hand. He was clearly someone

who had a lot of practice in relieving rich foreigners of their valuables. Unfortunately, he'd picked the wrong group to steal from today.

"Tie him up, guys. If he tries to run, feel free to rip his limbs off."

"N-Nooooo!"

The pickpocket paled as my werewolves surrounded him. Before long the pier's guards showed up and took him away. It appeared he was a repeat offender, so they'd been keeping an eye on him from the start. But this time he'd tried to steal from a foreign diplomat, so the punishment would be far harsher than usual. He really had picked the wrong group to mess with. I was more interested in that technique Mao had used than the pickpocket, though.

"Mao, what was that technique you used back there?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean Kogusoku."

Kogusoku? According to Mao's explanation, the technique he'd used was from a martial arts style known as Kogusokujutsu. In Japanese, Gusoku referred to an ancient samurai's breastplate and helmet, while Kogusoku referred to their greaves, pauldrons, and gauntlets.

"Even in Meraldia there are times where two armored enemies end up settling a fight with close-quarters grappling, right? This is a martial art designed for fighting armored enemies bare-handed."

The original martial art was known as Gusokujutsu, but over time it had been refined and simplified into Kogusokujutsu, which focused more on non-lethal techniques and ways to deal with unarmored foes.

"Why does a merchant like you know martial arts?"

"I learned it from a local dojo back when I still lived here. It's useful for dealing with drunks and pickpockets. Plus, it comes in handy for incapacitating nosy customs officials."

"Makes sense."

"It's a martial art designed for holding people down, so it's perfect for merchants like me. After all, techniques that involve throwing or punching or kicking could end up damaging the merchandise."

It was kind of surprising that techniques originally designed to bring down armored soldiers were useful for merchants too. Either way, both the name of this martial art and its origin were lifted straight out of Japan. This was a good sign.

“I’m kinda interested in learning myself. Where can I find a dojo for it?”

“You’re a werewolf, why bother learning martial arts? You don’t need technique to rip someone’s arm off.”

“I guess, but...”

While I was primarily interested because I was looking for clues on reincarnators, there were other benefits to learning martial arts.

“Techniques to subdue your opponent without killing them are important too,” I said. “Especially in peacetime. If I need to capture someone outside of a war zone, it’ll be a lot better if I don’t kill everyone who gets in my way.”

“You have a point there.”

Don’t look too impressed, that’s only half the reason I wanna learn Kogusoku.

“There are Kogusokujutsu dojos in every city, but I learned here in Nagie. If you’re curious, why don’t I take you to the dojo after lunch?”

“Yeah, that sounds perfect. I was hoping to take a look around town anyway.”

This detour might prove to be a very fruitful endeavor.

Nagie was a port town, but it was also nestled against a mountain, so the streets sloped upward as you went inland. The view was spectacular, especially since the mountain didn’t obstruct sunlight. Fumino hadn’t told me the city’s exact population, but I guessed it was around a few thousand. Maybe even 10,000 if the population density was higher than it looked.

The city was a vital naval base for the Chrysanthemum Court, so it had plenty of military facilities too. According to Mao, the ships Wa’s navy used were rather outdated. I took a look at their fleet for myself as me, Mao, and Fumino ate rice balls at a restaurant overlooking the ocean. My werewolves couldn’t use chopsticks, so I’d asked Fumino to pick a place that had food you could eat

with your hands.

“The rice here is pretty different from the variety you’ll find in Meraldia... What do you think of it?” Fumino asked excitedly as she tried to gauge my reaction. She was probably trying to find out if I was a reincarnator or not.

Wa’s rice was the short-grained, sticky variety, just like the kind you found in Japan. It was definitely nostalgic, and I couldn’t help but smile as I savored the flavor. I washed down the rice ball with soup, which also tasted just like the miso soup in Japan. Overall it was a little bit lacking compared to the miso soup I’d had in my past life, but it was still delicious.

“It’s quite good, though I think the other werewolves are probably craving meat. Do you think you could order some grilled fish for us?”

“Of course. Right away.”

Soon enough, a waiter brought a plate heaped high with salt-grilled fish. The fish was charred to perfection, and easily melted in my mouth. All of the dishes here were distinctly different from the foods I’d tried in Meraldia and Rolmund. Those had all used copious amounts of seasonings and oil to make heavy but hearty dishes. To use a weird analogy, they’d been like a knight in full plate armor. Meanwhile, Wa’s food was like the precise swordsmanship of a master fencer. It was lightly seasoned, but the flavors of the ingredients were all accentuated perfectly. Personally, I was equally fond of both types of cuisine.

Once I’d eaten my fill, I took a look around the restaurant. Its design was identical to the soba restaurants I’d visited back in Japan. From what I remembered of Japanese history, this style of restaurant with chairs and tables hadn’t existed back in the Edo period. They’d just used floor cushions. It seemed ancient and modern Japanese culture had fused together in Wa. *Come to think of it, I don’t see kanji writing anywhere.* There were a few wall scrolls with characters that looked similar to kanji, but they were distinctly different. *I wonder what the story behind that is.*

After lunch, we climbed up the sloping streets to the city’s apex. That was where the dojo Mao had once studied in was located. The dojo itself looked far plainer than I’d expected.

“Welcome, Veight. I am Seiga, the master of this dojo. This is the first time I have ever received guests from Meraldia.”

An old man with white hair and a white beard came out to greet us. He had an air of composure, and though he didn’t appear particularly well-built, I could tell he’d trained extensively. His arms and shoulders may have looked slender, but I knew they were as hard as steel.

Mao bowed to Seiga and said, “It has been a long time since we last met, Master.”

Seiga looked down at Mao and said in a deep voice, “Mao, I heard you were forced to flee Wa after you were implicated in a drug deal. Why have you returned?”

“I was tricked by my employer, then set up to take the blame for his misdeeds. I am here now as part of Lord Veight’s entourage, and have been promised diplomatic immunity.”

At that, Seiga’s expression brightened, and he smiled jovially. “I see, I see. In that case, you are welcome. Good grief, for a moment I was worried I would have to shelter you from the authorities.”

“Thank you, Master.”

I guess the master-disciple relationship is the same no matter where you go. Seiga’s demeanor reminded me of my own master. Seiga studied Mao for a few minutes, then turned to me.

“My disciple’s bearing has changed significantly, and he has the face of a scoundrel now, but I can see that he’s still the same person inside. I have no doubt that is thanks to you, Veight.”

“Oh no. If anything he’s the one who’s been helping me, not the other way around.”

There were plenty of capable merchants in Ryunheit, but Mao was the one I relied on the most. Since he wasn’t a Ryunheit native, he was at a disadvantage compared to the city’s other traders, but he worked harder than everyone else to make up for that handicap. His strong work ethic had ended up saving me more times than I could count. Sure, he was corrupt in the sense that he skirted

customs laws and fudged his taxes, but he wasn't truly evil.

I went on to tell Seiga all about Mao's recent exploits. Once he was sufficiently disillusioned about his disciple's virtuousness, I moved on to the main topic.

"I know I'm a werewolf, but I'm interested in learning Kogusokujutsu. It would be an honor to learn from you." I placed my hands on the floor and prostrated myself before Seiga.

"I have heard that werewolves are strong enough to tear through armor with their bare hands. What use would my meager techniques be to you?"

"Part of our duties include patrolling the streets and keeping them safe. However, if we used our full strength as werewolves against every petty criminal, our city would be full of corpses. Subjugation techniques are very important if we are to integrate ourselves into human society."

Seiga thoughtfully considered my words. "Hrm...I suppose I could show you a demonstration."

"Thank you."

I got to my feet and started to walk over to Seiga, but he held out a hand to stop me.

"No, I know my techniques will not work on you. Your stance is that of a Wa warrior's. The fact that you have understood and incorporated what little you've seen of this art in the short time since your arrival speaks volumes to your experience."

"Err, I think you're exaggerating a little here..."

Mao's movements had been easy to pick up on only because I'd practiced something similar in my past life, but Seiga seemed to think I was some kind of martial arts genius. As I was trying to think of some believable excuse, Vodd got to his feet.

"I dunno what's going on, but if he wants a sparring partner, how about me? I've fought with humans before."

Vodd couldn't speak Wa's language, but he'd more or less picked up what was

going on from our body language. *You really love fighting, huh, old geezer?* I translated Vodd's words for Seiga, and the dojo master accepted Vodd's proposal. The two old men got into position and began sizing each other up.

"Hrmm...there's something different about this man," Seiga muttered.

"Heh. Oh yeah, this guy's good alright. I can tell," Vodd said in a raspy voice.

Both combatants were smiling, but it was clear they were nervous. It was Vodd who made the first move.

"Let's see here..."

Still in his human form, he adjusted his center of gravity slightly forward and prepared to charge. The moment he did, Seiga stepped forward.

"Hm?" Vodd raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Though Seiga had stepped forward, it looked like he was retreating. It hadn't even been a full step either, just a small shuffle forward. The only reason I'd been able to read his movements was because I'd used magic to enhance my vision. While Vodd was still trying to process what Seiga had done, the old martial artist grabbed Vodd's wrist and twisted. His movements were simple, hardly something one would expect of a martial artist, but even so, the end result was effective.

"Hwah!?"

Vodd flipped through the air from the force of Seiga's twist. However, Vodd quickly recovered from his surprise and managed to reorient himself well enough to land on his feet. His wrist was free, and the two fighters were now at a distance where they'd need short swords to hit each other. They were too far to grapple, but too close to use large weapons. The exchange had lasted only an instant. Now the two of them circled each other once more, the wooden boards creaking underneath their feet. After a few seconds of glaring, both of them suddenly dropped their stances and grinned.

"Hahahaha! Splendid!" Seiga bellowed.

"Damn, that sent shivers down my spine. I thought you used magic there for a second."

Okay, what the heck just happened? I'm a mage, not a fighter. Someone please explain this to me.

“What I used just there was a basic technique known as the wrist throw. Normally it would leave my opponent on his back with his wrist locked, but as you can see, your friend splendidly evaded my technique.”

Right. Vodd nursed his wrist and smiled bitterly at me.

“Ya know, I only figured it out cause I saw Mao take that guy down at the port. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have been able to slip out of that.”

Back then, Mao had used his whole body as a fulcrum to suppress his opponent. However, Seiga had managed to do the same with just one hand while also being further away.

“I'm impressed you figured it out just by watching me,” Mao said with a hint of surprise.

Vodd smirked and replied, “Sure, your master's a lot better at it than you, but the basic idea's the same. So I jumped before he could flip me and bought enough time to reorient myself.”

Vodd was old, but he was still sharp. However, even he'd been caught off guard by Seiga's technique.

“You should try learning that technique too, Veight. That guy's sense of balance is amazing. The way he moves is art.”

“He's that good?” Curious as I was, I knew I wouldn't be able to defend against it like Vodd had, so I decided not to tempt fate.

Afterwards, Seiga gave a brief lecture on Gusokujutsu, and the more I heard, the more convinced I was that it had come straight from Japan—especially since when he was talking about specific techniques, he used Japanese terms to describe things. Yet he didn't seem to know Japanese itself. I wanted to dig a bit deeper, but I still had official business to take care of first. I promised Seiga I'd return to study under him for a few days after I finished negotiating with the Chrysanthemum Court, then set off for the capital.

We crossed the mountain pass leading out of Nagie and followed the highway to the capital. Wa was much smaller than Meraldia, so the distance between towns was less. Meraldia had been unoccupied before Draulight had led his slaves out of Rolmund and pioneers had come from the south, so the early settlers had put their cities down wherever they felt like it. In contrast, Wa's layout had been planned, with cities spaced at even intervals away from the capital.

"I used to lead caravans down this highway in the past. My job was transporting Nagie's salt to the capital," Mao said with a wistful look as he stared at the road. "By the time I realized the 'salt' I was carrying was actually drugs, the authorities were already on my tail. I had to use Kogusokujutsu to beat down the customs officials that went after me and fled to Nagie by horse. From there I made my way onto a ship and escaped."

"What would have happened to you if you got caught?"

Mao looked off into the distance, his eyes devoid of emotion. "I would have been beheaded for sure. The quantity of drugs I was carrying was too large for my punishment to be simple exile or imprisonment."

"What happened to your boss?"

If Mao was going to be killed just for transporting it, his boss must have faced an even more humiliating death. But to my surprise, Mao shook his head.

"From what I've heard, he got off scot-free... Miss Fumino, do you know anything about a store in the capital called Kingondou?"

Fumino turned back to Mao and put a hand on her chin. "Kingondou's that pharmacy that also sells foodstuffs, right? I'm pretty sure it's still in business. At the very least, I haven't heard any unsavory rumors about it."

"Why's it still allowed to be in business?" I asked Fumino, confused. She gave me a troubled smile and said, "I'm in charge of foreign affairs so I'm afraid I cannot say. But if what Mao said is true, then this is definitely something that needs to be investigated."

"Yeah, this sounds like a public safety issue."

"Y-You're right...I'll be sure to report this to my superiors."

Wa's capital was a fortress city. The whole thing was protected by a deep moat and stone walls—the complete opposite of an open city like Nagie.

“Our capital is Wa's oldest city. The other cities and towns were only built after Wa started expanding its influence.” Fumino explained the city's history to us as we crossed the bridge leading to the main gates. “We've never once been in a war, so the other cities have no defensive fortifications.”

Even without her explanation, I could tell the city was ancient at a glance. The streets reminded me of Kyoto, but unlike ancient Kyoto, there were plenty of stone and brick buildings. Whatever architectural style had existed before Wa's founding had probably influenced the city's construction. The center of every major street was also paved in stone.

“Horses and palanquins use the paved sections of road, so pedestrians who aren't in a hurry tend to use the dirt lanes on either side. Though on rainy days they turn to mud, so people have no choice but to use the stone paths.”

So kind of like how modern roads are for cars, with sidewalks on either side for people. As far as I could tell, most pedestrians stuck to the side lanes, and there were a number of food stalls dotting the street. There were regular intersections every couple dozen meters, much like how the old part of Kyoto was designed. While many of the finer details differed, it was obvious Wa's culture and customs were derived from Japan. *Yeah, this country definitely has something to do with reincarnators.*

The Chrysanthemum Court's castle was situated in the exact spot the imperial palace would be in Kyoto, but unlike the palace in Kyoto, the castle here was protected by more stone walls and a moat. There was no inner citadel like the kind you saw in Edo-era castles, but there were plenty of watchtowers. I was curious why there were gunports on the walls, but I didn't want to ask Fumino about it since it might give her hints about my true identity. *Has Wa developed muskets already?*

Fumino led us into the Chrysanthemum Court's castle and guided Parker, Mao, and me into one of its luxurious waiting rooms. My werewolf guards were

told to wait in a separate room. This room was the first I'd seen with a tatami floor. I'd expected more places to have tatami since Wa was clearly Japanese-inspired, but it seemed in this world tatami was a luxury. Fumino and I sat down with our legs folded under us in seiza, but Parker just plopped down on his butt and hugged his knees.

"I've been wondering this for a while, but why are there so few chairs in this country?" he asked.

"Parker, you've gotta sit on your knees. Look, like this."

"That pose looks rather painful so I'd rather not."

"You're made of bones—do you even feel pain anymore!?" I shouted.

Fumino stifled a chuckle. Wiping a tear out of the corner of her eye, she turned to me and asked, "Y-You're quite...w-well-informed about our customs."

"Hm? Of course I am. I'm here on a diplomatic mission, it's only natural that I'd study up on your traditions before visiting," I answered casually.

Fortunately, I'd prepared an explanation for my unnatural familiarity with Japanese culture beforehand. I knew at some point my inherent Japanese-ness would come out, so I'd planned ahead.

"Wa is one of Meraldia's neighbors, so it's hardly surprising that we'd try to find out as much about it as possible. It's no different than you coming to Meraldia to investigate, Lady Fumino."

"I-I see." Fumino nodded.

Parker suddenly exclaimed, "I just realized, why try and sit in such a difficult pose when I can simply remove my leg bones and emulate it? See, look, I just have to detach them and fold them under me!"

"Please stop. You're gonna terrify everyone in the room!"

This time, Fumino couldn't hold back her laughter. Sighing, I warily looked around the room. I could sense there were people watching us, and that they were doing their best to hide themselves.

There was one person hiding under the floor and another in the ceiling, as well as two people behind the sliding screens on either side of the room. None

of them were making any noise, and as far as I could tell they weren't armed. Their clothes didn't rustle when they moved, so I assumed they were wearing some manner of ninja outfit. *For now, I'll keep pretending like I haven't noticed anything.*

After a few minutes, a man dressed in an elegant kimono walked into the room. He seemed middle-aged, but he was in good shape and carried himself like a warrior. Of particular note was the fact that he made no sound as he walked.

"My apologies for the wait, Lord Veight," he said.

Once he was seated, Fumino introduced us. "Lord Veight, this is my superior, Mihoshi Tokitaka. He is a prominent member of the Chrysanthemum Court, and the chief of the Heavenwatchers. He also happens to be a distant relative of mine."

So he's Wa's spy boss, huh? I guess that makes him something like the director of the CIA. From the looks of it, he was also a pretty skilled fighter. His kimono looked like one of those informal robes people used to wear during the Heian period. Though he appeared unarmed, I heard the faintest metallic click as he sat down. He definitely had something hidden up his sleeves—literally. Smiling gently, Tokitaka bowed to me.

"Thank you for taking the time to travel all this way to our humble nation. I will do my best to ensure negotiations go favorably for both of us."

"I appreciate the kind words. I would very much like to build a bond of friendship between our two nations."

We started off with some generic pleasantries. But going on like this would be boring, so I decided to throw Fumino a curveball.

"Is this the 'asshole boss' you were referring to when we went drinking, Lady Fumino?"

"Hwah!?" Fumino's expression stiffened. I glanced briefly in Tokitaka's direction and noticed he was smiling happily.



“That’s right, I’m Fumino’s asshole boss. I’ve done nothing but cause her trouble her whole life.”

“Th-That’s not true at all!” Fumino quickly recovered her wits and started bowing her head over and over. “I’m deeply grateful that you agreed to take me in from the branch family! I swear I will repay this debt someday! And Lord Veight, please don’t pluck my words and tell them to others without context!”

Hey, I’m just telling your boss what his spy’s saying about him. The real reason I’d brought that up was because I’d wanted to gauge what kind of relationship Fumino and Tokitaka had.

Smiling, Tokitaka said, “I realize it’s not good manners to praise your relatives in the presence of guests, but I would just like to set the record straight. Fumino is an exemplary field agent. One of my very best, in fact. So please do not judge her too harshly, Lord Veight.”

“Oh no, I know firsthand just how good she is at her job.”

She’d managed to investigate so much in such a short time, after all. *I might as well tell him that, actually.* He probably didn’t know the full details of what had transpired yet, since I knew Fumino’s missive was still in her sleeve. *I can’t wait to see the look on his face when I tell him how much I’ve discovered.*

That aside, I could tell Tokitaka was a good boss. By praising his subordinate in the presence of guests, he simultaneously showed how much he valued Fumino, while also giving her more reason to be loyal to him. *I wish I could have had a boss like this in my past life...* Beside me, Fumino blushed furiously and hid her face in her hands.

“I-I don’t understand...why would you praise me even though I insulted you?”

What are you so surprised about? He just took this opportunity to show off how tolerant he is. I had a feeling I’d get along quite well with Tokitaka. He took a sip of the tea one of the servants brought him and grinned at me.

“The Chrysanthemum Court plans to hold an official meeting with you tomorrow. I’m hoping you might be willing to share your business with me first though.”

It sounded like he wanted to hold preliminary talks right now. That made sense, considering it'd be more awkward if I made any unreasonable demands tomorrow in a public setting rather than now, in private. From the looks of it, the Chrysanthemum Court was taking these negotiations seriously; this was the first time a Meraldian diplomat had come to discuss trade. My job was to find out whether trade between our two countries on the national level was possible, and if so what the details of that trade agreement would be. I'd already talked with the other councilors, and we'd decided on what concessions I was authorized to make, as well as what our priorities were.

"In order to bolster Meraldia's economy, we wish to make some manner of trade deal with Wa," I said. "Naturally, in return for your goods and technology, we would be willing to offer our own."

"I see. We are already connected by a stable sea route. Are there any goods in particular you wish to trade for?"

Hmm, what should I tell him? Actually, there's no point in hiding it I guess.

"Grain, primarily. In order to help feed Meraldia's growing population, we would like to start cultivating a staple grain crop. Wa's rice is high-quality, and we believe it makes for a good candidate."

These past few months had proven that humans and demons could live together in peace, as long as neither side was starving. In order to prevent any famines that might cause rifts between the races in the future, I wanted to introduce more staple crops into Meraldia—especially ones that were suited for Meraldia's climate.

Tokitaka's expression turned serious, though his smile remained. "Rice, you say? I hear Meraldia has its own variety of rice. Why would you want ours?"

It felt like he was implying "Is the reason you want *our* rice so badly because you're secretly a reincarnator?" I put on my best business smile and replied, "The reason for that is simple. Different varieties of rice grow best in different climates."

Beluza and Lotz specialized in growing long-grain rice, the kind that was used in paellas and the like, but that species of rice was weak to the cold. It grew well enough in the warm coastal cities, but it wasn't a viable staple crop in the cities

that lay further inland. That made sense, considering it wasn't native to Meraldia in the first place. Outside of coastal cities, wheat was Meraldia's staple crop. Meanwhile, short-grained rice was hardy enough that it had been grown as far north as Hokkaido.

The previous Demon Lord had been aware of that as well, and he'd constantly been searching for a rice crop that was resistant to the cold. If he'd had one, he could have expanded Meraldia's agricultural production significantly. He'd even accounted for the possibility that such a rice crop didn't exist, and had drafted a selective breeding program to use as a backup. There was no guarantee this world's version of Japanese rice was cold-resistant, but even if it wasn't we needed to gather as many species of rice as possible for that selective breeding backup plan.

After considering my response for a few minutes, Tokitaka finally said, "I'll have to consult the other Kushin and our agricultural specialists to decide whether or not we're willing to trade our rice seeds. Would you mind satisfying a curiosity of mine, though? Why ask for our rice, specifically? It has a distinctive flavor, and I was under the impression that Meraldia's staple grain was wheat."

I'd been expecting that question. The whole explanation would take too long, so I decided to give Tokitaka the summarized version.

"The yield and cultivation process of rice has a lot to do with it, but the main reason is that it's a very stable crop. There are a few other things I want to discuss too, so I'll give you the full explanation tomorrow. More importantly, these are the other goods we were interested in buying from Wa..."

I took out the documents outlining all the goods the various cities of Meraldia were interested in and started explaining to Tokitaka what we wanted and why.

The next day, we met with the full complement of the Chrysanthemum Court. There were 20 Kushin in total, all of them men and dressed in informal kimonos. Each Kushin had a different department they were in charge of, and they usually met in councils of just a few people. The reason everyone had gathered today was because my negotiations involved the whole country.

After a brief round of introductions, I immediately launched into my explanation of why Meraldia wanted Wa's rice. "Meraldia's staple grain crop is wheat, but wheat's yield per plant isn't as large as rice's."

At least, that's what the old Demon Lord told me. I had no reason to believe wheat and rice functioned differently in this world. The council seemed interested in what I had to say, and they nodded enthusiastically, waiting for me to continue. Feeling a little nervous, I nevertheless moved on to part two of my explanation.

"Rice requires a warmer climate and more water to grow, as well as more farmhands to properly take care of, but it can also support a much larger population than wheat or barley."

For Meraldia, the southern cities would be far more suited to growing rice than the north. The Senate had forced population caps on the southern cities, but if we could start growing rice, we'd be able to bolster our population growth significantly. Plus, unlike wheat, the more effort you put into growing your rice, the more plentiful the harvest was. In that sense, it was highly efficient. This world's agricultural technology was still developing, and as it improved, rice's yields would become even more bountiful.

"Moreover, rice is easy to process and preserve. Wheat needs to be milled into flour before it's edible, whereas for rice, all you need to do is thresh it."

It was only after coming to this world that I'd realized how time-consuming milling was. On the other hand, threshing rice was easy, and it spoiled a lot slower than flour. The Kushin seemed pretty happy that I was praising their country's grain.

"I see... I never considered that there might be such a difference in our two grains."

"To think the rice we've taken for granted was such a valuable resource."

Yep, that's absolutely right. I know exactly how you guys feel. However, that wasn't the only reason I wanted to import Wa's rice. This was top secret information the old Demon Lord had told me, but apparently genetic mutations occurred more frequently in rice than in most other crops, and it was very easy to breed for those selective mutations. For example, red rice was very resistant

to pests and the cold, so its genes would be useful to transplant into other rice varieties.

If I could collect a large variety of rice seeds, I might even be able to produce a strain that could grow in northern Meraldia. *Hopefully by the time that happens, the divide between north and south will be gone.* The old Demon Lord had left behind various selective breeding methods in his notes, so I'd be able to speed up the process a good deal, too. It was amazing how much he'd known about all sorts of subjects—from ballistics to rice cultivation. If I knew even half as much as he had, I'd be able to do a lot more for Meraldia, but unfortunately, my knowledge was lacking. *As a fellow reincarnator, I've gotta work harder to live up to his legacy.*

Incidentally, wheat was a very good staple crop too, but its ideal soil and climate conditions were very different from rice's. Relying too much on a single crop ran the risk of famine during bad years, so I wanted to make both rice and wheat widely cultivated across Meraldia. In this case, we'd have a stable food supply that could weather sudden changes in climate or soil composition. That latter piece of information wasn't top secret, so I explained that to the Chrysanthemum Court as well.

As I talked, the Kushin nodded along while exchanging glances with each other. Those subtle gestures felt very Japanese to me. The average Meraldian might not have noticed, but of course I was sensitive to those kinds of things. Personally, I found the Kushins' demeanor quite pleasant. Once I finished my speech, one of them leaned forward and said, "I am from the Inada family, which is in charge of agricultural affairs within Wa. I must say, Lord Veight, your speech on the merits of crop diversity was quite fascinating."

"Thank you very much."

Most of it had been cribbed from the lecture the old Demon Lord had given me. However, it seemed to have impressed this Inada guy, at least.

"Truly, I am awed by the depth of your research. Are you also in charge of agricultural affairs in Meraldia?"

"No, I'm just a simple vice-commander who happens to be part of both the

demon army and Meraldia's Commonwealth Council."

If I had to say, my specialty was diplomacy and military affairs. Though I was an amateur at both, so it was a bit presumptuous of me to call it my specialty.

Inada nodded respectfully and said, "So, despite being a military man, you have spent a great deal of time researching farming techniques. I admire your dedication."

I realized he was just trying to flatter me, but the praise made me feel good all the same. Inada exchanged glances with a few other Kushin, then turned back to me.

"Thank you for giving us an overview of Meraldia's situation and international policy," he said. "We are more than willing to sell our rice seeds to you, for the right price of course. If you so desire, we would not mind teaching you our cultivation methods as well."

"Thank you very much!"

They'd probably try to overcharge us for the seeds, so it'd be up to my negotiating skills to haggle them down. Wa cultivated wheat in small quantities, so I was planning on offering some of Meraldia's wheat seeds and farming techniques in return. If they wanted, I was willing to offer up our millet too. Millet had a bad reputation, but it was hardy enough to grow in places where rice and wheat would die. It could grow in most conditions, and it was highly nutritious. Wa was bordered by desert on one side and ocean on the other, so it didn't have much territory, but if they had millet, they'd be able to expand their arable land to include parts of the desert. I imagined it'd be a pretty good deal for them.

I'd managed to get the biggest issue resolved, but there were a few other minor items the other viceroys had been interested in trading for, and I wanted to see what other technologies Wa would be willing to exchange with us. For example, I knew Wa was interested in our shipbuilding techniques. As a maritime nation, Wa needed a modern fleet both for their navy and their merchant ships. However, it seemed they didn't know much about shipbuilding. Meanwhile, the residents of southern Meraldia were descendants of a seafaring

folk who'd crossed the Sea of Solitude to reach this continent. They were master shipwrights and navigators. There was no reason we couldn't offer up our expertise to Wa, so long as we didn't divulge military secrets.

We also discussed creating a Meraldian district in Nagie so Wa could start accepting immigrants. Likewise, Meraldia would create a Wa district in Lotz for Wa people who wanted to move to Meraldia. Unfortunately, this wasn't something I was authorized to approve on my own, so I'd need to discuss it with the other councilors first. Trade talks went on well past noon, but everyone was so engaged that we completely forgot about eating lunch. Of course, no official deals had been signed yet, but I was extremely grateful that Wa's Kushin were open to trying out new and unorthodox things.

Eventually, the Kushin had a dining table brought into the meeting room and we had a late lunch.

"Lord Veight, I think that's enough business talk for one day. Since you went to the trouble of coming all the way here, why not explore our castle after lunch? Fumino, would you be so kind as to guide our guest?" Tokitaka asked politely, and Fumino bowed.

"It would be my pleasure. Is that acceptable to you, Lord Veight?"

"Of course."

This wasn't the kind of place a foreigner would be allowed to wander around unattended. But if Tokitaka was willing to let me explore with a chaperone, I was definitely interested in seeing more of the castle.

As we started eating, one of the Kushin gave me a curious look and said, "Lord Veight, you're quite skilled at using chopsticks."

"Hm? Oh, thank you."

I gave him a smile, but internally I was sweating bullets. I'd started using the chopsticks the servant had brought me without a second thought. They'd left a spoon for me too since I was a Meraldian, but I'd naturally gravitated to the chopsticks. I needed to think of a good excuse for why I could use chopsticks, and fast.

Putting down my plate of grilled mackerel, I bowed to the Kushin and said, “When I decided to visit Wa I studied as much of your customs as possible so as to avoid accidentally doing something rude. I was afraid I had learned how to use them incorrectly though, so I’m glad my etiquette appears to be proper.”

I was honestly impressed I could come up with bullcrap like that on the spot.

The Kushin exchanged glances with his fellow councilmen, then turned back to me with a smile. “We are truly humbled that you would go to such lengths for us.”

“I see you are not only an accomplished general, but a man of culture as well, Lord Veight.”

The Kushins started plying me with platitudes. I realized they just wanted to be polite to their guest, but all this praise still made me a little nervous. Regardless, it seemed I’d managed to deceive them for now. However, I had the feeling they still suspected I was a reincarnator. I swiftly wolfed down my mackerel, miso soup, and rice, then leisurely got to my feet. Wa’s meals were a bit lacking in protein for a werewolf like me, but they still felt nostalgic.

“Excuse me, gentlemen, but I am simply dying to take a tour of your lovely castle. Please lead the way, Lady Fumino.”

“Oh, yes of course. This way.”

I saw the Kushins off with a smile, doing my best to hide how shaken I was.

“How much do you know about the history of the Chrysanthemum Court?” Fumino asked as we walked down a hallway.

“Practically nothing,” I answered truthfully. “Meraldia’s a country with a short history, and it was only after the recent fall of the Senate that we started associating with other nations.”

By land, Wa was separated from Meraldia by the Windswept Dunes, whereas the sea lanes to Wa were controlled by Beluza and Lotz. The Senate hadn’t liked either of those cities, so it had restricted their interaction with Wa as much as possible.

“Moreover, it’s been only a year or so since the demon army left the western forests. The only thing I know about the Chrysanthemum Court is that their spies are very good.”

“Y-You don’t have to keep bringing that up!”

Watching Fumino blush was rather enjoyable. She cleared her throat with a loud cough and launched into a history lesson.

“Ummm, I guess I should start with the founding of Wa... The Windswept Dunes to our west were once a fertile grassland—apparently back then Wa was part of Meraldia.”

“I see...”

Come to think of it, didn’t Master mention that once before too? She lived during the time of the Old Dynasty, which I think is the period Fumino’s talking about. Though she lived in the west, so she probably doesn’t know much about Wa.

“But then, for some reason, the grassland suddenly turned into a desert centuries ago. Our ancestors began to starve, and they fled eastward to look for fertile lands elsewhere. That was how Wa was founded.”

“Right.”

So one of the descendants of the Old Dynasty must have been a reincarnator; and had played an important role in the founding of Wa. As far as I could tell, it was mostly ancient Japanese culture that Wa had inherited, meaning that whatever reincarnator had been involved with Wa had lived centuries ago.

“Do you know when Wa was founded?”

“The histories say it was a thousand years ago.”

That would have been the Heian period for Japan. That also explained why the kimonos worn by the Chrysanthemum Court’s Kushin looked like the ones worn by imperial officials in the Heian era. Wa had most likely been created by a reincarnator from that time period, so it made sense that high-ranking officials wore the kimonos Heian nobles would have worn. However, the cities’ streets were modeled after Edo-era Japan, meaning another reincarnator from that

time must have also been born in Wa. *Does that mean reincarnators periodically pop up in Wa every few centuries? In that case, why were me and the previous Demon Lord born all the way in the west?* There were still too many unknowns.

I must have been silent for quite some time, since Fumino shot me a worried look and asked, “Is something the matter, Lord Veight?”

“Oh no, I was just thinking it’s wonderful that Wa has such a rich and storied history.”

“You’re too kind,” Fumino said with a smile. She led me to a wooden door set into the end of the hallway and opened it. “This room is where we store one of our most valuable treasures. Come, take a look.”

What do we have here? A little wary, I stepped through the doorway. As far as I could tell, it was just an ordinary room. It didn’t seem to be used frequently, and the tatamis smelled fresh.

“Umm, Lady Fumino?”

I turned back to Fumino, confused. She seemed just as confused as me and gestured to the wall.

“Umm, over there. On the wall.”

There was a large canvas framed on the wall, with something written in thick ink on the canvas. I studied the letters for a few seconds, then sighed.

“Sorry, but I can’t read that...”

“Huh? You...can’t?”

Fumino looked genuinely surprised by that. I did have some idea of what this was. The writing was vertical, and the calligraphy looked Japanese. I’d seen similar-looking scrolls occasionally in my past life too. The problem was, the characters were too stylized for me to read. Though I could pick out kanji here and there, the hiragana looked like gibberish to me.

Sighing again, I said, “I’m truly sorry, but those words mean nothing to me.”

After a moment of blank staring, Fumino glanced around the room, then asked, “Can you really not read that?”

“I really can’t.”

The silence stretched on. Fumino was probably thinking that if I was a reincarnator, I should be able to read this.

“Lady Fumino, is this the treasure you were referring to? If you need someone to decipher the text, I could ask Meraldia’s archeological experts to take a look.”

“Oh no, that’s fine. This is indeed one of Wa’s treasures, but...”

Fumino didn’t seem to know how to respond. *Wait, was she actually hoping I could decipher that for her?* Fumino furrowed her brows and frowned at the ground for a few seconds, but then she seemed to get over whatever her problem was and smiled at me.

“This scroll is two hundred years old. It was written by the then-head of the Chrysanthemum Court. I hear it’s very valuable, but I can’t read the words either.”

“I see.”

Fumino’s attempt at probing me had failed, but she’d given me a very important piece of information. These words had almost certainly been written by a Japanese person—just one who lived centuries ago. Either way, if the head of the Chrysanthemum Court had been a reincarnator two hundred years ago, then it was looking more and more likely that the nation itself had been founded by one. It had been the Edo period two hundred years ago. Chances were, the reincarnator themselves had lived a generation or so before that, but even if they’d lived a hundred years on earth, that would still have been the Edo period. The battle of Sekigahara, which marked the start of the Edo period, took place in 1600, so it was easy to calculate the length of the era.

“But to think I can’t read this at all...” I whispered to myself.

I figured I’d be able to read the signature at least, but those kanji didn’t spell a recognizable name either. Of course, it was possible whoever had written this hadn’t been famous in Japanese history, or had gone by a different name here than in Japan.

Turning to Fumino, I asked, “So, do you know what this scroll is supposed to

say?”

“Oh, uhh...let me recite it for you.” She cleared her throat and said in an orator’s voice, “It talks about what our nation’s guiding policies should be. Namely that we should facilitate trade and remove toll stations and customs taxes.”

“I see, I see.”

“It also says that there is nothing more frightening than being betrayed by one of your closest allies, and thus one should endeavor to treat one’s subordinates with courtesy and respect. Oh, and to never let religious institutions arm themselves.”

“Mhmm...”

“Lastly, it mentions that if one wishes to control their nation, they should spread their military to every corner of their territory.”

“Interesting...” I had a pretty good idea of who this guy had probably been, but it was probably better to ask still. “So what was this man’s name?”

“Maestro Oda.”

“I see.”

I sighed to myself. All of that certainly sounded like something Oda Nobunaga would write, but he’d lived in the late 16th century. Two hundred years ago would have been the 1800s, so it couldn’t have been the man himself. Of course, it was entirely possible time moved at a different pace here than on earth, but I had a feeling this was some Oda Nobunaga wannabe.

The whole message seemed so tryhard. However, there was one thing that caught my interest. Back in the Edo period, Oda Nobunaga wouldn’t have been very respected. If you’d wanted to impersonate someone, Tokugawa Ieyasu or Toyotomi Hideyoshi would have been much more respected figures at that time. Perhaps this imposter hadn’t wanted to emulate someone quite that famous. Or perhaps, they had been descendants of the Oda line, in which case, I was a lot more interested in their identity. Had they been direct descendants of the Oda family, or were they the grandchildren of one of his retainers? I was beginning to see why Fumino and her superiors were so interested in tracking

down reincarnators.

Trying to puzzle out their identities was surprisingly fun. However, so long as I didn't know what the Chrysanthemum Court's true intentions were, I couldn't admit that I was a reincarnator. The most troubling development would be if they claimed that because I was a one, I was obligated to support Wa. From what I could tell, past reincarnators had all contributed to Wa's prosperity. I wouldn't be too surprised if the Chrysanthemum Court expected all future reincarnators to do the same. Unfortunately, I couldn't answer those expectations. I was on Meraldia's Commonwealth Council, and one of the pillars of the demon army. At this point, I really couldn't handle any more responsibilities.

Fumino still looked like she wasn't satisfied. "It's a shame...I assumed someone of your caliber would be able to read these words," she muttered.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'm just a lowly, uneducated general."

"O-Oh I didn't mean to insinuate anything of the sort! I truly believe that you're as cultured as you are strong!"

While it really was fun watching Fumino get flustered all the time, I was starting to feel bad for her. *Maybe I should cut back on the teasing.* Regardless, I had no intention of making my reincarnator origins public. Right now I was an important member of both Meraldia's government and demon society. If I started going around telling people I'd actually come from another world, it'd make the people around me uneasy. It would be like an important general or president on Earth saying they were an Atlantean king in a past life or something. Since there was no scientific way to prove I'd been reincarnated, I couldn't exactly back up my claims.

"By the way, was the man who wrote those words a famous leader?"

"That's what I've heard, at least."

Those words were definitely not Oda Nobunaga's. Had Oda Nobunaga himself been reincarnated, Wa would be a very different nation. More likely than not, he would have led Wa's armies in a conquest of Meraldia. Whether he would have been betrayed by his allies before he succeeded was debatable though. Either way, it was obvious from Wa's current situation that this person hadn't

been Nobunaga. In a sense, it was kind of disappointing. However, Fumino looked far more disappointed than me.

“Perhaps this wasn’t the right one for you, Lord Veight...” she muttered again.

She’d probably been hoping I would have been shocked at seeing Japanese here and given away some hint of my true identity. Honestly, I probably wouldn’t have been able to hide my surprise if the writing had been legible. Fortunately, I wasn’t a master of Edo era calligraphy. Pathetic though it was, it seemed ignorance did come in handy at times. At least, that’s what I told myself to feel better about being an uneducated fool.

“Are there any other historical artifacts like this one, Lady Fumino? If so, I’d love to see them.”

“Oh, yes there are. Here, this way.”

As I walked out of the room, I glanced back at the scroll. I was still a little curious about the true identity of its writer.

—The Chrysanthemum Court’s Council—

“Is that true, Lord Mihoshi?” Lord Yakushi asked in a disappointed voice. Nodding, I replied, “According to Fumino’s report, he showed no reaction to the scroll, and seemed wholly uninterested in it.”

Honestly, I was confused. There was no doubt Lord Veight was a Divine, the first to be seen in Wa for a long time now. Despite being a demon, he understood the thoughts and feelings of humans. Moreover, he was quite forward-thinking and surprisingly gentle for a demon. It was hard to believe he was simply a demon who’d studied human mannerisms. In which case, the only logical explanation was that he was a human who’d reincarnated into a werewolf’s body, making him a Divine. He was also unnaturally familiar with Wa’s culture.

Taking all of that into consideration, it was all but certain he was the one. The Final Divine that we’d been waiting for. So why hadn’t he reacted to that scroll?

Lord Kaibara seemed to be thinking the same thing, as he asked, “Lord Mihoshi, that scroll was penned by Maestro Ukon himself. He said that no

Divine wouldn't recognize the words 'Tenka Fubu.'"

"Indeed, I've read the accounts myself."

Ukon had been a Divine who had presided over the Chrysanthemum Court for decades. He'd claimed that in his previous life he'd been from a distinguished military family, and was a distant descendant of the man who had once ruled his nation. Other people's accounts of him painted him as a refined man of culture who seemed completely divorced from martial arts, so it was hard to say how accurate his claims were.

"My ancestor was slandered as a demon during my life, but I'm sure history will eventually come to see him as the great man he was. Show my words to the next Divine who comes to Wa. I'm sure he will be astonished."

That was what Ukon had supposedly said when he'd written down that scroll. Moreover, that scroll contained one of the secrets of the Divine. But that was something known only to members of the Chrysanthemum Court, as they were the only ones who could read the Divine Script. Anyone Divine who read that scroll wouldn't be able to hide their shock. Naturally, we had expected Lord Veight to react in some way, but he didn't.

"Perhaps Lord Veight is simply that skilled at hiding his emotions."

"Hmmm..."

"You may be right, there," I replied.

The other Kushin nodded. Lord Veight would never admit he was a Divine of his own volition. Having read Fumino's message, he already knew that Wa had a deep relationship with the Divine. If he revealed his identity, it would compromise his position as Meraldia's representative.

"That's why I've sent Fumino to try and probe him. Of my operatives, she is the most likely to get Lord Veight to drop his guard."

"But what if he doesn't?"

"Hmmm."

The Kushin exchanged cautious looks. It seemed they'd all come to the same conclusion.

“If we probe too deeply, we may damage our relationship with Meraldia.”

“Indeed. Even if we cannot convince him to join Wa, we absolutely must not turn him into an enemy.”

We knew better than anyone how powerful the Divine could be. In fact, Lord Veight had already distinguished himself in the short time since his entrance onto the world stage. A Divine with the physical prowess of a werewolf was far beyond our ability to deal with. No matter what happened, we absolutely could not afford to antagonize him.

I could, of course, try and have the Heavenwatchers assassinate him or undermine his position, but I had the feeling they wouldn't succeed. Plus, if those attempts were linked back to us, the Chrysanthemum Court would be annihilated. We needed to maintain an amicable relationship with him. Ideally, we could turn him into an ally. Lord Veight was both rational and mild-mannered. Compared to how the other Divine were, he was far easier to get along with, which was exactly why I was confident my plan would work.

“Lord Veight is likely already aware of most of our plans. In which case, why don't we reveal everything to him?” I suggested.

“What!?”

“Lord Tokitaka, surely that's going a bit too far...”

Everyone looked surprised, but I did my best to convince them.

“If Lord Veight truly is a Divine, he probably feels an affinity for our nation of Wa. By being entirely truthful with him, I believe we can strengthen that affinity.”

“You think that by telling him our secrets, he will be willing to open up about his?”

“Yes.”

I had a feeling if we were forthright with him, he'd do the same for us. He struck me as a very upright individual. The other Kushin discussed my proposal amongst themselves for a few minutes before finally turning back to me.

“That might just work. Lord Tokitaka, what exactly did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking of showing him the Divine’s Archway.”

The Kushin stared at me in shock.

“Th-That’s...quite bold of you.”

“Are you sure we should show him that!?”

Lord Kanbe, the Kushin in charge of state secrets, looked particularly reluctant. Frowning, he said, “Lord Veight is an accomplished mage. If you show him the archway, he may unravel more of its secrets than you intend.”

“That’s fine. If you wish to touch someone’s heart, you must be bold in your sincerity.”

Fumino had given us a very detailed report on Lord Veight’s personality. He tended to support those who were frank with him, even if doing so jeopardized his official responsibilities. It was a risky gamble for sure, but we had only a short window of time before he left Wa. As expected, the other Kushin hesitated this time. I wasn’t expecting them to approve a measure this drastic without some discussion.

After a long silence, Lord Taira, the eldest Kushin, said, “No matter how trustworthy he is, I am wary of using tactics that rely on an individual’s personality. People’s feelings change easily, as do their obligations and responsibilities.”

Lord Taira certainly had a point. In fact, I shared his concerns. However, I’d given this a lot of thought.

“You bring up a good point, Lord Taira,” I said. “But I believe this will also help build an amicable relationship with Meraldia. Though right now they are preoccupied with building up a bulwark against Rolmund to the north, there’s no telling when they might turn their military attention to Wa.”

Wa was a small country surrounded by desert; it was far less developed than other major nations. If Meraldia decided they wanted to invade, our tiny nation would be overwhelmed within a decade. However, Lord Veight at least had no intention of starting a war. If we wanted to strengthen our relationship with Meraldia through trade, it was in our best interest to strengthen our relationship with him as well. There was no guarantee future heads of foreign

policy would be as amenable as Lord Veight.

Of course, if Meraldia started a war with Wa, it would suffer as well. Meraldians would lose out on a valuable trade partner, and would exhaust a large quantity of resources and manpower in their invasion. I explained all of this to the other Kushin, then added, “A small nation like Wa needs allies if it is to survive.”

The others fell silent. No one voiced any objections. Eventually Lord Taira said what everyone was thinking. “We’ll...need some time to consider this proposal. Implementing your plan will put us on a path of no return. I request that we have a few days to discuss.”

My rank on the Chrysanthemum Court was lower than Lord Taira’s, so I couldn’t refuse his request.

“As you wish. I, too, would like to meditate on this decision further.”

“Then today’s council is dismissed.”

The others nodded and got to their feet. The early summer sun cast its orange rays through the window as it began to dip below the horizon.

Taira turned to the window and muttered, “Whenever this season came around, the Divine would always say ‘it’s cicada season’ with a nostalgic look in their faces.”

I nodded and replied, “Indeed. Apparently one of the insects native to Wa is similar to these ‘cicadas’ they had back home. Though our insects make no noise. I must wonder what kind of sound the cicadas made, that the Divine missed their droning.”

Lord Taira gave me a strange look and said, “We don’t know. And it’s precisely because we don’t know that we must be careful.”

True. I had almost forgotten. The Divine had all been reincarnated from a faraway world completely different from ours. If we arrogantly believed we understood everything about them, we were bound to make some critical blunder. And when it came to Divine, mistakes could lead to disastrous results. I needed to be careful.

“Lord Taira. Thank you for the warning. I will take it to heart.”

“No need. When you reach my age, you start jumping at shadows. Doing nothing because everything scares you will lead only to stagnation. I intend to leave the final decision in the hands of youngsters like you, Lord Tokitaka.”

Lord Taira gave me a slight bow, then walked out into the hallway.

I sat in the castle’s courtyard, enjoying a plate of yōkan. It was less sweet than the kind I’d had in Japan, but still delicious. Apparently in this world, this amount of sweetness was the norm. Sugar was a luxury here, so I wasn’t surprised most desserts used less of it. Still, I would have liked it to be a bit sweeter.

As I bit into the yōkan, I remembered some trivia from my past life. No one knew when exactly it was first invented, but by the Edo period, it had become quite a popular dessert. Famous yōkan brands had even made a name for themselves. From that point on, it became a staple Japanese sweet. Apparently, even important shogunate officials served yōkan at their tables. There were even stories of servants who accidentally bought it from vendors other than the famous ones and got scolded by their superiors for it. *I guess grunts in any era are always forced to deal with the ire of their bosses.*

“This courtyard has a magnificent view,” I muttered as I looked at the ripples forming in the center of the courtyard’s pond.

I hope those ripples were caused by a koi fish and not a ninja. Though I didn’t hear any cicadas, this was otherwise a picturesque Japanese summer afternoon. It seemed the cicada species of this world didn’t buzz at a frequency that human ears could hear. There might have been some in the past, but I assumed they’d been driven extinct by predators. While there were cicadas that buzzed at ultrasonic frequencies and cicadas that could use magic, neither of them had any Japanese flair. Plus, they didn’t look cute. Back in my village, there had been cicadas who buzzed at a frequency werewolves could hear, but their sounds were so grating they just pissed me off.

A gentle breeze wafted through the courtyard, rustling the bamboo stalks growing by the pond. Honestly, the summers here were a lot more pleasant than in Japan. They were cooler and less humid. While I was relaxing, Fumino

came back.

“My apologies for the wait,” she said.

“Where are we going next?”

Fumino gave me a troubled frown. “There are a few more places I would like to show you, but the sun is beginning to set. We’ve prepared an inn for you, so there’s no need to worry about lodging.”

I could have stayed in the Chrysanthemum Court’s castle, but I wanted to explore the city a little so I’d asked Fumino to book me an inn. Fortunately, she hadn’t objected.

“Sorry about that. I should have been paying attention to the time. Let’s go back. I’m sure my men are bored out of their minds.”

I followed Fumino out of the garden. While the garden had been very Japanese, the lack of cicadas had made me a little uneasy.

We all had dinner together with the members of the Chrysanthemum Court, which went more smoothly than I expected. I taught everyone from Meraldia how to use chopsticks, and at some point, Monza got drunk and started clinging to me—but overall it was a pretty enjoyable banquet. Monza was a pretty annoying drunk, but fortunately she didn’t like alcohol so she drank only rarely. Though, apparently the Kushin who’d pushed alcohol onto her were quite enamored by her drunken antics. *Thank god the people of Wa aren’t sticklers for formality.*

“Leaving the Garney brothers behind was probably the right move, boss,” Jerrick said with a smile as we started walking back to our inn. I threw Monza, who was out cold, over my shoulder and nodded to him.

“Yeah, they would have made negotiating way harder. Bringing only the less violent werewolves was the right call.”

“I know, right?”

Why do you sound so happy about that?

“By the way, you’re gonna go sightseeing around the city tomorrow, right? Mind if I take a look at the smithies around here while you’re gone?”

“Sure, go for it. It’s a good opportunity to see things you might never find in Meraldia. If you find anything that catches your eye, feel free to buy it so we can take it back and analyze it.”

“Figures that’s what you’re thinking about.”

“It is my job, after all.”

I’d use anything and everything at my disposal to stimulate Meraldia’s development.

The next day, the Chrysanthemum Court held a meeting to discuss my proposals. While I was waiting for them to come to a decision, I had Fumino guide me around the city. Vodd, Parker, and Monza—who was still hungover—decided to stay behind while Mao and Jerrick opted to come with me.

“Hey, boss, this is a pretty good knife. The iron’s got the right amount of flexibility, and the edge is razor-sharp.”

We’d barely gone a block before Jerrick found a home goods store and started appraising its wares. The rest of his squad were fawning over other assorted goods too.

“This saw is designed to be pulled but...doesn’t that make it hard to use?”

“I’m going to go check out that stonemason’s shop over there. They’ve got a lot of interesting materials I haven’t seen before.”

“What are the eaves of this building made of? I haven’t seen a design like this before.”

Everyone in Jerrick’s squad was a carpenter, smith, or a craftsman, so they were easily drawn in by new smithing, crafting, or woodworking techniques.

“Good grief, everyone’s obsessed with Wa’s tools and materials... Hm? Mao?”

Turning around, I realized Mao was no longer behind me.

“Lord Veight, he’s over there,” Fumino said, pointing off to the side.

I turned and saw Mao walking alone a short distance away. He looked like he was about to round the corner at the next intersection. It’d be bad if I lost sight

of him, and it didn't look like Jerrick and the others would be interested in leaving any time soon. I handed Fumino my wallet and said, "Lady Fumino, if these guys want anything please pay for it with my money. Also, would you mind interpreting for them?"

"Not at all. But how will—"

"Jerrick'll be able to follow my scent to catch up to me later, so it shouldn't be a problem."

I flashed Fumino a smile, then ran over to where Mao had gone. I turned the same corner he had, and after a few seconds, I spotted him. He was hiding in the shadows of a nearby building and observing one of the shops on the main street. The signboard hanging above the shop read Kingondou. *So this is Mao's old workplace.*

"Mao, it's not safe to wander off alone," I said quietly, walking up behind him.

Surprised, Mao turned around. "S-Sorry. But when we reached this street I felt like I had to see what had become of this place."

"I understand how you feel, but I can't have anything bad happening to you. So stop running into danger by yourself."

"Fine..."

After a few minutes, Fumino and Jerrick's squad caught up to us.

"Lord Veight, I'm terribly sorry but the money you gave me wasn't enough to pay for what everyone wanted."

Fumino sighed, but Jerrick and the others proudly showed off their new purchases.

"Look at all the stuff we bought, boss!"

"The pattern on this comb is really intricate, I've never seen such detailed work before..."

"I hear it's made from tortoiseshell too!"

Did you guys just buy everything that caught your eye!? I turned to Fumino, scratching my head awkwardly. "Sorry about that. When we get back to the inn

I'll reimburse whatever you had to pay out of your pocket."

"Oh uh...thank you. My wages weren't enough to cover everything either, so we had to put it on my tab..."

I hope the budget the council gave me can cover these costs... Well, I can worry about that later. Right now, Mao takes priority. As we walked back to the inn, I struck up a conversation with Mao.

"So what kind of drugs are banned here, anyway?"

"There's this powder that supposedly makes anyone who takes it feel extremely happy. People claim that it's made by crushing this floating crystal you can find in certain caves, but that's a load of crap."

Fumino added, "The powder is actually produced by drying a certain plant's sap. I'm afraid I cannot give any specific details, though."

"I see."

From the sound of it, this drug was the same as the narcotics that were banned back on Earth. Fumino cocked her head and asked, "But is Kingondou really dealing in illegal drugs? If so, they should have been shut down by now..."

Grimacing, Mao muttered, "Any time an incident is discovered, the shop owner shifts the blame onto his employees and pretends like his business has nothing to do with it. Either his alibis are perfect, or the Chrysanthemum Court's willing to overlook his crimes."

Hesitantly, Fumino replied, "After discussing the situation with Lord Tokitaka, we've found records of the incident that led to your exile, Lord Mao. As you said, the store owner denied having any involvement with the cargo, and we could find no evidence linking him to the crime."

That said something worrying about the Chrysanthemum Court's governing abilities. Considering the era we were in, it was hardly surprising that bribery and political corruption weren't punishable offenses, but if that was leading to the circulation of drugs within the country then that was a huge problem.

"Lady Fumino, don't you think this warrants a much more thorough investigation?"

Fumino nodded, her expression serious. “Absolutely. We’ve already dispatched a unit of Heavenwatchers to conduct an independent inquiry.”

The Heavenwatchers were a spy organization, so they didn’t normally conduct criminal investigations. In general, it was the job of the Tsukumo, the police organization under the direct command of the Chrysanthemum Court, to deal with illegal activity.

“The Tsukumo, huh? That’s a pretty interesting name.”

“I’m glad you think so. The word ‘Tsukumo’ is an alternate reading of the word for ‘ninety-nine’ in the Divine Script. Moreover, in the Divine Script, the character for ‘white’ which can also refer to innocence or goodness, is the same as the character for ‘one-hundred,’ but with one line missing. So the Tsukumo’s name is an allusion to the fact that one less than a hundred is the symbol of honesty and virtue.”

“I see.” Nodding, I asked, “By the way, what’s the Divine Script?”

“Wha—!?” Stiffening, Fumino slowly turned back to look at me. “I-I umm...well...”

“Go on.”

“Can we just pretend...I never said that?”

“Sure.”

Looks like you slipped up again. Fumino accidentally divulged information she wasn’t supposed to surprisingly often. That earlier explanation made it obvious that the “Divine Script” was just kanji, or perhaps the Japanese writing system as a whole. Of course, if I pointed that out, I’d be outing myself as a reincarnator, so I had to feign ignorance.

Pretending like I wasn’t all that interested in this Divine Script, I casually said, “At any rate, if there’s anything I can do to help in your drug investigation, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“U-Understood!”

The next day, I visited Kingondou with Parker, who’d put on his human

disguise for the outing.

“Is the store owner here?” I asked the store clerk in the most haughty voice I could muster. The young woman, who’d been in the middle of setting up bags of herbs in the store’s display window, wiped her hands down on her apron and turned to me.

“I’m afraid the owner is away on business right now. If there’s something you need, I’d be more than happy to help you.”

“Pah, my business isn’t with the likes of you,” I said dismissively, and Parker stepped forward.

“What we’re looking for aren’t the kinds of common medicines you can find on any drugstore’s shelf, if you know what I mean.”

“Umm...” The clerk, who looked to be in her teens still, gave us a confused look. “What you can see here are all the goods we have for sale, though...”

I didn’t smell any lie from her. From the looks of it, this store clerk really didn’t know anything. Relieved that she was innocent, I scowled and said in a gruff voice, “This is why I said my business isn’t with the likes of you. Call the owner. This instant.”

“A-As you wish, sir!”

The girl gave me a terrified bow, then skittered to the back of the store. The owner of Kingondou was a man named Gehei. I had no idea what it looked like written in kanji, but the name’s pronunciation was quite comical. Maybe something like 外兵衛? *Well, not that it matters.*

“Oh my, it’s quite an honor to receive guests from Meraldia,” Gehei said as he walked into the waiting room we’d been led to. Rubbing his hands together, he sized me and Parker up with the trained eye of a merchant. “Now then, what is it I can help you two gentlemen with? Are you looking for ground redcress powder? Or perhaps some kuku fruit?”

I harrumphed in disdain and said, “Enough with the third-rate acting. We’re here to buy your drugs.”

Gehei’s eyes narrowed dangerously, like a beast on the hunt. “You said your

name was Lord Veight, correct? Where did you hear such outlandish claims?"

"I have no obligation to answer. And if they really are just outlandish claims, then I believe we have no business here. Sorry for the misunderstanding."

I casually got to my feet and Gehei hurriedly held out a hand to stop me.

"Now now, there's no need to rush. If you're too hasty you won't find what you're looking for. All I want to know is who gave you this information. If you tell me, I might be willing to be more forthright with you," Gehei said with a vulgar smile. That, combined with his greasy hair made him look unbelievably ugly. *Well whatever, I can just give him some random story.*

"A rather loose-lipped man from Wa got into some trouble in Meraldia. He was trying to smuggle drugs into the country, which was what caught my interest."

"I see, I see. Would you happen to remember this man's name?"

"I think it was...oh yeah, now I remember. Mao."

"And what happened to this man after he was caught?"

"Suffice to say, he won't be saying anything ever again." I let out an evil cackle.

Gehei mulled over my words for a few minutes, then said in a theatrical tone, "My humble shop deals only in legitimate herbs and medicines. We have no drugs to sell. However..."

Now we're getting somewhere.

"We do offer a selection of...rare remedies to a limited set of clientele. These herbs and spices are quite expensive, so we don't put them out on display."

Bingo. Grinning, Gehei asked, "What kind of cooking would you be looking to use these spices in, good sir? Or is it yourself?"

"Don't be ridiculous." I smiled coldly and said, "I have a friend who's rather particular about her food. I was hoping to shut them up with these 'rare spices' you seem to have. Satisfying them would give me much peace of mind."

I gave Gehei a suggestive look. Basically, I was implying I wanted to use these

drugs to cause a scandal for a political rival of mine. Being the scumbag that he was, Gehei understood my implication right away.

“Oh my, that friend of yours sounds...like quite an ordeal.”

“They most certainly are. Which is why I’m sure everyone will be better off once they’re sated.”

Gehei’s grin grew wider and he said, “With all due respect, I believe that is a perfect use for my goods. If you would be willing to describe this friend’s sex, age, and features in more detail, I believe I will be able to select the most optimal spice for you.”

Are his drugs custom-tailored or something? I didn’t really think that far ahead. The first person that popped into my head was Airia, so I decided to just go with describing her.

“She’s a young woman, quite beautiful.”

“In that case, I believe the Princess’ Drool will be a perfect fit for you.”

What’s with that disgustingly perverted name? Trying to sound as uninterested as possible, I casually asked, “What makes it so special?”

“It appears to be a normal spice, but it has been infused with multiple potent drugs. As for what it does, well... Gehehe.”

Gehei let out a creepy laugh. Just talking to this guy made my skin crawl. Maybe I should have asked Parker to talk to this guy instead. Mentally apologizing to Airia, I forged on with my deception.

“As long as it works, I don’t care about the details. Where do you keep this drug?”

“Not here, naturally. I’ll have it brought here for you, so please have the payment ready by tomorrow.”

“Very well. I’ll pay whatever your asking price is. However, this has to be kept absolutely secret. Understood?”

“But of course. It’s a merchant’s job to protect the confidentiality of his clients.”

“I’m glad you understand.”

I got to my feet and left the room as fast as possible without seeming rude.
God that guy gives me the creeps...

Two days later, I left the capital. Hidden within the mountains a short distance from the city was an unassuming charcoal-maker’s hut. When I reached it, Gehei was nowhere to be seen. However, there were a number of men dressed in monk’s clothes waiting for me. As I approached they surrounded me.

I silently held out a small teapot to them. It was this teapot that I’d paid Gehei an exorbitant price for. Normally it’d just be filled with matcha powder, but apparently this is what the drugs were going to go in. One of the men scrutinized the teapot thoroughly, then silently went into the hut. After a few minutes, he came back with a small wooden box.

“This is the Princess’ Drool you ordered,” he said in a surprisingly polite voice. The box was sealed with washi paper, and it looked pretty high-class. Inside was a teapot that looked identical to mine. Apparently, these men actually knew what it was they were dealing in, unlike Mao.

As I accepted the box from the man I said, “If you have any other high-quality drugs, I’d be interested in buying them.”

The man frowned and shook his head. “I’m afraid we cannot do business without Lord Gehei’s approval. If you wish to make more purchases, please ask him.”

“I see, I guess that makes sense,” I said with a smile. “By the way...”

“Yes?”

“You just said Gehei, didn’t you?”

Still smiling, I transformed into my werewolf form. Though I had no physical evidence, this proved that these guys were selling drugs on Gehei’s behalf. There was no reason to keep up the act any longer. It was time to round everyone up.

“Uwaaaaaaaah!”

“Wh-What the hell are you!?”

“It’s a monster!”

This must have been these guys’ first time seeing a werewolf. As the men screamed, a group of armed guards spilled out of the hut. They all looked like masterless samurai, and raised their swords menacingly at me.

“G-Get him!” the man who’d given me the box shouted, and the swordsmen leapt forward.

Honestly, their swordsmanship wasn’t half bad. They must have been professionals, since they didn’t flee at the sight of me. But it was obvious they’d been slacking in their training recently, as their footwork left a lot to be desired. To my werewolf eyes, it looked like they were standing still.

I cast strengthening magic on myself and dispatched the swordsmen with a series of light jabs. I also knocked out the men in monk’s clothes, in case any of them were hiding weapons. The whole thing was so easy it was boring. Since none of the humans were wearing armor, I knew exactly how much I needed to hold back to not kill them, too. Right as I was finishing up, I heard a scream from inside the hut.

“Gyaaaah!?”

“Sorry, boss. I couldn’t help it,” Monza said casually from inside. I let Jerrick’s squad take care of tying up the criminals while I went inside to see what Monza had done. Inside the dim hut, I found Monza still in her werewolf form looking down at a decapitated swordsman.

“Oh, hey, boss. This guy thought he could beat me cause I looked like an unarmed woman.”

Apparently she hadn’t wanted to surprise him, so she’d asked him to surrender in her human form. But that had caused the man to underestimate her, which had led to his untimely death. *Well, they would have all been executed anyway, so I guess it’s not a problem.* Sighing to myself, I gave Monza a light smile.

“As long as you’re not hurt that’s all that matters. It’s his fault for not surrendering anyway.”

“Ahaha, you’re so nice, boss.” Monza grinned, blood still dripping from her fur. To most werewolves, that smile would probably look charming. But to me, it was mostly just scary.

In total there were four men in monk’s clothes and seven guards. We captured all but one of the guards, who ended up getting killed.

“Alright, now all that’s left is to hand these guys over to the Chrysanthemum Court. Vodd’s probably getting tired of staking out Kingondou, so I want to get back as soon as possible.”

Knowing that old geezer, he was probably itching for a fight. There was no telling what he’d do if he got bored of just watching.

“The Chrysanthemum Court’s spies’ll be here soon. Once we’ve turned over the crime scene to them, return to the capital!”

“You got it, boss!”

“Okaaaay.”

That evening, I met with Gehei again in the back of his store.

“Thank you very much for your generous purchase.”

“Uh-huh.”

According to the Heavenwatchers I’d talked to, I’d bought these drugs at 150 times the standard market price. It was a very *generous* purchase alright. *This guy’s got some real balls, overcharging by that much.* Grinning, Gehei poured me a cup of alcohol. Honestly, I just wanted to keep him as far away from me as possible so I didn’t really appreciate the gesture.

“With those drugs, your political position is perfectly secure, Lord Veight.”

“I sure hope so.”

“Incidentally, I was hoping that you would be willing to allow me to expand my business to Meraldia...”

Seriously? It seemed Gehei wanted to sell drugs in Meraldia, as well as Wa. I suppressed the urge to transform then and there and rip this slimy weasel’s

head off.

“Is that why you agreed to sell drugs to me? You were hoping to build a pipeline to Meraldia?”

“A wise merchant never lets any opportunity slip past him. Seeing as one of Meraldia’s most influential men has come to me, it’d be a crime not to try and build connections, wouldn’t it?”

“Hahaha.”

The moment he realized I’d caught on to his intentions, he changed tactics and started buttering me up. In a way, he was a pretty crafty businessman.

Smiling proudly, Gehei said, “It’s only by diving headfirst into danger that you can find opportunity. But of course, if you do the diving yourself, you’re likely to drown. So...”

“You have other people do your diving for you?”

“Indeed. If only that fool Mao had learned that lesson, he wouldn’t have met such a pathetic end.”

Don’t you dare badmouth Mao. He’s one of my most trusted advisors. He didn’t meet a pathetic end; he’s made it big in life, you sack of shit. I continued insulting him in my head, but outwardly I smiled and said, “If you come to Meraldia, just don’t be too conspicuous.”

“Don’t worry, I understand the value of being discreet. As you can see, I’ve caused no trouble at all in Wa.”

“So it seems.”

Gehei had definitely gone to great lengths to make sure the Chrysanthemum Court didn’t discover his operation, including being very selective with his customers. He was undoubtedly a skilled businessman.

I downed the fragrant alcohol in one gulp and said, “You better not slip up like you did with Mao.”

“Of course...” Gehei wiped his forehead and bowed respectfully. “I’ve learned from my past mistakes. My operation is more discreet than ever. Moreover, I’ve taken precautions to make sure that I’m not implicated even if the drugs are

found.”

“Are you certain your precautions are airtight?”

“Oh yes. My greatest strength is my willingness to discard even capable pawns if it ensures my safety.”

What a fucking piece of trash. I kept repeating “Fucking trash,” in my head over and over while Gehei puffed his chest out and said, “Besides, I’ve hired a number of skilled guards to take care of any trouble that might occur. There’s no need to worry that the people I set up to take the fall will escape like Mao did.”

This guy just kept on getting worse and worse. He was such a coward it was physically repulsive. Fortunately, I was a scoundrel myself, and I knew how to mess with guys like him.

“Incidentally, that drug you sold me is distilled from a certain species of plant, isn’t it?”

“You have quite a discerning eye. Indeed it is.”

I thought he’d try to keep its source a secret, but he admitted it surprisingly easily. *I guess that means he trusts me?* A server brought a plate of tempura for me, and I cautiously took a bite. *Oh, this is eggplant tempura. It’s pretty good too. It’s been ages since I had tempura.*

As I munched on the tempura I grinned and said, “If that plant can be cultivated in Meraldia as well, I wouldn’t mind granting you your own plot of land so you can start growing it.”

“Do you truly mean that?” Gehei’s eyes widened, but his surprise was clearly feigned.

Nodding, I moved on to what looked to be a plate of burdock tempura. This was seasoned a lot more than traditional tempura, but it wasn’t bad. In fact, the fare Gehei was serving me was more luxurious than the food I’d had at the Chrysanthemum Court. *Anyway, food’s not what’s important right now.*

“Just tell me what conditions that plant likes best, and I’ll find land in Meraldia for you that fits your needs,” I boasted.

“Let me think...” Gehei hesitated a bit, clearly unwilling to give me that information. But in the end, he made up his mind and said, “Right now I’m cultivating this plant at the summit of Mt. Oogiri. It’s three days by horse from the city.”

“Hmm, that’s a bit far, but I suppose I’ll have to see the region in person to draw any conclusions. This is a wonderful plant you’re growing here; it’d be a waste not to expand its cultivation.”

“Indeed, it’s as you say.”

By using Meraldia’s land as bait, I coaxed Gehei into telling me more about his operation, including his distribution channels. At times I could tell he was lying from his scent, but I pretended not to notice. I just needed a rough grasp of what his network looked like, and he was definitely spilling enough for that.

Isn’t it about time you showed up?

Just as I thought that, the door behind us slid open.

“You are Gehei, owner of Kingondou, correct?”

Fumino walked into the room, dressed in her shrine maiden outfit. Gehei instantly recognized the clothes she was wearing and his face went pale.

“Are you from the Chrysanthemum Court!?” he exclaimed while recoiling back.

“I am indeed. Gehei, you’ve as good as confessed. Don’t do anything unsightly and allow yourself to be arrested,” Fumino said with a smile.

However, Gehei quickly recovered from his shock and said, “You might be one of the Chrysanthemum Court’s spies, but do you really think you can escape from here alive!?”

“Surely you don’t plan on resisting?” Fumino said in mild disbelief.

“It’s too late to turn back now!”

Fumino shook her head sadly. “Please desist. You’ll only cause needless casualties.”

“Shut up! Get her, you fools!”

At Gehei's command, I heard numerous footsteps approaching from the corridor.

"Our master's in trouble!"

"Hurry!"

Another door slid open and a group of armed guards ran into the room. Unlike the swordsmen who'd been protecting the hut, these guys were pretty skilled.

"Boss!"

"Kill that Chrysanthemum Court bitch!"

The swordsmen rushed at Fumino. A second later, blood sprayed through the air. Naturally, it wasn't Fumino's blood. The first of the swordsmen fell back, his windpipe sliced clean open.

"Wha!?"

The other swordsmen faltered. Fumino hadn't moved from where she'd been standing. However, there was now a flute in her hands. The guards had no idea how their comrade had been killed, but they were professionals. They wouldn't break from just this. Cautiously, they surrounded Fumino and launched a simultaneous attack from all sides.

"Don't fuck with us!"

"We'll kill you, bitch!"

Calmly, Fumino started playing her flute. As the notes rang out from her instrument, tiny explosions of mana filled the room.

"Gyaaah!"

"Ngh!"

"Gaaah!"

The swordsmen fell one after another, blood spraying from their necks and chests. All of them were gravely wounded. Their cuts were so straight it looked like they'd been made by a ruler, and they were quite deep, too. Within a few seconds, all of Gehei's guards were on the floor. There was so much blood

spilling from their wounds that the tatami couldn't absorb it all, and tiny crimson rivers ran across the floor.

Fumino just stood there, doing nothing. Gehei fell out of his chair, utterly terrified.

"Wh-What did you do!?"

Fumino lowered her flute and smiled at him. "That was one of the thirty-seven secret techniques of the Heavenwatchers, Invisible Blade. It's also known as Thunder Strings."

I was a mage, so I knew what Fumino had done. She'd shot out a number of threads right before the guards had attacked. I didn't know what they were made of, but they were fine enough to be almost invisible in the dim light of the room. She had then used the sound from her flute to cause a resonance in the strings. Her flute playing had served as a substitute for a chant and caused the strings to vibrate. At the frequency they'd been vibrating at, the strings had easily been able to slice through human flesh.

Of course, Fumino didn't explain any of that, but when she looked at my face she realized I'd figured out her trick. *Hehehe, that's right. I know one of your ninja techniques now.* I smiled at her. Though the one thing I didn't get was how she'd managed to get those threads in the right place so easily.

Noticing the slight confusion in my expression, Fumino smiled as well, proud to have pulled one over me.

"The Heavenwatchers were originally a group of astrologers," she said. "We're skilled in magic that can predict the future."

I see now. She'd used magic to sense where her enemies would be in a few seconds' time, then sent her threads there. Mages who could use prediction magic often used such spells when fighting with mundane weapons.

But should you really have unveiled your secrets to me? Realizing she'd just slipped up again, Fumino looked away, flustered. Taking her frustration out on Gehei, she walked over to him and said in a low voice, "Alright, lecture time's over. Give yourself up Gehei, there's nothing you can do."

But even after losing all of his guards, Gehei refused to surrender.

“N-Now that it’s come to this, I guess I have to give up my shop and my fortunes. But no matter what happens, I’ll never be caught! Never!”

Fumino looked disdainfully down at Gehei.

“Now this is just pathetic,” she spat.

“Fufufu, say whatever you want!”

The swordsmen who were supposed to be dead slowly got their feet. *Oh shit...*

The guards Fumino had defeated were no longer bleeding, though their wounds were still open. That meant either their hearts had stopped pumping blood, or something was constricting the damaged blood vessels—or that all of their blood had already spilled out. Either way, they shouldn’t have been able to move.

Fumino momentarily stiffened in surprise when she saw the swordsmen standing behind her, but like any good ninja, she adapted quickly. As soon as she analyzed the situation she jumped away, putting some distance between her and the guards. She started playing her flute again, causing the countless threads she’d shot out to oscillate. However, the threads which had been so potent a minute before had little effect on the swordsmen now.

“Bwahahahaha! You’re just wasting your time! Those puny threads can’t kill my men!” Gehei crowed triumphantly. “They’ve all drunk my secret Elixir of Undeath! No matter how you rend their flesh, they can’t be killed! Thanks to my drug, they’ll keep fighting until their bodies rot!”

This guy was a more dangerous drug dealer than I’d initially thought. I didn’t even know there were drugs that let you control people after they died. Fumino’s threads were sharp, but they were too thin to cut through bone. They weren’t suited to taking out zombies.

“Ngh...”

Frowning, Fumino stowed her flute and shook out her sleeves. Several flashes of silver light shot out of them. It seemed she’d brought out a different kind of thread. A second later, numerous cuts appeared on the zombie samurais. But they were all too shallow to do any real damage.

“Curses...”

Fumino looked like she was running out of ideas. *Guess I should lend her a hand.* Before I could make a move, however, I heard a familiar voice recite in a lyrical tone, “The laws of heaven are immutable. Life and death are but two sides of one coin and thus, their faces must never meet.”

Looking up, I saw Fumino’s boss, Tokitaka, chanting a spell from the second floor window. As his voice echoed through the room, the guards’ corpses slumped to the ground like ragdolls.

“How!?” Gehei shouted, surprised.

Honestly, I was pretty shocked myself. I had no idea what that Elixir of Undeath was made of, but I was certain its ingredients weren’t magical. I couldn’t sense any mana from the zombies, which I definitely would have if necromancy were involved in any way. Necromancers like Parker could disable zombies operating on magic by cutting off their mana supply, or by exorcizing the spirit powering the corpse. Being able to stop zombies in and of itself wasn’t that surprising. However, these zombies weren’t running on magic, meaning Tokitaka had used a different method.

From what I could tell, it was something closer to Japanese onmyōdō. *How very interesting... Wait, now’s not the time for scholarly speculation.* Tokitaka jumped down in front of Gehei, which was quite a feat considering he was wearing his ceremonial kimono.

“Gehei, owner of the Kingondou, there’s nowhere left for you to run. Surrender now, so as to not tarnish your name any further. The least you can do is repent for your sins with dignity.”

“Fuck you!” Gehei screamed, picking up one of his guards’ swords off the ground. “So what if the Chrysanthemum Court is here!? I’ve got Meraldia’s backing now!”

Huh? What’re you talking about, man?

“Do you know who this is!? This is one of the most powerful men in Meraldia, Lord Veight!”

Now hold on a second. I’m not on your side, you know.

“Gehei,” I called out to him.

“Lord Veight, please lend me your assistance.”

“Sorry, not happening.”

“What?”

I said flatly, “I’ve been cooperating with the Chrysanthemum Court to arrest you.”

There was a brief silence.

“Y-You’re joking, right?”

“Nope.” Sighing, I clapped my hands once. “You’re here, right?”

“Naturally.”

The door slid open and Mao walked into the room. The moment Gehei saw him, he realized what was going on.

“Y-You’re still alive!?”

Mao shrugged his shoulders and replied, “Yes, no thanks to you. I’m one of Lord Veight’s aides now.”

“Th-Then...you were tricking me this whole time!?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, yes.”

Frowning, I added, “You saw Mao as nothing more than a disposable pawn from the very start. So I don’t see why you’re so surprised that I saw you as nothing but scum from the very start.”

“What!?”

Mao smiled thinly, enjoying Gehei’s shock. “This time it’s your turn to be disposed of, Gehei.”

This is karma, fool. I started gathering mana in order to capture Gehei. My plan was to hit him with the opposite of strengthening magic, weakening his muscles so much he couldn’t even stand. But before I could touch him to transfer the spell, Gehei shouted, “L-Like hell I’ll meet my end here! I’m different from you pathetic failures! I’m the genius who built Kingondou up

from scratch! You all exist to serve me, not the other way around!”

The way he was talking was bringing back some very painful memories from my past life. Tokitaka and Fumino cautiously advanced on Gehei. They were afraid of getting too close though, since there was no telling what other drugs he had hidden up his sleeve. Killing him would be easy enough, but their goal was to capture him. Gehei took a few steps back, swinging his sword wildly.

“Dammit, how could you all be so useless!” he spat at the guards’ corpses. “Did you forget that I saved your lives!? Don’t collapse just cause you’re dead! Work enough to earn your keep, goddammit!”

But no matter how much he shouted, the corpses didn’t budge. All Gehei succeeded in doing was bring back more memories I’d rather forget. *What an asshole. People aren’t just tools to use and throw away!*

Gehei continued backing up toward the wall, his movements surprisingly lithe. There was no door in that direction, but I could hear a faint breeze on the other side of the wall. There was a cavern of some sort behind it. *Still trying to run, huh?* Gehei continued swinging his sword with one hand to keep people at bay, while he scrabbled at the wall with his other.

“The world’s separated into those who use others and those who get used! And failures like you exist just to get used!”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not part of that world.”

With that, I transformed.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

Before Gehei could recover from his shock, I swiped at him, knocking his sword out of his hand. As the blade clattered to the floor, I grabbed him by the throat and hoisted the slimy scumbag into the air.



“You think you’re god just because you got rich getting people addicted to drugs? If you’re so special, show me how you’ll get out of this mess! Come on, you’re one of the chosen ones, right?”

“Gah... N-No! Ngh...”

Gehei’s face was starting to turn purple. I slammed him into the wall over and over, letting my anger take over.

“It’s because of scum like you that we have such a hard time. You don’t deserve to see the light of day!”

If I pushed just a little harder, I’d crush Gehei’s windpipe. Hell, I could rip his head off if I wanted. When leeches like him made it to positions of power, everyone working under them suffered—just like those poor zombified guards lying on the ground.

“What’s wrong, cat got your tongue? I thought you were good at talking your way out of sticky situations? Why don’t you try begging for your life, huh?”

I put a tiny bit more pressure into my fingers. Gehei started convulsing, his legs flailing wildly through the air. *Pathetic*. For all his bluster, he was powerless before the might of a werewolf. It was possible he had a good reason for doing the things he had, much like the “villains” I’d met in Rolmund. But even if he did, I no longer cared. I was going to squeeze the life out of this miserable weasel.

“...ht! Lord Veight!”

It took me a second to realize someone was desperately shaking my arm. It was Mao.

“Lord Veight, you can’t kill him! I realize he’s the worst kind of scum out there, but it’s not worth dirtying your hands over him!”

I’d never seen Mao look this pale before. He was normally so calm and collected. Though his puny strength wasn’t enough to make my arm so much as budge, his expression shocked me to my core. *What the heck am I doing?* Noticing that I was finally loosening my grip, Mao shouted, “Just hand him over to the Chrysanthemum Court! That should be punishment enough for him!”

There is no need for you to get so angry on my behalf, Lord Veight!”

“No, I...”

I couldn’t honestly say I’d gotten angry solely for Mao’s sake. Gehei had just reminded me so much of *that* man from my past life that I couldn’t restrain my rage. I turned to Tokitaka and Fumino. The two ninjas were watching me warily. Tokitaka had his hands poised to cast a spell while Fumino had her threads at the ready. Their weapons were trained on me, not Gehei. That was how much my outburst had terrified them.

“Lord Tokitaka.”

“Yes, Lord Veight?”

Fortunately, the commander of the Heavenwatchers was still composed enough to hold a discussion. I threw the nearly unconscious Gehei at his feet.

“This man is a criminal of Wa. I leave dealing with him to you.”

“Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

Tokitaka took an enchanted scrap of paper out of his pocket and stuck it to Gehei’s forehead. The strength drained from the merchant’s limbs, and his body went limp. Sighing in relief, Tokitaka wiped his brow.

“We were hoping to apprehend him after he’d unveiled all of his tricks, but I see he was too dangerous to allow that. I’ve restrained him with a shadow binding charm, so we should be able to investigate him thoroughly now.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

I canceled my transformation and grabbed a nearby yukata to replace my ripped clothes.

—The Fugitive’s Victorious Homecoming—

When I was still a naive youngster, I was betrayed by my employer. No, discarded is probably a more apt word than betrayed. Regardless of where you are, whether it be Wa, Meraldia, or Rolmund, grunt workers are treated like disposable tools. Of course, even if they’re on the lowest rung of society’s ladder they still have lives, responsibilities, friends, family, and so on. But to the

ones with power, the lives of those beneath them are worthless.

As someone who was framed for my employer's crimes, I understand that all too well. I was forced to abandon the life I'd built up and flee to a foreign country, all for the benefit of the strong. Even the sailors who smuggled me out of the country betrayed me along the way. We live in a world where you can't trust others, where the weak exist to be trodden upon. It is not righteousness that governs this world, but strength. In fact, righteousness is meaningless without strength. That is the lesson I've learned. It is thanks to this that I was able to survive in Meraldia when I had not a coin to my name, and came to amass wealth and grow strong.

However, there is one man to whom this lesson doesn't apply. He's the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor. On top of that, he is a master mage, and he possesses the ferocious might of a werewolf. He wields authority and power in spades, yet he's furious at Gehei because the man treated his employees like disposable pawns. I can't fathom it.

You're on the side of the strong, aren't you? You're one of this world's rulers. So why do you care so much about the plight of the weak? Who are you, really? I was once one of the weak who was trod upon, so I can understand their hardships. But that shouldn't be the case for you. Why are you so familiar with the suffering of the weak? Is it possible you actually experienced being weak in the past? I don't know. However, it's precisely because I don't know that I find myself drawn toward you. If there is any beauty to be found in this disgusting, mud-smeared word, then...that beauty undoubtedly is in the form of a single werewolf.

The Heavenwatchers who had been surrounding Gehei's shop started pouring in to secure the perimeter. Some of them were dressed like shrine maidens, others were clad in merchant clothes, and a few wore black ninja garb. Naturally, my werewolf guards came in with them. They arrested anyone who looked suspicious, and confiscated all evidence they found.

"Guess that's settled now." I turned back to Mao, still feeling awkward about my previous outburst. "Err...well your false charges should be cleared now. At the very least, this proves you weren't purposely transporting drugs. I'll do what I can to help restore your honor too."

Mao scrutinized my face for a few seconds, then said, “Lord Veight. I will never forget everything you did to help prove my innocence and get revenge on the man who framed me. I swear on my honor that I will one day repay this debt.”

Mao dropped to his knees and prostrated himself before me.

“I am but a humble merchant of Ryunheit who has lost both his old name and his old homeland, but I will endeavor to serve you to the best of my abilities.”

It seemed Mao had misinterpreted my wrath. I hadn’t gotten angry on his behalf. Or at least not solely on his behalf. Gehei had been acting eerily similar to my past life’s old boss. That was the real reason I’d lost it.

“Don’t thank me,” I said. “I didn’t do it for you anyway. I just wanted to improve relations between Meraldia and Wa, and make sure he didn’t create any more victims. Someone in my position can’t afford to act on personal grudges, so please don’t misunderstand my intentions.”

That last sentence was more a warning to myself than to Mao. He remained kneeling on the floor, but raised his head to look up at me. There was a blindingly bright smile on his face. “That’s why I like you so much, Lord Veight.”

“Hearing that from you doesn’t really make me happy, you know...”

In truth it did, but I was too embarrassed to admit it.

The next day, Kingondou was forcibly shut down by the Chrysanthemum Court. That was the first thing the Kushin told us when Parker and I met with them in the afternoon. I noticed today they were missing a member.

“Is today not a full meeting of the council?”

The eldest Kushin, Lord Taira, nodded solemnly and said, “Lord Kurando, the leader of the Tsukumo, has been dismissed from his post. Our investigation revealed that corruption was rampant among certain sections of the Tsukumo.”

“Can you be more specific?”

According to Lord Taira, members of the Tsukumo had been helping Gehei smuggle his drugs all across Wa. Any time someone had been dispatched to

investigate Kingondou, Gehei had bribed them to work for him. Such blatant corruption would have been unbelievable back in Japan, but in this world, it was an everyday occurrence. Most nations didn't have strict laws against bribery, and the few that did rarely enforced them. In some countries, bribes were considered a socially acceptable form of secondary income. Wa wasn't much different, but the situation this time was so severe that the Chrysanthemum Court had been forced to act.

Lord Taira added, "We've also removed the two Tsukumo section chiefs who were found to be accepting Gehei's bribes. This news won't be public for another day or two, but we've ordered them to commit ritual suicide."

That's a pretty harsh punishment. Though I was more curious about the disgraced Kushin's fate.

"What will happen to Lord Kurando?"

"He himself wasn't accepting Gehei's bribes, and it seemed he was legitimately unaware his subordinates were, so his life will be spared. His eldest son shall take over the family headship, and he will be forced to retire." His expression still grim, Taira continued, "However, as a result of his failure, the Kurando family will be stripped of their responsibilities as managers of the Tsukumo. We will choose another Kushin family to take over that role."

"I see you're taking this seriously."

"We share your anger over this incident. We made a gross oversight, which allowed corruption to fester. Moreover..."

"Yes?"

"While Lord Kurando may not be guilty, as the man in charge of the Tsukumo he is the one who must take responsibility for its failures," Lord Taira said with a heavy sigh.

As for Gehei, he was currently being interrogated by the Heavenwatchers. Seeing that Taira had nothing more to add, Tokitaka said, "Gehei is descended from the nobles of the Old Dynasty which ruled before the creation of Wa. Though he's nothing more than a commoner now, his family was once part of the ruling elite."

“Do you think he holds a grudge against the Chrysanthemum Court because of that?”

“Possibly. He has admitted he holds the Court in contempt, though he has yet to explain his reasons.”

It looked like this whole issue went deeper than a simple drug smuggling operation. Gehei had probably planned on using the wealth he amassed to strike at the heart of Wa. Lord Taira gave Tokitaka a resigned look and said, “Considering how cooperative he’s been, it seems foolish to continue hiding our secrets. I am confident Lord Veight will not betray our trust. Your proposal is accepted, Lord Tokitaka.”

Tokitaka bowed to Lord Taira and muttered, “Then I will take him now.”

“Mmm.”

What’s going on here? Tokitaka rose to his feet and gestured for me to follow him.

“There’s something I wish to show you, Lord Veight. Please, follow me.”

Still somewhat confused, I nodded to him and got to my feet.

Tokitaka guided me to a small mountain behind the Chrysanthemum Court’s castle. Foliage covered the mountainside, and there was a series of moss-covered stone steps cut into its slope. The scenery reminded me of the nature paths that led to ancient shinto shrines.

“Back before Wa came to be called Wa...when the Old Dynasty was still young, our nation covered a vast expanse of land,” Tokitaka said, a sad smile on his face. “You saw the Windswept Dunes on your way here, correct?”

“Yes, the desert was much larger than I anticipated,” Parker replied. He’d kept quiet while we were meeting with the Chrysanthemum Court, but this was a much more informal setting.

Tokitaka turned to him and said, “In the past, all of that land belonged to Wa.”

“That’s a lot of land!” Parker exclaimed, his bony jaw literally dropping open.

“Sorry, I was just so surprised that my jaw...” he trailed off.

I grabbed Parker’s jaw and put it back in place for him. Before he could derail the conversation with a horrible pun I asked Tokitaka, “What happened to turn such a huge area into a barren desert?”

“We’re not sure,” Tokitaka said succinctly. “Very few records from the Old Dynasty have survived. Some sources claim monsters were to blame, while others say that a great natural disaster or a powerful magic spell gone wrong destroyed all life in the region.”

We listened to Tokitaka’s story as we climbed up the stone steps.

“But once the desertification began, our ancestors were forced to flee to the eastern edge of the continent. They couldn’t survive in a land too barren to grow crops, after all.”

“Understandable.”

“However the ever-expanding desert eventually began encroaching on what is now the current territory of Wa. So many of our ancestors had already succumbed to starvation and disease that they no longer had the strength left to keep running.”

As we neared the top of the staircase, I saw a torii gate waiting for us. *I knew it; this path really is leading to a shrine.* Nostalgia weighed down my steps, but Parker kept climbing swiftly, unimpressed by the small red archway. Once he reached the top he tried to circle around the gate, but I called out to stop him.

“Wait, wait, wait, stop, Parker!”

“What’s wrong, Veight? I haven’t heard you sound this flustered since you were a kid.”

He turned back to me, and I said, “You have to pass under that red archway, Parker. It’s customary.”

“Umm...are you sure?” Parker looked up at the torii, cocking his head curiously. It seemed there was a reason he’d tried to avoid it earlier. “This is some manner of sacred monument, correct? Are you sure someone like me should pass through it?”

“Yeah, you have to walk under it...Umm, I can’t really give you a good explanation for why, but that’s just tradition.”

“Well, if you say so.”

Nodding, Parker walked through the torii gate. There was no special purification magic contained within the gate, and Parker’s soul wasn’t exorcized as he passed under it. Sensing a piercing gaze, I turned back to find Tokitaka staring at me.

“I see you are familiar with torii.”

Guess I can’t really explain my way out of this one. Sighing, I gave him an honest answer, “Yes, I am.”

Tokitaka nodded, but he said nothing more. The inside of the shrine was a stark contrast from what I was expecting. For starters, there was no main shrine building in the center. It also lacked an offertory box, as well as a building for receiving pilgrims. However, there was a much larger torii gate enshrined at the center of the shrine grounds. Behind it was a boulder with a sanctified rope tied around it.

In a hushed voice, Tokitaka said, “This is what has protected the lands of Wa from the desert and allowed us to prosper. We call it the Great Torii of the Divine.”

I was more interested in the boulder than the torii, but I shifted my attention back to the gate. Parker stepped forward and said, “This is a magical apparatus of some kind. But this is far more complex than even the artifact Master used to prolong her life.”

“Hey, don’t just start investigating it without permission.”

But before I could pull Parker back, Tokitaka waved his hand dismissively and said, “I do not mind. This is a sacred place people cannot visit without the express permission of the Chrysanthemum Court, but since we have invited you here you are free to do as you wish.”

“Lord Tokitaka...”

Just as I was about to thank him, Parker shouted, “Veight, this is amazing! This

archway is connected to the boulder behind it! But I can't for the life of me find the magical circuit connecting them!"

"That's great and all, but I'm in the middle of a conversation here! Investigate all you want, but keep it down, okay!"

"Yippee!"

Why are you so excited? Parker started running back and forth between the torii and the boulder as he puzzled over the machine's inner workings.

"Hmmm, if only I could use epoch magic. Oh, I know. I can call up Kite's spirit to...wait no, he's still alive."

I left him to his own devices and turned back to Tokitaka. He stared intently at the boulder and said, "The Chrysanthemum Court doesn't know much about that gate or the boulder behind it. We're not even sure who made it, or when. What we do know is that this torii is connected to the world of the Divine."

Unable to hide my curiosity, I asked, "Is that a world separate from ours?"

"Yes." A faint smile appeared on Tokitaka's face and he added, "Somehow, this torii is linked to a world of gods."

Okay, that's a bit of an exaggeration. As I was wondering how best to explain the truth to him, Tokitaka smiled ruefully and said, "At least, that's what we tell the people, but as far as I know, no gods have come out of that gate."

There's no way they would.

"That being said, it is true that beings similar to gods have come from this gate in the past. Allow me to tell you a little something of this great torii's history."

Tokitaka gently laid a hand on the gate as he launched into his story.

A thousand years ago, this torii activated for the first time in recorded history, and a young man appeared from the gate. He was wearing an ancient kimono similar in design to the one Tokitaka was wearing now. From Tokitaka's description, I couldn't tell if he was a noble or a warrior, but he was undoubtedly someone of status.

“He introduced himself as Ason. At first he had trouble making himself understood, as his language was different from ours, but by all accounts, he picked our language up quickly.”

After doing a quick mental kanji conversion, I could think of only one word Ason was referring to. It used to be a title for nobility over a millennium ago, but there were a number of people who received the title Ason, so I had no way of knowing which famous person this Ason might have been. Granted if he’d come here while young, he probably hadn’t much time to rack up a lot of achievements in ancient Japan. It was entirely possible he hadn’t even been a famous Ason.

Regardless, that proved that this machine didn’t exist to reincarnate souls from earth, but rather to summon people here while they were still alive. I’d been reincarnated, so this machine might not have had anything to do with my arrival. Unaware of what was going through my mind, Tokitaka added, “When Maestro Ason first arrived in this world, he was terribly exhausted. But when he saw what a disastrous state Wa was in, he immediately took action to help our ancestors, despite being unable to even converse properly with them at first.”

It sounded like this Ason had been quite the charismatic fellow. Not only had he rallied a people whose culture and language he didn’t even understand, but he’d also lifted them up from the depths of despair. Once he’d gotten them to follow him, Ason had applied a mystical technique to halt the land’s desertification.

In a voice full of admiration, Tokitaka said, “By erecting sacred buildings in key locations, he was able to spread mana throughout Wa’s cities. This was a novel idea that no one else had ever attempted.”

You’d think the esteemed mages of the Old Dynasty would have come up with the idea of incorporating magic into city planning at least, but I guess simple insights are easy to overlook. At any rate, thanks to Ason’s revolutionary urban planning techniques, he was able to create magic circles that spanned entire cities. Those magic circles were powerful enough to prevent the land’s desertification.

“Ason referred to the techniques he employed as onmyōdō. However, it was

our mages that rearranged his techniques into magic that followed the laws of this world.”

In other words, Ason hadn’t been a genius mage, he’d just been a master of organizing people. By mobilizing the right people in the right way, he’d been able to erect magical barriers against the encroaching desert. Apparently it was Ason who’d named the country protected by magic “Wa.” After introducing a number of laws and other important social infrastructures, he suddenly vanished.

“Did he...return to his own world?” I asked hesitantly.

“We’re not sure. The last thing he said was that he wanted to explore the rest of the world, so he may just have departed on a long journey.”

So he was a man wrapped in mystery, huh? No one knew what became of his fate after he left Wa, but after his arrival, other people started coming through the Great Torii of the Divine every few decades. One was a warrior clad in unfamiliar armor, another was a ninja dressed in all black, and yet another was a priestess wearing strange clothing. There were plenty of others, and they were all unique in their own way. Each one brought new ideas and technologies to Wa, allowing it to develop much faster than the other nations of this world.

Many of the people who came to this world chose to remain in it, and there were descendants of the Divine living in Wa to this day. In fact, every Kushin on the Chrysanthemum Court was a descendant of the Divine. For example, the Heavenwatchers were all descended from a ninja Divine named Rokkaku. Unfortunately, that name didn’t ring a bell. Judging by the techniques Fumino used, my guess was they’d been a ninja serving the Takeda clan, but there was no way to be sure.

“There was a consistent cycle to the coming of the Divine—one appeared every twenty years.”

“‘Was’? Why past tense?”

Sighing, Tokitaka replied, “This gate no longer works.”

With impeccable timing, Parker—who was now covered in dirt—ran over and shouted, “Hey you two, come look down here! There’s cracks in the boulder! I

can see fragments of a magic circle inside, it's amazing! I have no idea how the people who made this managed to create a three-dimensional magic circle *inside* a natural object, but—”

“Yeah, okay, great! I'll listen to your explanation later, but I'm talking right now!”

Despite my annoyed tone, Parker had given me the last key I needed to solve this puzzle. I turned back to Tokitaka and said, “That boulder is the real powerhouse behind the Great Torii of the Divine, isn't it? And now it's broken.”

“Yes, I'm afraid so. It's exactly as Lord Parker said. There is a three-dimensional magic circle inside the boulder, but as we have no way of analyzing it, we do not know how to repair the apparatus.”

Three-dimensional magic circles were beyond my area of expertise too. I doubted even Master would be able to fix this machine up. This artifact was obviously a relic from a lost age.

According to Tokitaka, the torii's deterioration began two hundred years ago. As the machine wore down, the interval between each Divine's arrival grew. Eventually they stopped appearing entirely, and instead people with the memories of Divine started being born in Wa. Reincarnators, just like me. Unsurprisingly, most of those reincarnators contributed to the development of Wa. Considering how well Wa treated its Divine, their decision made sense. However as the torii's degradation grew worse, reincarnators stopped appearing entirely. Panicking, the Chrysanthemum Court asked the Heavenwatchers to investigate. They were astrologers as well as spies, so they could read the stars for clues. Tokitaka solemnly told me what his predecessors' investigation unearthed.

“The verdict their astrology magic delivered came as quite a shock. Divine were now appearing in places outside of Wa. Meaning the secrets of the Divine were being spread to other nations.”

I completely understood Wa's desire to monopolize the reincarnators' knowledge. Were I from Wa, I would have felt the same.

“Our astrologers discovered that the next Divine had been born far west of the Windswept Dunes, somewhere in northwest Meraldia, or even further west

in the unexplored forest.”

Ah, that was probably the previous Demon Lord. Nice going, Friedensrichter-sama. According to Tokitaka, the Heavenwatchers had infiltrated Meraldia to search for traces of the Divine, but they hadn’t been able to find any clues. That was hardly surprising, considering the reincarnator had been a dragonkin instead of a human. Also, his village had been deep in the mountains, where humans never went.

“After that, we managed to start up the Great Torii of the Divine one last time, but it took us seven years. And like before, the Divine we called forth was born far from Wa. This time they appeared in the forest west of southwestern Meraldia.”

That was probably me. Sorry about that, guys.

Tokitaka added, “The Chrysanthemum Court was extremely worried by this state of affairs, and they gathered eight of Wa’s best mages to rectify the problem. Since they were unable to repair the Torii itself, they instead tried to cast a supplementary spell on it to capture any souls that passed through the gate.”

“Sounds like you were playing with fire.”

Attempting to cast supplementary magic on an active magical device was like trying to fix a telephone pole while the wires were still live. Unsurprisingly, Tokitaka sighed wearily and replied, “Quite. Fortunately no one died, but the spell ended in abject failure. Though something rather strange occurred when the spell fizzled.”

“And what would that be?”

“We made absolutely sure that the spell was constructed by two pairs of four mages, as I stated, eight people. However, our records claim that only seven people participated. Moreover, I personally knew each of the mages, yet I can only recall seven of them as well.”

After mulling over Tokitaka’s words, I suggested the most logical solution. “Maybe your spell failed precisely because you accidentally forgot to bring an eighth person?”

“That’s impossible. This was a ritual vital to the country’s future. Everyone would have noticed if we were missing our eighth member.”

So you’re absolutely sure eight people took part, but you only remember seven of them. Just then, a concept from one of the sci-fi novels I’d read in my past life flashed through my mind.

“In that case, you must have altered the past,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

Tokitaka gave me a confused look, and I tried to explain to the best of my ability.

“The eighth mage definitely existed, but when you cast the spell to interfere with the Torii, that changed. Instead of failing completely, the spell interacted with the Torii in such a way that your eighth member was erased from history, making it seem like he never existed.”

As for where that eighth member ended up, I had no idea. Perhaps he was sucked into the Great Torii of the Divine and sent to another world, or perhaps he was simply annihilated. Considering how powerful this artifact was, it was a miracle the results weren’t more disastrous. I did feel bad for the one guy who was sacrificed, but it was a relief Wa hadn’t accidentally unleashed a calamity upon the continent. That being said, this endeavor had cost Wa more than just one of their mages.

“As Lord Parker has so astutely pointed out earlier, our failed spell also caused the boulder to crack. The Great Torii of the Divine will not activate again, and we have no idea how to repair it. I’m sure you’ve noticed that no mana is flowing through the gate.”

“Yes...I have.”

If it was just dormant I would have felt a residual trickle of mana, kind of like how a computer in sleep mode still used a little bit of electricity. But this artifact was completely dead. There was no mana in it at all. If by some chance the Chrysanthemum Court had actually succeeded in calling another reincarnator through the gate with their spell, they had no way of knowing where that person was now.

“If there’s another reincarnator in this world, we would know. But since our astrologers sensed no change within the stars, the summoning must have failed too,” Tokitaka muttered, seemingly reading my thoughts. But that got me thinking in a different direction.

If this transmigration gate could interfere with the past, wouldn’t that explain the appearance of one other historical reincarnator? The slave swordsman who escaped from Rolmund 300 years ago, Draulight. What if Wa’s mages had succeeded, but instead of summoning a reincarnator they’d sent one of their own to reincarnate into the past? *It sounds far-fetched, but that’s the only way to explain Draulight’s modern mountain-climbing skills.*

Noticing my pensive expression, Tokitaka asked, “Is something the matter?”

“No...it’s nothing. I was just wondering if my magic might be able to discover anything about the Torii.”

If my theory was correct, then this apparatus was more dangerous than I initially thought. Sending reincarnators into the past carried the risk of altering history, and thereby altering the present and future. It was for the best if this artifact was never activated again. Looking up at the Great Torii of the Divine, I mused, “So this gate can’t ever be activated again?”

“Correct. Unfortunately...” Tokitaka turned toward the gate as well, his expression glum.

“Hey, Veight, I don’t think we can repair this, but we should definitely try analyzing it. I bet if we gathered Master and all of her disciples, we would be able to figure *something* out at least!” Parker’s cheerful voice echoed through the shrine, dispelling the pensive mood.

I shoed Parker away from the boulder, then returned to Tokitaka.

“What does the Chrysanthemum Court plan to do with this torii now?” I asked.

“Regrettable as it is, our nation lacks the magical knowledge to repair it. If it was a two-dimensional magic circle, we might have been able to do something, but...”

Tokitaka gestured sadly toward the boulder. I had a feeling this artifact predated even the Old Dynasty. Magic circles were like computer programs made up of physical magical circuits. They had the qualities of hardware and software simultaneously, making them very delicate. Adding a third dimension on top of that made the whole thing even more complicated.

However, if we all tried to tackle the problem together with Master, there was a chance we might be able to decipher this thing. Each of her disciples were masters of their field. Plus we all possessed knowledge normal humans could never obtain. Parker was right; it was possible we'd be able to analyze and reconstruct this artifact. But if this really could interfere with the past, it was too dangerous to mess with.

As an extreme example, if we created a new copy, then Wa could use it to ensure the old Demon Lord and I were born here as humans instead of as demons. All the effort I put into making Meraldia and Rolmund better places would be erased. It was also highly likely the founder of Meraldia, Draulight, had come from Wa's mistakes, so if those were rectified, Meraldia might never come to be. *Meaning Airia...and Garsh and Forne would never be born.*

That wasn't all. If my and the previous Demon Lord's origins were rewritten, I'd never get to meet Master or any of the eccentric demons I'd grown so fond of. Hell, it was possible I wouldn't even meet the old Demon Lord. Everything I'd built up as "Veight the Werewolf" would be overwritten. *I didn't realize it until now, but I've gotten pretty attached to this new life of mine, huh?*

During my past life, I couldn't have cared less if someone had rewritten my entire history. But things were different now. I'd come to love my life as a werewolf, more than even I'd expected.

I looked up at Tokitaka and said, "There's a lot I need to think about. Would you mind leaving me alone for a few minutes?"

"Of course. We're in no rush, take as much time as you would like."

Even though this was Wa's greatest secret, Tokitaka seemed to have no problem leaving me alone with it. With a casual wave he headed down the long stone staircase.

Once I was alone, I looked back and forth between the Torii and the boulder. It was best that this artifact never got activated again, for the sake of the world I knew and loved. The demon army, Meraldia, and Rolmund had finally started moving in a positive direction. I couldn't bear it if all that got overwritten.

But ensuring this artifact stayed dead meant that no reincarnators would ever appear in this world again. I would be the last reincarnator from Japan. Never again would I have conversations like the ones I had with the old Demon Lord.

"What era are you really from, Demon Lord?"

"I believe I told you I wouldn't entertain such questions, Veight."

"I know, but... Oh yeah, did you ever visit Tokyo?"

"I did indeed. Quite often in fact."

"Right. Since you know the name Tokyo, you must have been born after the Meiji Restoration."

"Must you be so nosy? Though I admit your ability to tease information out of me like that is quite impressive."

We used to make small talk like that all the time back when he was alive. If I was being honest with myself, forging trade relations with Wa was just a pretext. The real reason I'd come all this way to the edge of the continent was because I'd been chasing after the old Demon Lord's shadow. Here, in this country of reincarnators, I'd been hoping to find clues on whether or not he'd been reincarnated again, and if so, where. But all I'd discovered was this busted ancient artifact. And since I'd decided not to fix it, there was no way for me to keep chasing after the Demon Lord's soul. I was well and truly alone.

Isolation and loneliness washed over me. I had no choice but to continue on as this world's only reincarnator. There were no other living ones left, and there wasn't any greater being like God sending more into this world. It was an unthinking machine that had brought me here.

If there had been a god of some sort, I could have talked to him at least. In truth, I had harbored the faint hope that something had brought me here for some greater purpose, like in those stories where the hero gets summoned to defeat a great evil, or the protagonist is granted a second chance at life because

of all the regrets they had before dying. But it turned out my appearance here wasn't due to any of those reasons. There was no grand quest I'd been tasked with, and no one had believed me worthy of a second chance. It was mere coincidence that this broken piece of junk had picked up my soul and dropped me here. My reincarnation held no meaning.

"Which means..." I muttered quietly, stroking the surface of the boulder.

The cool stone felt nice to the touch. *I'm free to live my life however I want to.* I was completely cut off from my old life, but that also meant I no longer had to be chained down by my past.

"I can do as I please."



For me, that meant continuing to serve as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander. Honestly, that came as a bit of a relief. Unfortunately, though, this meant my standing was about to get even more complicated. I owed Wa a debt for reincarnating me into this world, and I personally felt a desire to aid the people of this country. Without them, I would have never known the joy of this life. Past reincarnators had contributed to Wa's development, and I wanted to do what I could for them too. It'd be a shame if I broke the streak and brought shame to the name of my forebears.

That aside, it's pretty lonely knowing I'll never see the old Demon Lord again. Why'd you have to go and die on me? You were the ideal boss, the ideal senpai, and well...the kind of dad I always wanted. Couldn't you have stuck around for a while longer? There was so much I wanted to do with you.

I patted the boulder a few times, then got to my feet.

Alright, that's enough brooding. There were a ton of things I needed to do, and plenty more that I *wanted* to do. I bowed to the Torii and gave my farewells to the old Demon Lord. *I'm going to keep on doing my best to help this world as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander. You can rest easy knowing we inherited your dream. I pray that one day, somehow, you get reincarnated again. Hopefully you'll be able to live a more peaceful life next time. We'll definitely meet again, whether in this world, or the next.*

Flourishing my cape, I turned my back to the gate and said to Tokitaka—who was undoubtedly watching me from the shadows, “Let's go back. There is still a lot of work to be done.”

I won't look back anymore.

Unsurprisingly, Tokitaka appeared seemingly out of nowhere. I turned to him and said respectfully, “Thank you very much for showing me this artifact. I'm sure it was a decision you didn't make lightly.”

“We simply believed it would be the most effective strategy.” Beaming, Tokitaka continued, “Rather than offer wealth and status, we believed you would be more cooperative if we showed you our greatest secret. Did it work?”

Damn, this guy read me like a book. Smiling ruefully I replied, “Vexing though it is to admit, your strategy worked perfectly, Lord Tokitaka. Overtures like these are certainly the best way to gain my trust.”

I just couldn’t hate someone who was willing to show me their deepest secrets. It probably wasn’t a good thing that I was so soft, considering I was a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor and the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, but I couldn’t change who I was. Besides, it looked like Tokitaka and the other Kushin were all amicable toward Meraldia, so it wasn’t really a problem if I grew fond of them.

Also, while I hadn’t publicly outed myself as a reincarnator, I’d more or less implicitly admitted it to the Chrysanthemum Court. They understood what that meant without me having to say anything. After all, they were as skilled in the Japanese art of vaguely alluding to things as I was.

Really, though, I was glad the Chrysanthemum Court had shown me the Great Torii of the Divine. Thanks to that, I had been able to reaffirm who I was, and where I stood in the world. I was Veight, werewolf of the demon army. But at the same time, I was also a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor. My duties and responsibilities lay with Meraldia and the demon army.

Though I couldn’t abandon my friends and join Wa, I did owe this country a debt. Not only had they shown me their biggest secret, but they were willing to pretend they hadn’t discovered mine. That meant a lot to me. The least I could do for Wa was make sure that relations between them and Meraldia were as amicable as possible. *Man, why do I keep taking on more and more responsibilities...*

Turning to Tokitaka, I resolutely declared, “In deference to the Divine who came before me, I will do whatever I can within the bounds of my position to aid Wa.”

“That is reassuring to hear. It has been many decades since a Divine has graced Wa. Knowing you are willing to aid us is a huge relief.”

Smiling, Tokitaka bowed to me. I had a feeling this guy knew how to manipulate me perfectly.

“Seeing as our nations are separated by the Windswept Dunes, there is little

worry war will break out between our two countries, so let's just focus on hashing out a trade deal that's mutually beneficial," Tokitaka said lightly, and I nodded.

"Agreed. Hopefully we can strengthen our friendship to the point where we're willing to exchange information and technology as well."

Mwahahaha, I can't wait to bring all of Wa's advanced technology to Meraldia. Of course, this wouldn't be a one-sided relationship. Meraldia would offer what it could as well. However, just trading goods and ideas wouldn't be enough.

"Eventually we're going to have to do something about the Windswept Dunes," I muttered, more to myself than Tokitaka.

The Kushin shot me a surprised look and asked, "Do you mean to say you can restore the land to fertility? That is something not even Wa's founder, Maestro Ason, was capable of."

"Well, I definitely wouldn't be able to do it alone." I shook my head. "But if we utilized all of Meraldia's talent and manpower, we'd at least be able to create safe highways passing through the desert. And if we can do that, eventually towns will begin to spring up along those roads, bringing our borders closer together."

That wouldn't happen until long after me, Airia, Tokitaka, Eleora, and everyone else I knew was dead. But it was still something to strive for, especially because it was definitely possible one of Rolmund's future emperors would want to renew the empire's expansion into the south. Were that to happen, Meraldia would be much better off if they'd forged a strong alliance with Wa. Naturally, the opposite scenario where Rolmund allied with Wa to crush Meraldia could also happen, but that was something for future generations to worry about, not me. Meraldia couldn't hope to resist Rolmund on its own. Linking Wa to the rest of the world was necessary one way or the other, so it was in our best interests to put Wa in our debt.

With all that in mind I suggested, "First, we should tie up any loose ends relating to the drug smuggling operation. In order to prevent another Gehei from appearing, we need to arrest everyone involved with the manufacturing

and distribution of these drugs, not just the sellers.”

If we left any warehouses unattended, Wa’s drug problem would get worse, not better. Gehei had at least been selective in his clients, but if any of his underlings tried to sell off his remaining stock to make a quick buck, I doubted they’d be as discreet. Tokitaka nodded in agreement.

“We’ll take steps to ensure no remnants of his operation survive. I’m planning on mobilizing the Heavenwatchers, but would you be willing to lend us your werewolves for this as well?”

“Naturally. Also, I would like to request that Mao’s name be cleared in Wa.”

“That can be arranged. The charges against him have already been scrubbed from our records, but I can have the Chrysanthemum Court issue a formal letter of apology as well.”

I wasn’t trying to use Mao’s amnesty as a bargaining point or anything, but I did want his name cleared since I was planning on making him ambassador to Wa. He was a good success story to advertise the fact that Waians were both welcome in Meraldia, and could make a name for themselves there if they so choose. More than anything though, he really was an innocent who was falsely accused.

Upon returning to the Chrysanthemum Court’s castle, I was greeted by quite the surprise.

“Veight!”



Airia wearing a kimono. *What's she doing here?* Airia put down the ceremonial teacup in her hands and turned to me with a smile. "You were taking longer than expected, so I came here to check up on you as the Commonwealth Council's representative."

"You did?"

"Yes, I did."

"Well, sorry for making you come all this way. I got wrapped up in exposing a criminal drug ring, and..."

Now I felt guilty about putting my official duties on hold for personal reasons. That aside, Airia looked really striking in a kimono. It was a bit strange to see someone in blonde hair wearing a Japanese outfit, but it suited her perfectly. Apparently, Fumino had been teaching her the art of tea ceremony while the Kushin waited for my return.

"Wa's tea becomes excessively bitter if you steep it in water that's too hot. Wait until the water has cooled slightly before adding the powder. In the meantime, prepare the tea whisk. You need to warm it to make it more flexible, or it might break when stirring the tea."

"Understood, Lady Fumino."

When they were sitting together, the two of them complemented each other's beauty. *Wait, now's not the time to be staring.*

"Airia, who's ruling Ryunheit in your absence?"

Airia gave the tea whisk a curious look before turning to me and saying, "My assistants are taking care of the day-to-day administration of the city. The other viceroys promised they'd take care of any important matters that popped up, so there shouldn't be any problems. Besides..."

"Besides?"

Airia grinned and boasted, "I doubt anyone will cause trouble in the city where the Demon Lord lives."

Can't argue with that. Sighing, I replied, "I'm honored you have so much faith in the demon army."

Airia followed Fumino's example and started mixing the matcha with the tea whisk.

"There hasn't been a single time where the demon army...or rather, you, have betrayed my trust, Veight."

Is that really true? I keep breaking the promises I make to you. Seeing my expression Airia added, "You're always sincere, and have our best interests at heart. Besides, you have never once broken a promise."

I broke one just last week! Are you being sarcastic here? I was scared of correcting her, but I felt like it would be wrong of me not to.

"I wouldn't say I've *never* broken a promise," I said.

Airia gave me an awkward smile and offered me the matcha she'd finished preparing. "What you're thinking of doesn't count as a promise. It was my fault for making you agree to such an unreasonable request."

"Still, I'm the one who made that promise. You're not at fault."

I stared at Airia, inhaling the nostalgic scent of matcha. It was a weird feeling, seeing the borders of my old life and new one mingling like this. I sipped the bittersweet matcha tea, savoring the taste. When I was done, I took out a handkerchief and wiped down the teacup. I had no idea how tea ceremonies in this world worked, but I vaguely remembered that was what you had to do for a tea ceremony in Japan.

"Your tea was delicious," I murmured, returning the cup to her.

"Thank you very much," Airia replied, smiling. The eldest Kushin, Taira suddenly said, "I am envious of how strong the bonds between demon and human are in Meraldia."

"Why envious?"

Taira sighed audibly. "Wa has demihumans living in its borders as well, but our relationship with them is quite rocky. In truth, I doubted humans and demons could really live together until I laid eyes on you, Lord Veight."

"Well, there are all kinds of demons, so you can't really lump them together."

The demon army handpicked which demons were allowed to live in human

cities. And even then, there were tons of problems, so coexistence wasn't easy by any means. Taira sipped on the tea Fumino had made him and smiled faintly.

"If the grimalkin living near the desert would stop being so aggressive, we wouldn't have to worry so much about our borders."

Grimalkin? We didn't have any living in Meraldia, but Master had taught me about them. Airia and I exchanged glances.

You think this is a chance to put them in our debt?

It does sound like they're implying they want our help.

Should we offer our help?

I believe so.

After having that silent exchange via eye contact, I loudly cleared my throat and said in a stately voice, "As a token of Meraldia's friendship, will you allow us to assist you with your feline problem?"

"Oh yes, your help would be greatly appreciated. A demon perspective might be what we need to resolve this issue."

"Well, like I said, there are all kinds of demons out there, so it's not like I'll be able to understand them just because I'm also a demon..."

Werewolves, dragonkin, and canines all had different values and cultures. For example, the red-scaled dragonkin that the previous Demon Lord had belonged to and the blue-scaled dragonkin that Kurtz and Baltze were a part of had been at war with each other before Friedensrichter had united them. Just being a demon didn't mean other demons would automatically listen to me. That said, I was growing more confident in my diplomatic skills, even if I did have to resort to force at times. *Might as well see what I can do. Besides, I'm curious to see what the grimalkin are like.*

We left the castle, and I took Airia to a nearby restaurant. The interior was quite luxurious, with the smell of fresh tatami filling the building.

"Did you read the report I sent about my current progress?"

"I did. The council decided that since Wa is willing to deal in good faith, we

should send a human diplomat as well to show that both races in Meraldia wish to forge strong ties with Wa.”

“Is that really the only reason you’re here?”

Airia grinned mischievously and replied, “Well, they also wanted me here because they think you’re too nice and you’ll give Wa more concessions than you should.”

I figured. I’d been an ordinary civilian in my past life, so serving as a nation’s ambassador was still more than I could handle.

“Sorry. I ended up sympathizing with Wa’s situation, and I couldn’t help myself.”

“No need to apologize. That’s one of your good points, Veight. However, Petore is eager to keep sending more diplomats here to make sure his interests are represented, so I recommend finishing up negotiations sooner rather than later.”

Damn greedy old man.

“Got it. Do you think you could help me, Airia?”

“But of course.”

While we talked, Airia struggled to get used to using chopsticks. Normally she picked up on everything right away, so it was kind of refreshing to see her have trouble with something for once.

“You have to hold them like this, Airia.”

“Is this right?”

As always, she was quick on the uptake. It only took a few tries before she started holding them right. However, she was still having trouble moving her fingers the right way to pick things up with them.

“Ah—” Her grip faltered as she tried to pick up some vegetables, so I grabbed her hand and showed her how to do it.

“You lift things like this.” Airia’s hand was soft and surprisingly small. My heart started pounding when I realized I’d just grabbed a girl’s hand, but I pushed

those thoughts out of my head and continued my lecture, “Don’t worry. Knowing you, you’ll get the hang of it right away.”

“O-Okay...” Airia looked down, averting her gaze.

Should I not have grabbed her hand? As we resumed our meal, Airia and I discussed how we were going to tackle negotiations. In the end, we decided to go with the usual approach.

“In order to appease Petore, it’s probably best if you hash out the details with the Chrysanthemum Court, Airia. I’ll let you know if there’s any conditions we absolutely have to bargain for.”

“I don’t mind, but what will you be doing in the meantime?” Fingers trembling, Airia awkwardly picked up a piece of tofu with her chopsticks.

“Fieldwork. Stamina’s the only thing I’ve got going for me, so I may as well make use of it.”

“I wouldn’t— Ah!?” As Airia looked up at me, she lost her grip on the tofu, and it plopped back onto her plate.

I hadn’t received any formal education on diplomacy or politics. While my recent successes had given me a confidence boost, I knew I was still an amateur. It was best to leave negotiations to an expert like Airia. As a noble, she’d been raised for this. Still looking at me, Airia tried to grab her tofu again.

“Are you going to negotiate with the grimalkin?”

“That’s the plan. The humans living in that area seem to be on pretty bad terms with the grimalkin so I’ll see if I can patch things up between them. The incidents haven’t escalated past cattle theft, so I’m sure we can still resolve this peacefully.”

According to Master, grimalkin weren’t an especially belligerent race. The people of Wa seemed to fear them, but they were about as small as canines, and just as harmless.

“I don’t want to scare them, so I think I’ll only take Jerrick’s squad with me. Vodd’s and Monza’s squads will be in charge of guarding you.”

Monza and Airia had been getting along well recently, while Vodd was a

veteran of a thousand battles. With those two around, Airia would be 100% safe. Still, it was probably best to settle things between Wa and the grimalkin quickly. The longer I took, the longer it would be before I got to see Airia struggle with tofu again.

—The Wandering Prince—

“You want me to go to Wa, Petore?” I folded my arms and the viceroy of Lotz gave me a wrinkled smile.

“Indeed, Woroy. Negotiations with Wa’ll wrap up faster if ya go. You don’t have to do anything, just be present.”

That told me everything I needed to know. “So by sending a former Rolmundian prince to Wa as a Meraldian diplomat, you’ll be showing off how much power and influence you guys have. You want me to put pressure on those guys, don’t you?”

“I never said that. The Kushin of Wa are free to interpret yer presence as they please.”

He’s a crafty old geezer, alright. Though I quite liked guys like him. Grinning, I replied, “In that case the less I say the better, right?”

“That’d be ideal, yes. I already told Airia she’s in charge of the particulars.”

“The Demon Ambassador? It’s not Veight who’s handling the negotiations?”

Petore ruffled his thinning hair and gave me a wry grin. “Veight’s too nice for his own good. He’ll offer Wa more than he needs to, and he’ll let them deliberate for longer than he should.”

Veight’s style was definitely to treat people with courtesy and compassion, though if they turned hostile toward him, his ferocity in battle was unbelievable. Smiling, Petore added, “Well, it’s ’cause of that personality of his that we’re all allied with the demon army now, though.”

“It’s the same for me.”

I never imagined I would end up surrendering to a foreign general, especially since he was a demon. *Life’s full of mysteries, I suppose.* I grinned back at Petore

and nodded. “I’d be stuck in Meraldia otherwise, so an opportunity to travel doesn’t sound too bad. I’ll see if I can’t learn some new city building tricks by looking at how Wa builds their towns.”

“Take care of yourself, Prince.”

“Don’t worry, my skills aren’t limited just to leading troops.”

I wonder what kind of face Veight’ll make when he sees me in Wa... Just thinking about it brought a smile to my face.

After dumping my diplomatic duties onto Airia, I headed northwest to the arid region where the grimalkin were supposed to be. Upon my arrival, I discovered something rather surprising. There was no gradual shift from fertile plains to arid desert, but rather an invisible boundary beyond which the desert suddenly started. It really made it obvious where the magic protecting Wa stopped being effective. According to the locals, the grimalkin had taken up residence in the nearby ruins of an Old Dynasty city. It was one of the last cities to be abandoned before Wa was founded. But now nearly 1,000 years had passed since the desert reclaimed it.

“I haven’t seen this architectural style before, boss.”

“I guess this is what Old Dynasty buildings looked like.”

One of the men of Jerrick’s squad, the carpenter’s son and Jerrick’s good friend Gior, looked around in wonder. All of the buildings, from the houses to the castle, had rounded designs that eschewed sharp angles. Aesthetically, they looked kinda tacky, but at the same time, they made the ruins feel welcoming. I’d heard the Old Dynasty had employed different architectural styles based on region, but I never knew they had buildings this unique.

While the ruins had piqued my curiosity, though, we weren’t here to explore today. I could see erect feline figures hiding in the shadows of nearby buildings. Actually, most of them were lying down so I couldn’t say for sure whether or not they stood on two legs, but I assumed they did. Either way, they were likely the grimalkin we were looking for. Surprisingly there was no one keeping watch, nor was there anyone doing any sort of work. *How does this community function?* Cautiously, we slipped in through one of the cracks in the city walls and entered the ruins proper.

I could see grimalkin lying on the weed-covered stones littering the streets. It seemed like they did nothing but laze around all day, but they had to be doing something to get all their food and other necessities.

“Excuse me, but I’m an envoy of Wa, and I’m a werewolf from Meraldia. I’d like to meet your chief,” I said in Old Dynastic, and all the grimalkin turned to look at me. They stared blankly at me for a few seconds, then went back to sunbathing. *So they’re not even interested in talking, huh?* But to my surprise, one of the grey-furred grimalkin lying at the foot of a stone staircase turned to me and said in an annoyed voice, “We don’t have a chief, traveler...meow.”

Is it just me, or was that “meow” at the end super forced? Ignoring my growing sense of unease, I turned to the grimalkin, who was wearing a straw hat, and asked, “If you don’t have a chief, do you at least have a representative or someone I can talk to?”

“Uhh, sure I guess. Lemme think... Oh yeah, I guess Nerimi’s on duty for now...meow.”

You don’t have to add meow after every sentence if you find it that much of a pain, you know.

“Which one of you is Nerimi?”

“She’s the girl over...oh, I guess she’s not there...meow.”

Seriously, just give the meowing a rest. The grey tabby grimalkin rolled over and resumed napping, so I was forced to go search for this Nerimi on my own. Eventually I found her—a white-furred grimalkin who looked like she’d rather be doing anything than working.

“Isn’t it Izushi’s turn to take care of stuff like this? He’s the grey-furred guy in the hat.”

Seriously? I hurriedly went back and found Izushi washing his face in a nearby well. When I told him what Nerimi had said, he replied, “Oh yeah, I guess I forgot to actually hand the job off to her...meow.”

“You don’t have to force the meows at the end of every sentence you know.”

“No wonder everyone’s still listening to me...meow.”

From the looks of it the grimalkin took turns being chief of the village, and once they got tired of their job they foisted it off onto someone else. However, Izushi had forgotten to officially hand his responsibilities over. *How do these guys survive?* I was used to dealing with the well-organized dragonkin and the energetic but obedient canines, so the grimalkin were throwing me for a loop.

“At any rate, I’m the werewolf Veight. My friends are all werewolves too, but they can’t speak Old Dynastic.”

“Gotcha. Meow.”

“Seriously, cut the meowing out.”

“But Maestro Ason said humans found it cute when we do that. Meow.”

“I’m a werewolf, not a human. Wait, hang on, did you just say Ason?”

“Yeah, you know the famous human Maestro Ason? Meow.”

“You’re going to have to explain to me how you know about him. Also stop with the meowing.”

It turned out that after Ason had disappeared from Wa, he’d gone to live with the grimalkin. For reasons I still didn’t quite understand, the grimalkin all worshiped him. When I relayed everything Izushi told me to Jerrick and the others, they frowned at me.

“I should have known this place would bring out that bad habit of yours.”

“Wait, what bad habit?”

“Anytime you find an interesting puzzle you get obsessed with solving it. And it *always* leads to you sticking your nose into something you don’t have to.”

Really? Now that I think about it, I guess so. My biggest priority was resolving the dispute between the humans and the grimalkin. But after learning that these grimalkin had a connection to one of Wa’s earliest Divines, I’d completely forgotten about my initial goal. *Whoops. Good thing I’ve got friends to keep me on the right track.*

“Well, you’ve got a point...I’ll try to be more careful from now on.”

Jerrick and his squadmates exchanged glances, then shrugged their shoulders.

No really, I mean it. I decided to put this mystery out of my mind for now and focus on the task at hand.

“Anyway, the nearby villagers want you to stop stealing their livestock. They need those animals to sustain their livelihoods, and it’s not like they’re doing anything to harm you guys, right?”

“Wait, hold on a second here!” Izushi was so surprised he forgot to add meow to the end of his sentence. “We haven’t stolen anyone’s livestock! We don’t even need it since we have Maestro Ason’s legendary treasure!”

“Legendary treasure?”

“Ah!?”

Realizing he’d said too much, Izushi dropped to the ground and started rolling around like a cat.

“Meow?”

Sorry, but you’re gonna tell me everything you know. There’s no getting out of this.

I pressured Izushi into divulging everything he knew about this legendary treasure of Ason’s.

“All I know is what’s been passed down from our ancestors, so I dunno if the details are accurate...meow.”

Please don’t start meowing again. According to Izushi, Ason had been obsessed with investigating the source of the desertification. Though he’d managed to halt the expansion of the desert, he hadn’t been able to figure out the root cause that started this problem, so once he’d made sure Wa was stable, he’d slipped out of the country and started exploring the Windswept Dunes.

While I admired his proactive attitude, it struck me as a little irresponsible to leave the country you founded to go on adventures. That was the kind of thing people should leave to their vice-commanders. *Actually, that kind of fieldwork isn’t really suitable for vice-commanders either, huh... Oh well.*

“Do you wanna hear about the heroic feats the three grimalkin companions he traveled with achieved?”

“Maybe some other time.”

I got Izushi to skip over the details of their exploits. Suffice to say, after many trials and tribulations, Ason discovered a mysterious artifact in the center of the desert. It was a very valuable magical tool that could manipulate mana. He’d left this artifact with his grimalkin friends, then went off in search of someone who understood how to use it. And that was all Izushi and the other grimalkin living in the desert knew. Though this wasn’t directly related to our current problem, I definitely needed to take a look at this artifact before leaving.

Incidentally, Izushi was adamant that his people hadn’t been stealing the villagers’ livestock. It’d be rude to press him any further, so I decided to shelve that issue for now. Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell whether or not grimalkin were lying based on the scent of their sweat. Werewolves’ senses had evolved specifically to help them against humans, so they weren’t as effective against non-human targets.

“By the way, would it be alright if I took a look at this legendary treasure Ason found?”

“Sure.” Izushi seemed to have finally given up on adding meow to the end of all of his sentences. “The place it’s kept in isn’t far from here. Follow me.”

Wouldn’t it make more sense to enshrine a treasure like that here in the center of the ruins or something?

When I reached the shrine where the treasure was being kept, I realized why the grimalkin hadn’t done that. A small but lush grove was growing around the shrine. To my surprise, pumpkins the size of people, eggplants as big as church bells, and apples of all kinds were growing within the grove. Even though the grove wasn’t very well-tended, it was producing more food than acres of farmland.

“The hell is this?” One of my werewolves muttered, while I frowned suspiciously.

Izushi patted his straw hat and said proudly, “Whaddaya think, amazing right? All we have to do is throw our leftovers in here, and they start sprouting into giant fruit trees.”

So this is why they don't have to work to get their food.

“Plus, if we ever want any meat, we just have to hunt the rabbits and birds that come to nibble on the fruit. As you can see, there's no reason for us to waste our time stealing food from humans.”

“I see what you mean. So this is all because of Ason's amazing treasure?”

“Yes. No matter where you put it, the land around it becomes extremely fertile. Though, uhh...you don't wanna live next to it.”

The place where the treasure was enshrined had once been part of the ruins, but the explosive growth of the vegetation had eroded away the stone buildings until barely anything was left. What few buildings and roads remained were choked with vines and flowers. Anything built here would be destroyed by the flora within a decade or so. But while the grove itself was uninhabitable, people gathered around it to partake of its bounty. Most of the grimalkin villages were located in close proximity to the grove, and I could see people coming from all directions to gather food. Most people ate what they harvested on the spot, without any regard for decorum.

I scrutinized the soil for a few seconds, and after finding nothing immediately dangerous, I gingerly walked into the grove with Jerrick and the others. We pushed our way through the undergrowth and entered the shrine holding the artifact. It was only the area around the shrine that looked well-kept. The grimalkin apparently cared enough to maintain the shrine, at least. It had originally been built for some ancient religion which was likely long dead, but the crumbling building still possessed an air of solemn divinity. Sitting atop the shrine's altar was a golden goblet, and a number of grimalkin dressed in ostentatious kimonos were bowing before it. They seemed to be in the middle of some kind of sacred chant.

“Namya Myana. Ason Ason.”

“Namya Myana. Ason Ason.”

I nearly burst out laughing when I heard what they were saying, but I could tell their prayers were sincere. I didn't want to seem rude, so I did my best to keep a straight face. Beard twitching, Izushi puffed his chest out proudly and said, "That right there is Maestro Ason's legendary treasure. It's also the grimalkin's guardian deity."

I nodded hurriedly, my mind racing. "Yeah, it's amazing. Totally awesome. Thanks for showing me."

It took all of my willpower to remain calm. I poked Jerrick in the ribs and motioned him and his squad outside.

"Whoa, why're you in such a hurry to leave, boss? Didn't you come here cause you wanted to see that thing?"

As calmly and quickly as possible, I explained the situation to Jerrick, "You have to get out of here *now*. That goblet is dangerous."

"Really?"

Jerrick wasn't a mage, so it wasn't surprising he couldn't tell. Still speaking quickly, I replied, "That goblet is one hell of a magical artifact. It's been active for centuries, probably millennia."

"So what's the problem?"

"Well..." I tried to think of how best to explain this without using technical terminology. "That goblet sucks up surrounding mana. It was made to do that, so that's fine, but it has long since exceeded its maximum capacity."

"So you're saying it's starting to overflow?"

"Yeah. That's why all the plants here grow so fast, and get so big. Mana has the power to influence everything, including life."

There was still a lot unknown regarding mana, but we knew it was power in its rawest form, and it could be transformed into anything from kinetic energy to chemical energy to potential energy. Moreover, like all fuel sources, it was highly volatile. In fact, the Blast Rifles worked by combusting pure mana like gunpowder.

That goblet was sucking mana out of the surrounding land—its draining

powers covered a wide area too. But it could no longer store the mana it was absorbing, and so the excess was spilling out in the surrounding area. Kind of like an overflowing bathtub. Regardless, what the goblet was currently doing was definitely not intended, and that was a problem.

Back when Ason had brought this artifact back, it had probably still had enough room to store more mana—meaning it was just a mana-guzzling goblet. But he'd been a Japanese man from the Heian period, so he probably knew nothing about magic. He would've had no way of knowing what the goblet was really doing. Now that the goblet had sucked in mana for thousands of years, the excess mana was spilling over and polluting the nearby land.

"We are standing in the middle of a bonfire, with oil lying all around," I said, giving Jerrick a serious look. "If that goblet's mana bursts, this whole grove is going to go up in flames."

"If you really think it's that bad, we should probably run, boss." Jerrick nodded, his expression turning grave. But then he added, "Though knowing you, you're gonna do something reckless to fix it, aren't you? If you're not leaving, we're sticking with you."

"You make it sound like I'm reckless all the time..."

That goblet either needed to be deactivated or moved before it caused a tragedy. I wasn't a magical artifact expert so I couldn't say for sure, but it was possible it'd wipe out way more than this grove if it did end up exploding. I allowed Jerrick and Gior to stay behind with me, but I sent the other two men from his squad to deliver an urgent message to Airia and the Chrysanthemum Court. Right as they left, Izushi walked out of the shrine, casually chomping at a rice ball.

"This is a nice place, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

Izushi picked a few grains of rice out of his beard and plopped them into his mouth. "Sure hope things stay this peaceful forever."

"Believe me, so do I."

I needed to bring Kite and Ryucco over ASAP. It didn't matter if they were in

the middle of something, they needed to get here *now*.

After returning to Izushi's village, I asked him to gather the representatives from all the nearby settlements. Unfortunately, I was having a hard time convincing them to give up the goblet.

"Maestro Ason's legendary treasure is the grimalkin's legacy, after all," a black-furred grimalkin said languidly, though his expression was dead serious.

A calico grimalkin added, "That's right. It's our duty to protect it. Maestro Ason may have been a human, but we have no obligation to hand it over to other humans."

I figured this is how the conversation would go. Of course, the grimalkin had a much simpler reason for not wanting to relinquish ownership of the goblet. Izushi nodded and said flatly, "We'll have a hard time finding food without Maestro Ason's treasure. Will the people of Wa look after us if we give it up?"

"Well, maybe..." There was no way in hell the Chrysanthemum Court would do that, but I decided to be diplomatically vague. Seeing as there was no way they would give up their goblet, I decided to tone down my request. "That goblet could explode at any minute. Will you at least let me bring a team of experts from Meraldia to examine it?"

"If that's all, then..."

The grimalkin exchanged glances. After leaving the goblet here, Ason had gone searching for an expert artificer. But he'd never returned. The grimalkin knew that Ason's treasure needed to be analyzed. However, they were unwilling to let outsiders mess with it.

"It's only thanks to this treasure that we were able to live here peacefully without having to deal with the humans..." A brown-furred grimalkin muttered, and the others nodded in agreement.

"We figured we'd be able to live like this forever."

"That'd be the dream."

They had everything they wanted without having to work a day in their lives.

Honestly, if I'd been born in similar circumstances I'd be reluctant to give up my magic goblet of plenty too.

Izushi glanced at me and muttered, "The treasure's been working fine for a thousand years, so can't you make it keep going for another thousand? If not, at least another hundred... I don't care what happens to it after I'm dead."

At least you're being honest. I kind of respected how frank he was. Unfortunately for him, just because the artifact had worked fine for a thousand years didn't mean it would keep working for another thousand. I understood how he felt, but considering the strain on the goblet, the grimalkin would be lucky if it lasted another decade.

"I'm not trying to steal your guys' livelihoods away from you or anything. But as a mage, I can tell you for a fact that your treasure is on the verge of blowing up."

There were no mages among the grimalkin. Apparently there used to be in the past, but the grimalkin hadn't needed magic for a few generations now, so everyone gave up on studying it. None of the grimalkin alive right now had any idea how precarious their situation really was. Unsurprisingly, they all made sour faces when I told them they were deep trouble.

"Hmm...are you sure you can't do anything about it?"

"Yeah, I really don't wanna work."

Sadly, everyone seemed to be as lazy as Izushi. But while these guys were slackers, they weren't bad people. I definitely didn't want to let them die. While I was trying to think of a good way to convince these guys of the danger, a mud-caked grimalkin ran into the meeting hall.

"W-W-W-W-We've got trouble! Ohaji, you've gotta come back right now!"

"Oh, if it isn't Chikuna. What's the problem?"

The black-furred grimalkin turned around, and the mud-covered one shouted, "Monsters are attacking our village!"

What!? According to the grimalkin, an eerie monster had raided his village's granary.

“It looked like a tiger, but it had wings. And it had a snake for a tail...”

“A nue, huh?” One of the grimalkin murmured, his expression grim.

Apparently chimera monsters were called nue here. Considering that was the Japanese word for chimera, it made sense. Fortunately, it seemed there hadn’t been any casualties. After tearing its way through the granary, the nue had left. Upon hearing the grimalkin’s account of the attack, I suddenly remembered my original reason for coming here.

“That’s probably what’s been eating the villagers’ livestock. Jerrick, get your squad ready to fight!”

“You got it, boss! Though uhh, it’s just me and Gior left now.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.”

I’d sent the other two members of Jerrick’s squad back to the capital. They’d be back soon enough, but for now the three of us would have to handle things.

I immediately transformed and ran across the desert to the neighboring village. The destroyed granary still had traces of the nue’s scent, and I did my best to commit it to memory. Sadly, I wasn’t as good as other werewolves at remembering non-human scents, probably because my brain’s circuitry was still that of a human.

“They smell kinda like tigers, but I can’t really tell for sure. Jerrick, Gior, mind sniffing them out for me?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

“Following a scent like this will be a piece of cake.”

It sure is nice, having reliable comrades. We, or rather Jerrick and Gior, tracked the nue to the grove where the goblet was enshrined.

“Why’d it have to run into here of all places?” Gior grumbled. Considering the chimera had the body and limbs of a tiger, it made sense for it to make a mini-jungle its home. Werewolves were good at hunting in forests too, but this wasn’t our home turf. I clapped Gior reassuringly on the shoulder, and said confidently, “Don’t worry. The grimalkin only spotted a single nue, but there’s

three of us. We've got this."

"Plus, we've got the werewolf Champion on our side. Ain't that right, boss?"

Jerrick winked at me, and I laughed awkwardly. *Please don't expect too much from me.* I was happy he had faith in my abilities, but expectations made me nervous. At any rate, the three of us cautiously made our way into the grove. The grimalkin had roused themselves as well, and each village had sent a few soldiers to accompany us.

"It's time for a boar hunt!"

"Except we're not hunting a boar."

"A nue hunt then!"

"Man, this is kinda fun."

Judging by their jaunty attitude, the grimalkin wouldn't be any use in a fight. It didn't help that they were only armed with scythes and machetes. Plus, the way they held their weapons made it obvious they were amateurs at warfare. Until now, they'd been living peacefully by themselves, so they hadn't trained at all. On top of that, they were small in stature, so they didn't have much physical strength. Well, a lone werewolf could easily beat down a hundred grimalkin even if they *were* good fighters. I hadn't been counting on them from the start. Jerrick, Gior, and I would be enough to take care of things.

"Jerrick, Gior, don't leave each other's side. Your job is to flush the nue out of hiding. I'll finish it off."

"Planning on taking the most dangerous job again, boss?"

"That way no one has to die."

It was common sense for the strongest person to handle the most dangerous battles. At least, that was common sense among demons. I split off from Jerrick and advanced into the undergrowth alone. Since I was using strengthening magic to enhance my perception, even my defective nose could pick up on the nue's scent. Tracking it through the dark forest was surprisingly easy. Before long, I'd gotten close enough that the beast's stench was everywhere. As far as I could tell, the nue wasn't moving. Part of the reason why its scent was so thick

here was because it had remained in one spot for so long.

I found a boulder situated downwind and hid behind it to spring an ambush. Jerrick and Gior came from upwind, purposely allowing the nue to pick up on their scent. Most creatures recognized a werewolf's scent, so the nue was probably on its guard now. In fact, I could tell from the faint shift in the nue's scent that it was nervous.

Alright, it turned around. It's coming this way. As the nue approached, I prepared to cast the usual strengthening spells. They didn't last long, so I tried to wait until right before I needed them before casting them. Just as I finished my preparations, a large beast leapt out of the undergrowth. *Holy crap, it's huge. That's way bigger than a tiger.* Though the nue had the overall body type of a tiger, it was as large as an elephant. It also had a pair of massive, jet-black wings, and a hissing snake for a tail.

The moment it landed, it turned to me and charged. It seemed it had noticed my ambush. *Yeah, I guess I really am second-rate when it comes to hunting.*

"Bring it on!" I shouted, rousing myself. Sure the nue was big and scary, but it didn't have nearly as much mana as the Hero, and it was way smaller than the Island Kraken. I could beat something like this.

"AWOOOOO!"

I let loose my Soul Shaker, making good use of the dense mana in my surroundings. As expected, my Soul Shaker gave the nue quite a shock. The giant beast stopped in its tracks, its body stiffening momentarily. However, the spell wasn't enough to knock it unconscious. *Fine, I'll just beat you into the ground then.*

"If you're not coming to me, then I'll go to you!" I howled, leaping at the monster.

Up till now, I'd battled a large variety of enemies, but this was my first time fighting a feline monster. Roaring, the nue pounced at me. Its movements were both lithe and fast, making them hard to read.

"Whoa!"

I was able to react just in time to parry the nue's sharp claws. Back in my old life, I'd gotten very used to stopping my cat from scratching me, and surprisingly that experience came in handy here. But the gust of wind created by the nue's swipe was still enough to flatten my black fur. A normal human would have been blown back by the wind pressure. Moreover, even though I'd successfully parried the attack, my arm hurt. A werewolf would be knocked out if they took two or three of those hits head-on. I had cast high-speed regeneration spells on myself, but they wouldn't be able to heal that much damage quickly enough for it to matter in a fight.

However, I wasn't going to get anywhere just dodging and parrying this thing's attacks. Besides, if I kept this up I was bound to take a clean hit eventually. It was time to go on the offensive. I ducked under another one of the nue's swipes and threw a punch at it.

"Take this!"

I wasn't sure where exactly I hit it, but my fist sunk deep into the nue's flesh, and I heard a few bones crack.

"Boss!"

"Vice-commander!"

I could hear Jerrick and Gior yelling at me, but I didn't have time to listen to their lectures. Originally I'd been planning on coordinating with the two of them to take the nue down, but considering how dangerous this monster was, it was best if I fought alone. I'd have them distract it instead.

"Circle around to its rear, you two! Force it to split its attention!"

"Roger!"

After a few more attacks, I noticed a few things. Firstly, the nue wasn't paying any attention to the two werewolves threatening to pincer it. Whenever Jerrick and Gior got too close, the snake-tail hissed at them to keep them at bay. That allowed the nue's main body to focus solely on me. As far as I could tell, the nue and its snake tail didn't share a brain, but they were definitely coordinating with each other.

Second, I realized none of the damage I dealt was sticking. I'd been raining

down punches and kicks on the nue for a while now, but its movements were as sharp as ever. Most monsters, even ones that were elephant-sized, wouldn't be able to fight at full strength after taking that many attacks, but the nue's swipes were still as swift as a gale. Judging by the flow of the surrounding mana, it was absorbing all mana in its vicinity. Even though that shouldn't have been possible, since my Soul Shaker had put the nearby mana under my control.

Man, that just isn't fair.

Because it was also absorbing mana, I couldn't go with my usual strategy of using ambient mana to keep my healing spells going and waiting for my opponent to tire themselves out. The mana in this grove was dense enough that if the nue was converting it into healing power, it could keep fighting for as long as I could.

"Hey boss, you okay!?"

"Yeah, I am, but..." I trailed off, parrying and sidestepping the nue's claws and teeth. Monsters of this caliber were no big deal for me at this point. Of course, if I let my guard down I'd be mincemeat in seconds, but I'd fought enemies way tougher than this nue and emerged victorious. The problem was, I had no idea how to defeat this thing. No matter how much I beat it down, it just kept recovering. Moreover, the distribution of mana within the nue's body was unnaturally balanced. It was almost as if this creature had been artificially created.

Man, I should have brought my Blast Rifle. I hadn't wanted Wa to know Meraldia possessed that kind of technology so I'd left mine at home, but now I was regretting that decision. As the fight dragged on, I heard voices in the distance.

"Ah, over there!"

"Veight's fighting it!"

"Whoa, what the heck is that!? It's huge!"

"Damn that looks scary!"

It seemed the carefree grimalkin had finally caught up to us. Though I doubted they'd be much help. To my surprise, however, the moment the

grimalkin stepped into the clearing, the nue started acting strange. It stared at the grimalkin, seemingly confused. Though it continued attacking me, its concentration was clearly broken.

“What the?”

When I finally saw an opening to go in for a decisive blow, the nue turned and dashed toward the grimalkin.

“Waaah!?”

“It’s gonna eat us!”

The grimalkin scattered to either side, and the nue bounded right past them.

“Wait!”

I wanted to chase after it, but the grimalkin had fallen into a panic. Calming them down came first. What surprised me though was that the nue had just leapt past the grimalkin without harming any of them. I watched, bemused, as the massive monster melted into the trees.

“What do we do, boss?” Jerrick asked, dashing over to me.

“Remember what the old geezers in our village always said. The more powerful your prey, the more dangerous it is to attack it when it’s fleeing.”

“Then should we keep tracking it until it runs out of steam?”

“I get the feeling that thing won’t tire no matter how long it runs for. For now, let’s head back to the grimalkin village.”

But why was the nue so shaken when it saw the grimalkin approach? Moreover, why did it invade a grimalkin village when there was plenty of prey for it here in the grove?

After returning to the village, I told the grimalkin what I’d learned.

“That nue isn’t an ordinary monster.”

“Well yeah, it was crazy strong and all.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Werewolves and giants were plenty strong too, but they were both built like normal organic creatures. However that nue had been

different. “The distribution and flow of mana within its body, as well as its other vital signs, were completely different from normal monsters.”

The grimalkin all gave me blank looks.

“Vital...”

“Signs?”

“What...does that mean?”

Crap, I should have used simpler terms. I decided to go with a more dumbed down explanation. “Its mana is all messed up, and it’s not like other living beings. If I had to say, it feels more like an undead soldier, or a golem. Everything about it is artificial.”

That nue was most likely some strange hybrid life form. *It’s probably based on some kind of feline race, but... Wait, I’m staring right at them. The nue was probably made by splicing grimalkin DNA with something else.* That would explain why it had reacted like that when it had seen the grimalkin too. The nue had probably been hesitant to attack those it saw as members of the same race. But if it was willing to raid their villages, that hesitation would probably be going away pretty soon.

As I was contemplating how best to tell the grimalkin they were related to this monster, Jerrick came back from tracking it. “Bad news, boss. There’s this huge circle of burnt trees right where we lost the thing’s scent.”

“Are you telling me the nue can breathe fire?”

“Nah, it looks more like lightning hit the area. Some of the burnt trees are split in half.”

Not good. The goblet’s excess mana was starting to manifest as electricity now. If I used strengthening magic again inside the grove, the mana it absorbed from my spell would probably spill back out as something even more violent.

“The mana pouring from the goblet is causing the nue to evolve. We can’t afford to wait.”

If the nue’s mind and body were strengthened any further, it’d probably lose

enough of its original self that it'd start attacking grimalkin too. Jerrick furrowed his brow.

"Hang on, how is it evolving to shoot lightning?"

"All living creatures have a small amount of electricity running through them. There's a few species of fish who even use electricity to hunt. Though I haven't seen anything that can shoot lightning through the air. This is gonna be one tough monster to kill."

"Yeah, if it can use lightning we won't be able to get close."

Jerrick folded his arms thoughtfully, and the grimalkin all gave me curious looks.

"Is it just me, or is that werewolf super smart?" said one.

"I thought he was just strong, but he's knowledgeable too."

Jerrick turned to them and puffed his chest out proudly. "Course he is. Veight's one of the Great Sage Gomoviroa's best disciples. He's a master of magic, and he's one of Meraldia's leading scholars."

Okay, I'm definitely not a "leading" scholar by any metric. However, the grimalkin seemed convinced.

"Wait, does that mean we can actually rely on this guy?"

"Definitely."

"This isn't the kind of mess we'd be able to handle on our own, either..."

"Hey, I think we should do what Veight wants."

Perfect. Eliminating the nue will be a lot easier if these guys cooperate.

"In that case, I'd like you guys to ask all the grimalkin to leave their villages," I said. "The nue'll probably strike another one of them soon. If there's anyone left inside when it does, there might be casualties. I'll ask the Chrysanthemum Court to shelter you guys while we take care of things."

I decided to keep my hypothesis about the nue's true identity to myself for now. It was just conjecture, and if I wanted to be even half the scholar Jerrick claimed I was, it was best not to make assertions without evidence.

“In order to kill the nue, we need to separate it from its mana source. Which is why we need you guys to evacuate.”

Right now, the nue was getting an endless supply of mana from the goblet. However, its instincts were pushing it to seek out the grimalkin, its former brethren. If all the grimalkin vanished from the goblet’s vicinity, the nue would have to leave too. Even if that failed to successfully lure the nue out, having the grimalkin evacuate ensured their safety. Wa was separated from the desert by its barrier, so the nue wouldn’t be able to receive the goblet’s mana inside it.

“Everyone, pack your stuff and follow me. I’ll make sure you’re all looked after until the problem is resolved.”

“Okaaaaaay.”

The grimalkin nodded and started wrapping their food. While they packed, they muttered things like, “Sure is great to have other people solve your problems,” and “I wish I could do this for everything.” *Is a bunch of pumpkins really the only things you’re bringing with you?*

I went back to explain the situation to the Chrysanthemum Court, and they let the grimalkin stay in one of Wa’s more deserted rural towns. The town sat on a highway that wasn’t in use anymore, which was why barely anyone lived there. Fortunately, that made it the perfect place for a battle.

I led the grimalkin to the designated town, where I was greeted by my long-awaited reinforcements.

“Yo, Veight, where’s this magic artifact you wanted to show me? Hurry it up, I’m a busy man you— Whoa, what kind of radish is this!? Can I eat it!?”

“Heh, I knew you’d need my help. So what do you need investigated, Veight?”

Ryucco and Kite ran excitedly up to me. It had been a while since I’d last seen them. To my surprise though, they weren’t the only people here.

“Woroy, what are you doing here? I didn’t ask for you.”

“Come now, don’t be so cold, man. I just wanted to see what cities in other countries are like to get a better idea of how to build my own.”

The exiled prince of Rolmund was standing a few steps behind them, a carefree smile on his face. He was carrying a cross-shaped spear and had a Japanese-style bow slung across his back. From the looks of it, he'd bought both on his way out here, as well as the kimono he was wearing. The clothes and the weapons suited him well, but I'd never pegged him as one of those "when in Rome" types.

"Airia told me everything. Where's the chimera you're hunting?"

"It got away. But we're pretty sure it's going to come here. Jerrick's squad is keeping an eye out for it."

"Perfect, then I'm not too late for the party!"

Woroy walked up and gave me a hearty slap on the back. Ryucco and Kite were pelting me with questions the whole time I was talking too, making it hard to concentrate on my conversation with him. Fumino, who'd brought everyone here, gave me an apologetic look and said, "Sorry, Lord Veight. But he said he absolutely had to see the nue no matter what."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Lady Fumino. If anything, it's my fault for recruiting this guy in the first place."

"I heard that, Veight! Anyway, what's the plan for taking down that chime—I mean nue?"

Stop trying to include yourself in this. I cleared my throat and turned to Kite and Ryucco, ignoring Woroy's question.

"Kite, once the nue's been taken care of, I want you to investigate this legendary treasure of Ason's. Ryucco will help you analyze any functions you don't understand, and once you know how this thing works, I want you two to get it ready for transport."

"Aye, aye!"

"Gotcha."

I then turned back to Woroy with a sigh. "You...can attend meetings with me after the nue's been killed."

"Sure."

If we showed off how strong the link between Meraldia and Rolmund was, we'd likely be able to negotiate more favorable terms for us. *Oh yeah, I should probably make this clear.*

"You don't have to help hunt the nue by the way."

"Yeah, I know. I get it."

No you don't. You don't get it at all. I could tell from the look on his face that he was just dying to try these new weapons out on a formidable foe. *Man, if something happens to you, it's my responsibility, you know that?* But of course, I understood Woroy's personality all too well.

"You know, but you still want to join the fight anyway, don't you?"

"Obviously."

Why do you have to be so reckless...

"Fine, fine. If you're gonna help, then there's something I want you to do."

"You can ask me for anything!"

Including sitting this out? I swallowed that retort and instead said, "The nue's been evolving, and it looks like it can wield lightning now. Werewolves are only good at close-range combat, so if I try to fight it, I'll get hit."

"Huh. What about your Blast Rifles?"

"It can absorb mana, so there's no guarantee they'll be any help."

Woroy grinned as realization dawned on him. "I see. By the way, all of Rolmund's knights are proficient with bows. Hunting is a traditional sport, after all."

"Trust me, I know. Are you sure you want to do this though? It's going to be extremely dangerous."

"You're just making me want to do this even more. Don't worry, I'll bring that beast down." Woroy patted my shoulder, smiling in pure joy.

I'm definitely worried now...

The town we'd evacuated to had been designed for travelers, and most of its

buildings were inns. There was one long main street, which held most of the shops and lodging, and a small residential district. None of the buildings were durable enough to withstand a direct attack from the nue, but they would serve just fine as obstacles. Setting up an ambush was definitely possible.

I called Jerrick's squad back and explained the plan to them. If my guess was right, the nue had a fatal weak point. As long as we could lure it into town, we'd be able to take advantage of it.

"Barricade the eastern exit. I want to lure the nue in from the west."

"You got it, boss. You don't mind if we demolish a few of the inns on that side to make a rubble wall, do you?"

"Go for it."

Werewolves were strong enough to destroy buildings bare-handed, so it'd be an easy job for Jerrick. He and his squad were all carpenters and smiths too, so they'd be efficient about it too.

Jerrick flashed me a small smile. "This sure takes me back."

"Hm?"

"This is just like that time when we were kids, remember?"

"Oh yeah, when we took out that golden wildeboar."

That was a nostalgic memory. Still smiling, Jerrick said, "Ever since then I knew you were special, boss."

"R-Really?"

That's kinda embarrassing.

As the days passed, the nue grew closer. We found scorched clearings in the nearby woods, indicating that it was slowly making its way to the town. While Kite focused on analyzing the scenes of destruction the nue left behind, Jerrick and his squad worked on building the barricade. Despite his grumbling, Ryucco did a good job building all the equipment we needed for this hunt, and Woroy and Fumino trained for the upcoming fight. The night after everyone finished their preparations, the nue reached the town.

“Boss, it’s here,” Jerrick reported as he retreated from his lookout post. He frowned, his features perfectly visible in the light of the full moon. “It’s gotten bigger, just like you said it would.”

“I knew it.”

The nue’s cells were brimming with mana, so the constant electricity flowing through it had likely caused them to multiply at a prodigious rate. At this point, the creature was a walking lab experiment. If Master was here, she’d definitely want to keep it as a specimen.

“Jerrick, you and your squad cancel your transformations and remain on standby. The nue might run away if it catches a werewolf’s scent, and there’s no guarantee the wind will keep blowing our way.”

“You got it, boss.”

Jerrick transformed back into a human and gave me a crooked smile. He was naked from the waist up, but most of the werewolves didn’t care too much about their clothes getting ripped. *That being said, I still wish you’d put something on. Then again, Woroy’s not wearing a shirt either, so I guess I can’t complain.*

“It’s been a long time since my last hunt. I’m looking forward to this.” The prince hefted the upgraded bow Ryucco had modified for him. He was like a kid who’d just gotten his hands on a new toy.

Ryucco hopped over to him and planted a few specially made arrows into the ground at his feet. Woroy looked down at them and said, “Hunts aren’t like target practice. Your prey reacts to your attacks and fights back. I didn’t bother with a quiver because it’d just slow me down. Same reason why I’m not wearing any armor. Besides, armor would be useless against that thing anyway, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, smart choice.”

The nue was as fast as a werewolf, and at this point, probably twice as strong. Melee weapons and armor would be useless against it. Of course that didn’t mean Woroy had to strip to just his pants, but there was actually a reason why

he'd done that.

"Turn your back to me, Woroy. I'll cast my spells on you now."

"Okay."

I placed my hands on Woroy's well-muscled back.

"I'm going to start by strengthening your spine. Don't move until I'm done."

"Alright."

Once I finished strengthening Woroy's core muscles, I moved onto his limbs. I had to go in this order for people not used to strengthening magic, or they were likely to tear their muscles. *Still, that doesn't mean I have to like rubbing a dude's back.*

"Are you done? Your hands stopped moving."

"Yeah, mostly. Just putting some final precautions in place."

Werewolves didn't really use bows. A few of my werewolves knew how to wield one in their human forms, but Woroy was better than them by far. He had way more practice, and he'd trained his back muscles to properly pull a bowstring. And now that I'd buffed him with strengthening magic, he was basically a walking cannon. But while it made logical sense to let Woroy take on this job, rubbing a grown man's body still felt weird to me.

"Your hands stopped again."

"I know..."

Just treat it like work. It doesn't take long anyway. See, done already.

"Does it hurt anywhere?" I asked.

"Nope. In fact, I feel better than ever." Smiling, Woroy rolled his shoulders. With my magic enhanced night-vision, I spotted a pale blue light in the distance. *That's probably the nue's electric discharge.*

"It's here."

"Got it." Woroy nocked an arrow on the steel-wire bowstring. "Time to show Meraldia and Wa what a Rolmund archer looks like."

He lowered his center of gravity and moved one foot slightly backwards. Judging by his stance, he was more focused on evading the nue's attack than maximizing his aim. The light advanced through the darkness, heading straight for us.

After a few seconds, it entered the town. Without taking his eyes off the target, Woroy muttered, "Watch my back, Veight."

"You can count on me. Don't do anything too crazy though, you hear me?"

Woroy gave me a wry smile. "You're the last person I want to hear that from."

Why?

After another minute or so, Kite's voice came through the magical transceiver I'd obtained in Rolmund, "Veight, according to the grimalkin, the nue's extremely wary right now."

"Understood. Don't do anything until it reaches our cage."

"Roger."

The nue had come here following the scent of its former kin the grimalkin, but I had no idea what it intended to do to them. Last time it had fled when it spotted them, but it was possible that was simply because it had been confused. Now that it had evolved, it was too dangerous to let the grimalkin near it. They were all hiding in nearby buildings.

Kite contacted me again after a few more minutes passed. "It's in."

The nue was finally close enough that I could make out its outline and not just the electricity it was emitting. *Damn, it's huge.* Its head was level with the second-story windows on the nearby buildings. I'd expected it to grow, but not this much. It was Godzilla-tier now. The nue had seemed to have noticed our presence, since it was making a beeline straight for us. We were all in our human forms so it likely thought we were food. The nue was still near the western edge of town, but it had finally advanced into bowshot.

"Woroy, you're up."

"Roger." Using his superhuman strength, Woroy drew back his superhuman

bow. “Hrngh!”

The bow had been reinforced with metal springs, and it took an enormous amount of effort for Woroy to draw it.

“Here I go!”

Woroy loosed, the bowstring making more of a weird metallic noise than the usual twang. The arrow flew true, hitting in the nue’s front paw. But instead of embedding itself in the beast’s flesh, the arrow bounced off its fur and hit a nearby wall.

“Damn it’s tough.”

Unperturbed, Woroy readied his second shot. He loosed, then drew back a third time without even looking to check whether or not his second bolt hit. He continued rapid-firing arrows as fast as his arms would let him.

Now enraged, the nue began to charge, but it was so big that it didn’t gain much speed by running. The buildings on either side made it impossible for it to dodge the barrage of arrows too. Every time it tried to jump to the side it crashed into a building and got buried in falling rubble. As Woroy’s onslaught continued, the lightning surrounding the beast began to crackle, and sparks filled the air. The sound of flowing electricity was something I’d heard quite often in Japan, but very rarely in this world. Unsurprisingly, the sound terrified the hiding grimalkin. Woroy, however, was a seasoned warrior who’d gone toe to toe with werewolves before. He didn’t even flinch in the face of the nue’s charge.

“Compared to dueling the Astral Fencer, this is child’s play!”

Okay, now that’s exaggerating. The beast continued its charge, its lightning casting the nearby buildings in a bluish-white light. By the time it got close, dozens of arrows were stuck in its face and paws. Rumbling forward like an unstoppable truck, the beast howled furiously at Woroy. He just smiled fearlessly and readied his final arrow.

“Your turn, Fumino.”

“Leave the rest to me,” Fumino replied calmly from somewhere within the darkness.

Suddenly, the nue turned around. It seemed it had finally noticed the wires Fumino had placed in its path. Unfortunately, it had been so focused on Woroy that it noticed too late. Unable to stop itself, the nue tripped over the wires and tumbled to the ground. The buildings the wires were attached to shook a little as the force of the nue's charge was transferred to them, but the sturdy wooden structures were designed for earthquakes, and they didn't topple. They did end up losing most of their roofing, though, and the specific pillars the wires were tied around did snap.

"Ahh, my precious knight slayer..." Fumino moaned sadly as her wires frayed and broke apart. Since industrialization hadn't hit this world yet, metal wires were extremely difficult to manufacture. *Sorry. Once modernization has kicked in 300 years from now, I'll pay you back.* As the nue struggled to get back to its feet, Woroy loosed his final arrow.

"Here's the finisher!"

The last arrow embedded itself deep inside the monster's back.

"Graaaaaaah!"

Woroy smiled and wiped the sweat off his brow as the nue screamed in agony.

"Alright, you're up next," he said, turning to me.

"Yeah, leave the rest to me."

The nue was still caught up in the remnants of Fumino's wires. Normally, felines were agile enough to easily escape such simple entanglements. But all the arrows sticking out of its face and limbs were causing the wires to get wrapped around it the more it tried to slip free. This was the combo play I'd been aiming for.

"ROOOOOOOOOOOOAR!"

The nue unleashed a massive blast of electricity, but most of the lightning was diverted by the wires and hit the nearby buildings. Now was the only time I could close in on it without being electrocuted. I quickly transformed and cast the usual strengthening magic spells on myself. I also cast insulation magic just in case. The spell created a thin layer of deionized air around me to block

electricity. It was a spell I didn't have to use often, but right now I was glad I'd taken the time to learn it.

"Owww," I groaned as I drew close. Despite all my precautions, a decent amount of electricity still reached me. My werewolf muscles were able to keep functioning despite the increased voltage running through my system, but a regular human would have been completely paralyzed.

"Whoa."

The nue swiped at me in desperation, and I deftly jumped out of the way. Because of how much damage it had taken, there wasn't much speed behind its attacks. However, its huge mass meant even slow attacks were powerful enough to crush buildings. Seeing as its paws weren't working, the nue tried to bite me. Though its limbs were slowed, its head was still fast enough that humans wouldn't have been able to react to that. I just barely danced out of the way, and sparks flew off its face onto mine. Ignoring the jolts, I circled around behind the monster and unleashed the spell I'd been molding this whole time.

"Take this!" I put my hands on its back and poured all of my mana into it. A second later it shook me off and strained at the wires so hard they cut into its flesh. But then a second later, it screamed.

"GRAAAAAAAH!" It rolled around the floor, limbs flailing wildly and frothing at the mouth.

"You're done for."

I backed away from the monster, my fur standing on end thanks to all the electricity I'd been exposed to. Though I was certain my attack had been fatal, I remained on guard just in case. Jerrick transformed and ran over to me once I was a safe distance away.

"Hey, boss, what'd you do to it?"

"I cast high-speed healing magic on it. Right now the spell's mana is going berserk inside its body." I cast another spell to heal my own wounds, then smiled at Jerrick. "You know how when we fought it before, its snake tail moved independently from the rest of it? I realized that snake is actually a different creature. The same goes for its wings. It's too big to fly, but it could at least use

its wings to accelerate its jumps. But it never did.”

As the nue thrashed around, it destroyed the surrounding buildings. Though the wires cut deeper the more it moved, it didn’t stop.

“Both of those things are unnatural additions. Unlike a normal animal, this beast can grow any organs or body parts.”

“So what, it can turn into anything?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t get to choose what it becomes. So I decided to use a healing spell to accelerate its transformation.”

It was a pretty cruel way to kill something, but that was the only way I could use my magic offensively. After a few minutes, the nue’s thrashing got weaker. Extra joints started growing out of its limbs, making it impossible for it to walk. Five wings now grew out of its back as well, but they were all attached in uncomfortable ways. Hefting his spear, Woroy walked over to me. Though the nue’s initial appearance hadn’t scared him, the way it looked now was enough to elicit a disgusted frown.

“So healing magic can do something like this too?”

“Healing magic isn’t omnipotent. All it can do is fix things to the way they were before. But when used on something that can’t be fixed, it goes berserk.”

Healing magic was an umbrella term for spells focused on returning things to their original state. However the nue’s “original state” had been overwritten by magic mutations. There was no way to fix it back to normal, because normal for it no longer existed. For a similar reason, diseases like cancer couldn’t be cured with healing magic either. That was why Rolmund’s mages hadn’t been able to save the old emperor, Bahazoff the Fourth. When I explained as much to Woroy, he nodded in understanding.

Jerrick shot the dying monster a pitiful look, then asked, “Hey, boss, is there really no way to turn that thing back to normal?”

“I feel bad for it too, but no magic I know of would be able to fix it.”

Even its brain had been warped to the point where it could no longer communicate with its fellow grimalkin. Before long, its mind would have been

completely transformed, and it would have started attacking them. At any rate, this was a good lesson on how healing magic could be dangerous if used improperly. It was because I'd used healing magic in a purposely wrong way that I'd been able to defeat the Hero Arshes too. Of course, the only reason my plan worked this time was because the nue was a mutated grimalkin, and not a species that was originally like this.

While my plan had been effective, it still led to quite a gruesome result. By the time the twitching creature stopped moving, I couldn't even bear to look at it. It was still occasionally shooting off sparks, but the lightning surrounding it was growing weaker too. I cast strengthening magic on my claws and warily approached the nue. The least I could do was put it out of its misery.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me," I whispered as I plunged my claws into its heart.

Once the deed was done, Kite, Fumino, Ryucco, and the grimalkin all congregated around the corpse. The few remaining residents of the town also timidly came to see if it was really over. Kite spared the poor creature a single glance, then nodded.

"It's dead," he declared with certainty. Everyone present breathed a sigh of relief. Some of the grimalkin were so relieved the strength left their legs, and they sat where they stood.

"That was so scary..."

"You're amazing, mister Veight!"

"I never knew werewolves were this strong!"

"No wonder everyone calls them the kings of the hunt!"

I didn't want to ruin this moment for the grimalkin, but now that I had concrete evidence, it was about time I revealed the truth of the nue's origin to them. I wasn't sure how exactly to bring it up, but it was necessary to confirm this nue's former identity before we could truly consider this case closed.

"There's something I have to tell you guys..."

I explained to Izushi and the other grimalkin representatives where the nue had come from. They were surprised at first, but after they heard me out they timidly approached the nue's corpse. After conferring amongst themselves for a few minutes, Izushi turned back to me.

"It does resemble Danda a little bit. He lived in the village next to ours. The color of the nue's fur and eyes are the exact same as his. And he did go missing a few weeks back."

"I see..."

So your name was Danda. If only I'd arrived sooner, I might have been able to save him.

The next morning the grimalkin held a funeral for the nue—or rather, Danda. They buried his remains in a nearby forest and erected a splendid burial mound for him.

"Excuse me, Veight." As I gave my respects to Danda, Izushi and the other representatives walked over to me. They were all wearing mourning robes, and their expressions were solemn. "Thank you so much for all your help. After talking it over, we've decided to award you the title of King of the Hunt. It's the most honorable title a grimalkin can receive."

"Thank you."

I appreciate the gesture guys, but can't you come up with cooler-sounding titles?

"Also, we'd like to ask your opinion on something as a professional mage. How do you think this transformation in Danda came about?" one of the other grimalkin asked, his tone formal.

"Keep in mind that I'm by no means an expert on this field. But from what I've heard, grimalkin have a very high affinity for magic. More specifically, they can store large quantities of mana."

In this world, feline creatures tended to have strong connections to magic.

"That land you guys have been harvesting your food from is brimming with

mana, but there's so much of it that the air, food, and water are being polluted. Grimalkin who stay in that area start accumulating that polluted mana, and if they absorb too much of it, I suspect they begin to transform."

Mana was energy in its purest form, so it was capable of doing anything. Moreover, it was far more volatile than gasoline or gunpowder, so it was dangerous to store too much of it. My "professional" opinion was something the grimalkin likely didn't want to hear, but it needed to be said.

"Cases like Danda's will continue to pop up as long as that goblet is malfunctioning. I suspect there were other cases in the past; they just didn't become as big a deal." Most sudden mutations of this nature were fatal, so chances were the other grimalkin who'd been transformed had all died right away. "In Danda's case he got lucky enough that the mutations didn't kill him, but in the end, they still turned him into a monster. Left alone, he might have evolved into the most dangerous threat on the continent."

Kite, who was standing next to me, sighed audibly. "And he was already terrifying enough... Blast Rifles wouldn't work on him, and arrows alone weren't enough to bring him down. No one could get close to him without being electrocuted to death. As is, he was already strong enough to take out an entire army."

"Yeah. If it wasn't for everyone's help, I wouldn't have been able to take him down either. He probably would have escaped."

"Nah, if anything we would have been the ones forced to flee. No way we could have taken him in a fair fight," Woroy interjected.

Regrettably, I'd gotten quite used to going up against ridiculously strong opponents. Granted, I still hadn't met anyone as strong as Arshes, so even this nue hunt had just been another ole battle for me. The grimalkin stared at the ground, their expressions forlorn.

"I see..." Izushi muttered quietly.

Their representatives thanked me for my help, then returned to their villages. A few days later, they returned to the Chrysanthemum Court and offered to turn Ason's legendary treasure over to them if the Kushin would help save their villages.

Two days after Danda's burial, the Chrysanthemum Court's agents stepped foot into grimalkin territory. Most of Wa's citizens believed the grimalkin could use mystic, supernatural powers, which was why the lower-ranked agents were cowering in the grimalkin's presence. The more knowledgeable people like Fumino weren't scared, but even they hadn't talked with the grimalkin much, so there was still a little hesitation. Fumino specifically kept muttering things like "I want one as a pet..." though.

"I see you've rendered yet another distinguished service, Lord Veight," Tokitaka said, walking up to me with a smile. He had been appointed the leader of this expedition.

I smiled back and replied, "I was simply finishing the work that Lord Ason started."

Ason had discovered the artifact responsible for the land's desertification, but he'd been reluctant to bring it inside Wa's borders. After all, the barrier he'd worked so hard to erect wouldn't be of any use if he brought the goblet inside it. So he'd left it in the grimalkin's care and went off in search of a way to turn the goblet off. Unfortunately, he'd gone missing and never returned. The grimalkin had remained in the desert, believing that as long as they waited, Ason would eventually come back to them. Generations passed, and eventually a lush grove sprung up around the goblet. With abundant food so close by, the grimalkin had even less reason to leave, and they continued waiting for Ason while lazing around. As a result, Danda had ended up mutating into a monster.

"The Chrysanthemum Court will do its best to fulfill Maestro Ason's final wish," Fumino declared resolutely. I understood that she wanted to resolve this internally, but I'd already called Kite and the others over.

"About that, Lady Fumino. I've brought experts from Meraldia with me, so would it be alright to let them investigate the artifact as well?"

"Do you think the Chrysanthemum Court's analysts are insufficient?"

"Oh no, not at all. It's just as a diplomat I have a burning desire to stick my nose into anything that might prove beneficial for my country." This goblet was powerful enough to turn an entire region into a desert. I needed to know as

much about it as possible.

Afterwards, we held a meeting about what to do with the artifact. It was decided that if the goblet turned out to still be a threat, Meraldia and Wa would share equal responsibility in mitigating any issues.

“Are you sure we should have pledged our help so freely?” Airia asked, giving me a worried look.

“Don’t worry, if something comes up, we just have to ask our illustrious Demon Lord to take care of it,” I replied with a smile.

Master was one of the smartest mages alive, and she’d lived through the Old Dynasty’s era. Plus, we had the master artificer Ryucco on our side. A long time ago, Master had mentioned she’d accidentally teleported herself into the stratosphere while practicing teleportation magic. If the goblet turned out to be too dangerous, we could just have her teleport it out of this planet’s orbit.

However, removing the artifact entirely would mean depriving the grimalkin of their easy lives. It would take time to reintegrate them back into working society, so I made the Chrysanthemum Court pledge to help them in return for sharing responsibility over the goblet. Wa would find the grimalkin lodging and jobs while they transitioned from doing nothing to actually earning their keep. Unfortunately, when I had the grimalkin fill out surveys on what kind of jobs they wanted, the answers I received were disappointing.

“I want a job where I only work from noon to sunset, with a lengthy snack break and nap break.”

“I want a job where people pamper me all day.”

“I want a job that lets me eat snacks all day.”

“I want a job where I can laze around forever.”

“I want sweet dumplings.”

I cradled my head in my hands. “If jobs like those existed, I would have taken one ages ago!”

That last one’s not even a job; you just want food, don’t you? That being said,

most of them were at least willing to try and get a job. This was probably my only chance to get them to lead respectable lives. If they lost even the motivation to work, they'd be beyond saving.

Mao, who'd come as my assistant, took the survey answers from me and glanced over them. "Veight."

"Yeah?"

"Mind if I handle this?"

He gave me his evil business smile.

The next day.

"You all are in luck!" Mao grinned, kneeling down until he was eye-level with the grimalkin. The feline demons exchanged confused glances.

"We are?"

"Considering we just lost our food source, I'd say our luck's pretty horrible..."

But Mao didn't give them a chance to dwell on their predicament.

"Not at all! After a thousand years of lethargy, the time has finally come for the grimalkin to leave their mark on history! Your descendants will remember you as the generation which brought prosperity to your race. You will become what Maestro Ason is to Wa!"

The grimalkin's ears perked up at that.

"We'll be like Maestro Ason?"

"That sounds so cool."

"Yeah, we'll get to be as cool as him!"

Don't listen to his honeyed words, guys. Mao's smile was brighter than I'd ever seen it. He looked like he'd just struck the best deal of his life.

"Wa's capital is the most amazing city you'll ever see. The streets are bustling, the buildings are huge, and the food is delicious. There's all sorts of exotic dishes you won't find anywhere else too."

“Wow, that sounds great.”

“I can’t wait to get there.”

Nothing Mao said was a lie, but I could tell from his scent he was trying to deceive these guys. He took a notebook out of his pocket and flipped through its pages. “You grimalkin are pretty small, so it won’t cost much to feed or house you guys. Plus there’s no need to do heavy manual labor when us humans are stronger than you.”

“You really know how to speak our language mister...Mao? Was that your name?”

“You’re such a nice person, Mao.”

No, he’s not. He’s rotten to the core. I did my best to keep my mouth shut though. I said Mao could take care of it, so it wasn’t my place to butt in.

“Your guys’ greatest asset is how cute you are,” he said as his grin grew wider. He spread his arms wide. “I’m sure the people of Wa will be healed just by spending time with you.”

“Oh yeah, we’re way cuter than humans.”

“Yep. Meow.”

“If all you want is for us to be cute we can do that. Meow.”

They suddenly brought the meow verbal tic back. *How crafty.* Mao narrowed his eyes and said with a malicious smirk, “Do you guys like sweet things?”

“We love them! Meow!”

“Do you like pretty storefronts?”

“We love them! Meow!”

“Do you like cute kimonos?”

“We love them! Meow!”

Finally, Mao asked, “Then what do you say to working at a cafe?”

“We’ll do it! Meow!”

Well, at least they’re motivated now. I had no idea what kind of scam Mao

was pulling, but I wasn't too worried. Mao knew firsthand the pain of being abandoned by your boss, so he wouldn't treat them cruelly. Afterwards, Mao found the grimalkin a nice apartment complex to live in and let them work surprisingly flexible hours. Some of them worked in restaurants, grocery stores, or other places where customer service was essential. But as promised, Mao got most of them jobs at cafes, including the one he had a large financial stake in, the Kitten's Retreat.

A few days after they started working, I visited the cafe to see how they were doing at their new jobs. As I sipped my red-bean soup, I watched as the apron-clad grimalkin went about their work. Regardless of whether or not there were customers present, whenever one of them had a moment to relax they'd lie down in the sun and doze. *I know Mao promised you guys could take it easy, but isn't this, like, setting a bad precedent?* Still, the grimalkin working in the kitchen were all veteran bakers, so the food itself was pretty good. Shortly after opening time, young Wa women started flooding in.

"Is this the cafe where the cats work?"

"Welcome...meow."

"Kyaaa, they're so cute!"

"The rumors were true! They're adorable!"

Guys, he's just rolling around on the ground and wagging his tail. Is this really all you want from your cafe? However that seemed to be enough for the girls, and they excitedly found a table to sit down at.

"I'd like a mitarashi dango, some jelly, and a red bean daifuku please!"

"Man, that's so much food. What a pain. But fine, I'll make it...meow."

"Ahahaha, he's so cute!"

Even when the grimalkin messed up, the girls just laughed and found it cute. *God, I'm jealous. Though, now that I think about it, this is basically just like the cat cafes back in Japan.* I was still a little worried about their future, but it looked like the grimalkin were doing well, at least. I ordered another bowl of red bean soup while silently praying for their success.

During Kite's investigation, I asked him to copy over the goblet's magic circuit for me. I then handed the copy over to Ryucco for analysis.

Absently munching on a radish stick, Ryucco muttered, "What the hell was this thing made for? The only thing it's designed to do is suck mana endlessly from its surroundings. Nothing else."

According to Ryucco, the magic circuit itself was crafted with great detail, but functionally all it did was suck mana from the surroundings and create a reservoir to store it.

"The circuit's mana compression algorithms are impressive, but all that means is if you aren't careful with this piece of junk, it'll blow up a whole city. It just makes it more dangerous."

"Hmmm..."

After thinking about it for a few minutes, I tentatively offered my amateur opinion.

"What if you gave someone all the mana the goblet's absorbed?"

"Huh? Well... you *could* do that." Ryucco scratched his ears, carefully searching for the right words. "Anyone who absorbed this much mana could easily become a Hero or a Demon Lord. But only if they had the means to contain it."

Just like how drinking a lot of alcohol made you drunk, absorbing too much mana had negative effects on a person's body. And just like with alcohol, consuming too much could kill you—or turn you into a mindless monster, like Danda.

"Most people wouldn't be able to use that much mana even if you gave it to 'em. They wouldn't be able to absorb it all and the excess would combust, or it'd go berserk inside them and turn them into monsters. Either way, they'd probably end up dead."

"I see."

"Oh, but I bet you'd be able to absorb it all, Veight. Since you inherited that mana drain power from Master."

“I guess so.” Like Master, I could endlessly absorb mana near me. After thinking about it, I decided to voice my conclusion. “I think this artifact is meant to be a tool to mass-produce heroes.”

“But why would anyone wanna do that?” Ryucco gave me a puzzled look.

“Humans are always striving to become something more than human.”

“Really? Can’t imagine why you’d be obsessed with something like that.”

“It’s precisely because demons don’t have that desire that we need to be the ones to take care of this thing.”

Though I’d reincarnated as a werewolf, studied magic, and now served as the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, I was still human deep down. Turns out, no matter how much power humans obtained, they could never become anything more or less than human. I was confident in that assessment. That being said, humans were liable to make mistakes, and they constantly changed their minds about things. I was no exception, of course, which was why it would be best for everyone if this dangerous artifact was sealed away forever.

Ryucco looked up at me with his big, round eyes. “Hey Veight.”

“Yeah?”

“Wanna give it a try? If you become a Demon Lord too, you and Master could split the work.”

“No thanks.” Shaking my head, I ordered, “Shut down Ason’s legendary treasure. We don’t want it sucking any more mana out of the earth.”

“You got it. Won’t even take a second.”

True to his word, Ryucco was able to stop the goblet’s magic circuit with ease. Afterwards, the representatives of the Meraldian Commonwealth Council and the Chrysanthemum Court held a meeting to decide what would be done with Ason’s legendary treasure. Though it was no longer draining mana, the goblet was still a massive mana repository. One careless mistake, and it could level a city. Of course that meant it could also be used purposely as a weapon. After a lot of back and forth discussion, it was decided that the goblet would remain

dormant, and that Meraldia would take custody of it.

“It will cost a small fortune to build a facility that can safely house that artifact,” Airia lamented with a sigh.

“That’s probably why Wa was willing to part with it,” I replied, nodding. “If it goes berserk it’ll blow up a city, but there’s no productive way to use the mana stored within. It’s nothing more than a pain in the ass.”

That being said, it was far less dangerous an artifact to us than it was to Wa. Since Meraldia was filled with the Great Sage Gomoviroa’s disciples, we had plenty of experts who knew exactly how to handle artifacts like this. And on the off chance the goblet did go berserk, Master would be able to absorb all of its mana and prevent an explosion.

“Meraldia’s obtained a valuable magical artifact that it can research, and Wa’s removed one of the causes of the land’s desertification, so they can expand their territory now. Seeing as both sides benefit, I think this is the best outcome we could have hoped for.”

Ryucco wasn’t sure if the goblet was solely responsible for the region’s desertification or if there were other similar artifacts scattered about the Windswept Dunes. For now the plan was to wait and see if the entire desert became fertile, simply shrank in size, or if nothing happened at all.

“According to Ryucco’s analysis, you can give someone all the mana in that goblet to artificially turn them into a Hero. Most humans wouldn’t be able to withstand that kind of transformation, but there’s always a slim chance someone might try to use it, so it’s best to keep that thing somewhere close.”

I had no idea how Arshes had ascended to Hero, but we’d be in deep trouble if someone like him showed up again. I’d dealt with enough Heroes for a lifetime.

Airia gave me a curious look. “You’d be able to withstand absorbing the mana in that cup, right, Veight?”

“There’s no way to be sure unless we try it, but theoretically, yeah.”

“Has the thought of becoming a Hero, or I guess in your case a Demon Lord, crossed your mind?”

Not you too. Annoyed, I shook my head. “Nope. Things have finally stabilized internally, and we’re on good terms with all our neighboring nations. There’s no use for that kind of power anymore.”

Besides, Meraldia has Master. With her Vortex powers, she could easily suck the heat and life out of any enemy army. We already had one trump card; there was no need for any more.

“You really are free of greed.” Airia gave me a strange look, then chuckled to herself. “This is your one chance to become the undisputed ruler of Meraldia, you know?”

“Why would I want to become something like that?”

Between my werewolf strength and my magic, I had more than enough power to protect those close to me. Going after more would just lead to my downfall. Plus, it would mean heaping more responsibilities onto my shoulders.

Feeling like teasing Airia a little I smirked and asked, “If you had the aptitude for it, would you want to try becoming a Demon Lord? You’re already the Demon Ambassador.”

Of course I knew she didn’t harbor any grand ambitions. Even if someone offered her the chance to become a Hero or a Demon Lord, she’d likely turn them down. She had far too much integrity to do otherwise. It was part of the reason why I respected her so much. But to my surprise, after contemplating the question for a few seconds she shot me a hesitant glance and said, “Well... if I had the opportunity, I would consider it at least.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Airia flashed me a small grin. “If I became a Demon Lord, I’d be able to pull a certain reckless vice-commander away from the front lines.”

Though it sounded like she was joking, I could tell from her scent that she was serious. *I never realized I’d been causing her so much trouble.* Now that I thought about it though, it made sense. I’d been running off on adventures this whole time while leaving all the boring paperwork to her.

“Uhh...sorry, Airia. I’ll do my best to stay home as much as possible. So please don’t try to become a Demon Lord.”

“Very well.” Airia smiled cheerfully. “As long as you’re willing to be reasonable, I have no interest in the position.”

Strange as it seemed, it felt like our roles had reversed since when I’d first met her. *How did things end up like this? I guess this just proves humans really are stronger than demons.*



I asked Meraldia to send a team over to transport the dormant goblet back home. My work in Wa was pretty much done, but I decided to stay for a while longer until the transport team arrived. Airia was taking care of the few miscellaneous official matters left, so Woroy and I spent this free time touring Wa. Woroy looked surprisingly handsome in a kimono, and wherever we went girls fawned over him.

“He looks so hot.”

“He’s got this aloof air to him too...”

“And it feels like he’s a kind person beneath that cool exterior.”

“He’s perfect!”

How come you’re so popular!? I’m not jealous, but this isn’t fair!

I looked up at Woroy and sighed, “Being with you makes me feel insecure.”

“Huh? Wait, aren’t those girls talking about you?”

“Definitely not.”

Woroy had a handsome build, and he oozed confidence. His face was a bit stern-looking normally, but his joviality counterbalanced that. Moreover, he had a dignified air about him, *and* he was royalty. Spending time with him was not good for my self-esteem. That being said, he was also the kind of guy who’d start going around the city challenging dojos if we let him out of our sight, so me and the other werewolves had the unenviable task of babysitting him. According to Kite, when he’d been traveling around Meraldia, he’d stuck his nose into everybody’s business and solved as many problems as he could.

“Woroy. Isn’t it about time you returned to Meraldia and started building your city?”

“Don’t be such a stick in the mud, Veight. Hm? What’s this alcohol made of? It smells great.”

“Rice.”

Is there no way to convince him to go home?

Fortunately the transport team Meraldia dispatched arrived pretty soon.

“It has been quite a while, Sir Veight,” Kurtz said, standing at the head of the military engineer corps he’d brought with him. I wasn’t surprised they’d sent the demon army’s logistics master to take care of this. “Her Highness the Demon Lord has appointed me the first captain of the demon army’s R&D department. From here on out I will be overseeing the work of all technical officers.”

“Oh wow, that’s great. Congratulations on the promotion.”

Kurtz was highly competent and the old Demon Lord had trusted him too, so I wasn’t surprised he was being given such an important post. However, I wished Master had come up with a cooler-sounding title than “Captain of the R&D department.” Something like “Engineering Commissioner” had a nicer ring to it in my opinion. *When I get back, I’ll talk to Master about it, though she probably doesn’t care all that much about titles and prestige, huh...* I thought as I watched Kurtz efficiently set his engineers to work. Ason’s legendary treasure was carefully packed away in a mana-sealing box that Ryucco had specifically prepared for it.

“It can handle any kinda physical shock, but don’t you dare let anyone use any kind of magic except epoch magic around the box. Their mana’ll mess with its functions.”

Kurtz diligently wrote down all the warnings Ryucco gave him. “Understood. By ‘around the box’ what specific radius do you mean?”

“Huh?” Ryucco gave Kurtz a puzzled look. “Umm, good question. I guess around your height, basically?”

“In dragonkin measurements, that would be roughly four kagan. I presume this radius is perfectly spherical? Or is something more cylindrical, with a separate measurement needed for vertical distance?”

“Uhh...let me think. I guess roughly spherical sounds about right.”

This was a pretty entertaining discussion to watch. It really showed the difference between engineers and craftsmen. Also, the fact that Ryucco looked mostly like a rabbit while Kurtz looked like a lizard gave the scene a kind of cartoonish feel. Kurtz teased out as many concrete details from Ryucco as he could, wrote them down with as much accuracy as possible, then let his

engineers handle the rest.

“Sir Veight, the magical artifact is ready for transport. If you have no further orders, we will begin our return trip.”

“Thanks. You’ve been a huge... Sorry, your services are greatly appreciated, Sir Kurtz.”

Now that he’d been promoted to general class I felt like I should show him more respect.

Carefully, we moved Ason’s legendary treasure to the nearest village. Airia was almost done finalizing the minute details of our alliance with Wa, so we decided to wait for her to finish before all returning together. Woroy, Kurtz, and I borrowed a local farmer’s front porch to take a small break and share a pot of tea. The three of us probably looked like a strange combination to onlookers.

“Veight, shouldn’t you be present for the negotiations?”

“Airia’s far better at diplomacy than an amateur like me. She doesn’t need my help.”

Airia had spent her childhood training to be the viceroy of a city focused on trade. She was a master of economics and negotiation. It’s because she was so competent that I could kick back and relax out here. In the distance, I could see farmers planting rice seeds in the flooded paddies. They beat rhythmically on drums as they worked, creating a rather pleasant melody.

“Rice looks like it takes a lot of effort to cultivate,” Woroy mused as he sipped on his roasted green tea. “Hey, what’s that pipe that looks like a cage for?”

One of the farmers walked ahead of his fellows and stuck cylindrical pipes into the ground at regular intervals. The pipes seemed to make a sort of latticework between the paddies. I had no idea what they were for either. Kurtz stretched his long neck and scrutinized the farmers’ actions. He was a complete amateur when it came to agriculture, but he was perceptive enough to puzzle out their purpose after just a few seconds of observation.

“They appear to be tools for marking the ground.”

Woroy plopped a yomogi dumpling into his mouth and asked, "Marking it for what though?"

Ah, I think I know the answer to that. Puffing my chest out proudly I answered, "That's how they're marking the ideal intervals to plant the seeds at. Rice plants need a certain amount of distance between them to grow effectively."

Surprised, Woroy turned back to me. "Hang on, does that mean they plant each seed individually the exact same distance apart!?"

"Yep."

Pretty amazing, right? I had experience planting rice from my previous life, so I knew how much effort it took.

Woroy turned back to the farmers and sighed in amazement. "I can't believe they're willing to do such detailed work...They're just planting for the harvest, it's not like they're designing the imperial garden or anything."

"It's definitely hard work, but the more care you put into growing your rice, the more grains each plant will yield. That's why everyone's so diligent."

"I see." Nodding, Woroy rolled up the sleeves of his kimono and got to his feet. "Heeeeey, you guys! I dunno if I can be useful, but let me help you out! It's my way of thanking you for the tea!"

Woroy couldn't speak Old Dynastic so the Wa farmers just exchanged confused glances. I hurriedly got to my feet and grabbed his kimono. "Hang on, you're a prince, remember?"

Woroy turned back to me with an innocent, boyish grin and replied, "My job is to build a new city in Meraldia. There's no way I'll accomplish that without doing at least a little manual labor, so I may as well get some experience. Now stop complaining and translate for me."

"Seriously?"

Resigned, I hurriedly finished my own yomogi dumpling and got to my feet. I walked over to the farmers and translated Woroy's words for him.

"My friend is impressed by how disciplined you guys are. He said he wants to

help you plant. He won't get in the way, will he?"

"You're translating my words accurately, right Veight?"

"Yeah...more or less."

All of the young women stopped mid-planting and started crowding around Woroy. They were all blushing and looking up at him with adoration. *See, I told you everyone's got the hots for you!* One of the young girls turned to me and asked, "This gallant nobleman is willing to help us poor peasants plant?"

"Yep. His name is Woroy, and he's in charge of building Meraldia's newest city. But he's still inexperienced when it comes to farming, so he wants to learn from you guys."

"Oh my..."

His imposing appearance juxtaposed with his humble attitude had already won him the girls' hearts. Their faces grew redder and one of them tugged on his sleeve.

"Please follow us. We'll get something for you to change into so you don't ruin your fancy clothes."

"Ah, sorry for making you guys go out of your way for him..."

See, you're getting in their way! Also, I'd noticed the village's young men were all giving Woroy jealous looks. They probably didn't like this dashing foreigner coming in and sweeping everyone off their feet. *Don't blame me if you get into trouble.* Just then, one of the farmers came back and held a rough-hewn kimono out to me.

"Here you go, Lord Veight."

Why're you giving me one?

"Umm, we can't understand what Lord Woroy's saying so..."

"Oh yeah..."

Fine, guess I'll go plant rice with you. Sighing, I got changed and followed Woroy to the paddies.

After the planting was done, we went to a nearby river to wash the mud off. While we were cleansing ourselves, Kurtz walked over to us.

“Sir Veight, Sir Woroy, please return immediately. Airia has officially signed the Sea of Solitude Alliance accords.”

“Oh good, looks like everything worked out,” Woroy said, pulling himself out of the river. He flashed Kurtz a smile as water dripped down his bare chest.

The Sea of Solitude hugged Meraldia’s southern border, and it was what connected Meraldia, the Windswept Dunes, and Wa. The Sea of Solitude Alliance was a monumental accord that defined both nation’s territorial waters, established multiple large-scale trade agreements between Meraldia and Wa, and stipulated that both nations would aid each other in times of need. Hashing out all of the smaller details would have been impossible for me, so I was glad Airia, our ambassador plenipotentiary, had come to take over. Letting an expert handle something this big was the right choice.

With this, both Meraldia and Wa should prosper. *I can finally go back home to Ryunheit. I should probably give everyone in the Chrysanthemum Court my regards before leaving, though.*

Thanks to the efforts of the sagacious Demon Ambassador Airia, the Sea of Solitude Alliance accords were signed without incident. The reason I had to hurry back was because everyone wanted me present for the official signing ceremony. I figured they just wanted all the dignitaries around, but when I returned to the Chrysanthemum Court, they asked me to do the official signing.

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander?” Airia retorted as she pushed the writing brush into my hands, seemingly confused by my confusion.

“That may be, but this treaty is under the Commonwealth Council’s jurisdiction, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but you are the council’s representative as well as the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander. Besides, you are the one who laid the groundwork for this treaty.”

Airia forced me into a ceremonial robe, and I ended up being the one to sign the accords together with Tokitaka, who was the Chrysanthemum Court's representative. *Is it really okay for me to be signing this when I've barely read any of its contents?* I shot Airia a questioning look, and she nodded firmly, urging me to sign the thing already.

Fine, fine, I'll do it. I wasn't used to using writing brushes; I hadn't practiced much calligraphy in my old life. But I managed to write a respectable enough signature, cementing the alliance between our two nations. Now we were honor-bound to help each other in good times and bad.

"I look forward to working with you again in the future, Lord Veight," Tokitaka said with a bow.

I bowed back and replied, "Let us work together to bring both our nations peace and prosperity, Lord Tokitaka."

"Of course."

After the ceremony, I set off back for Ryunheit, with a significantly larger party than the one I'd left Meraldia with. Of course, this was all Garsh and Petore's fault for sending everyone over to Wa. I couldn't really hold it against them, though, since the success of this alliance was directly linked to Beluza and Lotz's growth. They'd probably wanted to make absolutely sure I succeeded. However, it now felt like the ship home was carrying half of the demon army's commanders. On top of that, Fumino and a few other members of the Chrysanthemum Court were traveling with us. They wanted to see Ason's legendary treasure off.

Not only had it been discovered by their nation's founder, but it was also extremely powerful. While Wa had agreed to transfer custody of it over to Meraldia, it's not like they were just going to hand it over and that would be that. As a symbol of both nation's joint ownership of the relic, a contingent from Wa had been dispatched to stay in Meraldia and watch over it.

Noticing my gaze, Fumino turned around and walked across the deck over to me. "Seems like we'll be working together again, Lord Veight."

"Indeed. I trust you will stick to doing your job and nothing more."

“But of course,” Fumino replied with a grin.

Of course, I knew what the Chrysanthemum Court was actually after by sending their spies to reside semi-permanently in Meraldia. They wanted Fumino and the others to gather intel. Considering they had the perfect excuse to send people to Rynheit, it made sense. Honestly, I didn’t really mind that much, since it wouldn’t hurt Meraldia for Wa to know more about its inner workings. Besides, we were planning on keeping an eye on Wa’s affairs via our merchants and diplomats as well.

“I assume you’ll be wanting homes in Rynheit, Lady Fumino?”

“Yes. If possible I’d like to leave a few people behind in Lotz and Beluza to set up a communication network, so could you find us lodging there as well?”

“You’re really trying to squeeze me for everything you can, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.” Fumino grinned, and I couldn’t help but smile back. Sure we had our disagreements, but I had the feeling I’d get along with Fumino and the others just fine.

And so, we returned safely to Lotz with Ason’s legendary treasure in tow. To my surprise, there was a crowd of people waiting for us at the pier.

“Welcome home, Lord Veight!”

“Long live the Commonwealth Council!”

“Three cheers for the heroes who slew the nue!”

“Lady Airia, you look stunning!”

“Thanks for all the trade opportunities!”

“Kyaaaa, Lord Woroy looked at me!”

What the heck? Flags waved in the sea breeze, and an entire orchestra played a triumphant tune to celebrate our return.

“Airia, what’s going on?”

Airia strained her eyes, then smiled awkwardly when she spotted a certain someone on the pier. “This was probably Petore’s idea. My guess is he thought

making a big public announcement for the results of our expedition would stimulate trade.”

“I see.”

That was a smart plan, honestly. A new alliance meant new opportunities for the residents of Lotz and Beluza. As soon as we docked, Petore dragged us off the ship and shook hands with us over and over in front of all the citizens. Grinning mischievously, he said, “Thanks to y’all, we’re going to be rich. I’ll do my best to expand the city like ya want, so keep bringing deals like these to us!”

“I’m starting to wonder if I can really trust you.”

Nothing he said was a lie, but his expression just made it so hard to trust him. As expected of a prosperous city, the festival Lotz threw in our honor was bigger than anything I’d seen before. People plied us with alcohol, threw wreaths of flowers over our heads, and offered us food at every block. It was hours before we managed to finally escape to the relative privacy of our hotel. Outside, I could still hear people carousing, and the appetizing smell of grilled fish wafted in through the windows. The people of Lotz seemed to be expecting great things from this new trade deal with Wa. Expectations just made me stressed, though, so I wished people would stop having them—at least regarding anything related to me or my achievements.

There was a huge welcome party waiting for us when we got back to Ryunheit as well, though this was one Airia herself had organized.

“I was unable to prepare a proper reception for you when you returned from your previous mission, so I made this one as elaborate as possible to make up for it,” Airia said with a smile.

“You really didn’t have to, you know.”

“Of course I did!” Her expression suddenly grew serious and she brought her face closer to mine. “You’re Meraldia’s savior. You improved our relationship with both Rolmund to the north and Wa to the east. Moreover, Ryunheit is the seat of the Demon Lord, Meraldia’s demon capital. It would tarnish the city’s reputation if your reception wasn’t at least as grandiose as your achievements.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“Well, I do.”

Airia was being surprisingly adamant about this. She hadn’t been exaggerating either; the welcome celebration was a sight to behold. Everyone in the demon army was present too. The canines, dragonkin, and a bunch of other races that didn’t even live in Ryunheit had shown up to honor our return. Ryunheit’s flags and the flags of the demon army flew from the rooftops, and pretty much every window in the city was open and filled with people waving at us.

As she waved jovially at the citizens, Airia turned back to me. “I had hoped to hold a festival this grand when you returned from Rolmund as well.”

“I get that you’ve been dying to hold this event, but I really think you went overboard,” I said. This excursion to Wa had been more of a business holiday than anything. “Please tell me you’re not going to do this every time I return from an extended trip.”

“Well, I might. You accomplish so much on your excursions, it’s only fitting to hold a celebration each time you return.”

That’s just gonna make coming back feel awkward. Wait, is this part of her plan to keep me from leaving Ryunheit too often? Nah, I’m probably just overthinking things.

“Salute Vice-Commander Veight and Demon Ambassador Airia!” Baltze—the dragonkin Champion and the commander of the Azure Knights—shouted as we passed through the city gates.

Ryunheit’s garrison and the Beluzan marines stationed here saluted in tandem with the dragonkin. Nodding, I returned their salutes. For all my grumbling, I had to admit I *was* enjoying the praise, and it was nice seeing everyone’s smiling faces. This all made my work feel worthwhile. That being said, I was worried I wouldn’t be able to live up to the image everyone had built of me inside their heads. With how highly people thought of me, I couldn’t afford to mess up. It was a terrifying thought.

“Good grief,” I muttered, staring out the window.

It was the day after our return, and I was sitting in my office. For once I didn't have to worry about monsters or enemy soldiers. Meraldia's eastern and northern borders were finally secure. To our west was the Demon Forest, and there was only water to our south. We wouldn't have to worry about any invasions for the time being, at least. Kite's job as Woroy's chaperone was over too, so I had my assistant back at long last. He walked into my room, bringing today's stack of documents. Surprisingly, there weren't too many this time. Maybe 20 at best.

"I only brought over the documents that require immediate attention for now. Can you get them all done by noon?"

"Sure."

"There's three times as many less important documents waiting after that, so you're probably going to need to eat lunch here."

"...I see."

I knew this was my own fault for leaving the city all the time, but I really wished someone else could do this job for me. Almost all of the documents were either progress reports from the demon army's research department, or complaints and petitions from the citizenry. *I get why I have to be the one to review military documents, but how come I have to take care of people's complaints too?*

"Can't we set up a department to handle complaints and petitions?"

"You mean the ones directed to the demon army? I'm pretty sure everyone only accepts the decisions because they come from you. Besides, I'm not sure any of the other demons would be able to handle it."

Can't argue with that.

"Can't we make the Demon Lord do it? She's got tons of free time."

I'd only said that as a joke, but Kite gave me a stern look.

"Don't be ridiculous, Veight. Taking care of these kinds of things is a vice-commander's job."

"Well you're my vice-commander, so why don't you do your job... Oh wait,

you already are.”

“Yeah, I’m already doing everything I can. Thankfully, I like this kind of bureaucratic work.”

It’s not fair, why can’t I have fun too? Grumbling, I got to work. Airia and Kurtz would be dropping by later, so I needed to finish this up quickly. Unfortunately, neither my werewolf abilities nor my strengthening magic helped me process documents any faster. *This is where the real battle begins.*

“Hey, Kite, what if I promoted you into a position with more authority?”

Kite shook his head without hesitation. “Being your vice-commander is already hard enough, I don’t want any more responsibility. I’ll make you some tea, so keep working at those documents.”

How come you get to enjoy the good vice-commander life but I have to suffer? Sighing, I resigned myself to my fate and picked up my pen. Every race had different handwriting quirks so deciphering all these documents took up a lot of time.

“How long until this world can go paperless...” I griped.

“Did you say something?”

“It’s nothing.”

There weren’t any pressing military or diplomatic issues left, so this was going to be my life for a while. In all fairness, this was a relatively cushy job, so I couldn’t complain. This was the boring, peaceful vice-commander life I wanted anyway. Plus, I really didn’t want any more parades in my honor, so it was best if I avoided going on any more adventures. Resolved, I resumed my war on paperwork.

About a month had passed since the solstice, and summer was in full swing now. *Man, I’m bored,* I thought as I stared absently out the office window.

“Hm? Did you already finish going through all the documents, Veight?” Kite cocked his head and I pointed to the mountain of papers on my desk.

“They’ve all been taken care of. Honestly, most of them just needed a

signature.”

“That just shows how good everyone else is at their jobs.”

“For sure.”

Everyone in the Commonwealth Council was a master of statecraft, and the demon army’s soldiers were all hard-working and disciplined. Our researchers were all experts in their respective fields too. An average guy like me didn’t even need to be overseeing them, honestly.

“By the way, they’ve finished building the vault for Ason’s legendary treasure in the old district.”

The vault was guarded 24/7 by a werewolf squad and a platoon of undead soldiers, so there was no worry of it being stolen. Fumino and the other Heavenwatchers who’d come with us were keeping an eye on it as well.

“What’s Master doing?” I asked.

“She’s making a distribution map that shows where all the dangerous monsters in Meraldia live. She said she wanted to help the council draft up a plan to eliminate all of them.”

“I see...that sounds just like her.”

Master was a scholar at heart, so it made sense that her contributions would be scholarly in nature. I skimmed over the new stack of documents Kite brought me, then signed them all. The past few days, most of the paperwork was already sorted out before it made it to my desk. There wasn’t much I needed to address.

“Man, I’m bored.”

“You go through paperwork so fast. Where did you learn how to do that?”

My past life. But of course I couldn’t say that.

Smiling ruefully I replied, “Back when I first started studying under Master, I had to go through a lot of old records. Wasn’t it the same for you?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot you went to the national magic academy.”

Kite's training had probably gone very differently from mine. *It's almost noon, so I guess this is a good time to stop.* I got to my feet and grabbed my coat. It was warm enough that I didn't need it, but as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander I needed to look presentable in public. *Every mid-boss has to look the part after all.*

"Let's go get lunch, Kite. We have a meeting with the Sonnenlicht priests later in the afternoon, so we may as well eat while we've got the chance. There's a good stall nearby. Let's grab food from there and come back here to eat."

"You sure? I thought you preferred eating outside?"

"Yeah, but these days whenever I go out, everyone stops to stare at me."

The citizens were treating me like a celebrity. It made guarding me more difficult, and I didn't want to cause any trouble for the stall owner, so it was best if I stayed inside as much as possible.

I led Kite to a skewer stall located on Ryunheit's main street. It was the same stall I'd discovered shortly after conquering the city—the one that used soy sauce. When I'd first found it, the owner mostly grilled chicken and fish, but he'd added pork to his repertoire recently and his customer base had grown exponentially.

"You really like that black seasoning, don't you Veight?"

"The aroma's irresistible, isn't it?"

"It tastes good at least."

The lunch rush was in full swing when we arrived, and Kite and I filed to the back of the queue. Southern Meraldians weren't very orderly. Oftentimes lines split into two because people weren't able to stay in a straight queue. We'd only been waiting for a few seconds when the people in front of us turned around in surprise. *Did I do something wrong?* Before I could ask, the line parted to either side, the scene eerily reminiscent of how Moses parted the Red Sea.

"I didn't realize it was you, Sir Veight! Please, go on ahead!"

"You must be extremely busy, Lord Veight! There's no need for you to line

up!”

Everyone urged me forward. *I’m not busy at all. In fact, I kind of wish I had more work.*

The old man running the stall beckoned to me with a grin. “Lord Veight, I just finished a batch of skewers! Take them while they’re still hot! Oh, and there’s no need to pay!”

“What the heck’s going on here?”

As I got closer, he started heaping pork ribs and sheep thighs onto a plate and explained, “Thanks to you, business has been booming. Everyone wants to come eat at the stall Lord Veight loves so much. This is just a small token of my appreciation!”

“You’re welcome, but I really should still pay.”

“No, I insist, this is my treat! You can pay next time.”

What do I do? I really didn’t like getting preferential treatment like this. I would have much rather lined up normally and bought my food like everyone else. After a bit of arguing, I convinced the stall owner to let me pay, but he gave me so many skewers that I could feed an army with them.

“He just wanted to show his gratitude; you should have let him give you the food for free,” Kite said as we walked back.

I firmly shook my head. “I can’t. As the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander it sets a bad precedent if I allow people to do me favors. That’s how corruption happens.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone in this country stupid enough to believe they can bribe you.”

Even so, it’s about the principle of the thing. Events like these had become commonplace over the past few days. *It’s like everyone in Ryunheit worships me. I don’t like it.*

After the meeting with the Sonnenlicht members was over, I consulted Yuhit about my worries.

“You can hardly blame the people for acting that way. With all you’ve done to develop this town and ensure the people’s prosperity, it’s only natural that they would respect you,” he conferred.

“It’s a strange feeling, hearing that from you.”

Not so long ago we were enemies, and now he was praising me.

“However, I can see how it would be a little uncomfortable to receive so much adoration.”

“Yes, to be perfectly honest I’m unsure how I should react to this newfound fame. Why is it that I’ve become so popular so suddenly anyway? I’ve been away from the city for most of this past year.”

“I suspect the *Black Werewolf King* plays are a major factor. I’ve seen them a few times with my grandchildren, and you are portrayed in an extremely favorable light in all of them.”

Figures. Though I’m kinda surprised you went to go see them with your grandkids. So basically, the plays had given everyone an exaggerated idea of how amazing I was while I’d been away. This is all your damn fault, Forne.

Yuhit looked out of the church window and smiled. “Though if you were to ask me, the plays don’t do your deeds justice, Lord Veight. You’re ten times the man they make you out to be.”

“Surely you jest, Father Yuhit.”

“Absolutely not. Your true worth doesn’t lie in the might of your fangs or the strength of your magic.” He thoughtfully stroked his beard. “Despite being an invader, you treated your conquered subjects with dignity and kindness. Moreover, you have never once acted out of self-interest. You use all the power and authority you wield for the sake of your subjects.”

“But isn’t that only natural?”

Yuhit closed his eyes, his expression wistful. “Indeed, that is how all rulers should act. But think about it. How many people in power are capable of doing what you claim is ‘only natural’?”

“Good point...”

Within Meraldia, bribery wasn't even a crime. Of course, blatant corruption might get you removed from office, but taking the occasional bribe was considered par for the course. It didn't help that it was very difficult to draw a line between good-willed donations and bribery. As a demon, I could just use the excuse that I don't understand human customs to refuse any and all gifts, but that wasn't possible for the other councilors.

Of course, I wasn't some paragon of virtue, I just didn't want to owe anyone any favors. It would cloud my judgment if I did. I knew better than anyone that I was too weak-willed to not use my position to help people for personal reasons if I owed them.

Seeing that I was unconvinced, Yuhit added, "Money, prestige, status, authority. You have no interest in any of those things. You serve others, not for your own benefit, but because you truly believe it is your duty. Am I wrong?"

"I didn't really think about it before, but I suppose you're right."

All my life I fought desperately to create a place where demons like me could live in peace. I wanted a world where we didn't have to fight every day of our lives just to survive. A world where we didn't need to live in fear of disease, starvation, and monsters—and if possible, a world that had a standard of living closer to that of my old life. That was all.

"Lord Veight. Everyone sees that in you. We humans are not so ignorant as that."

"I see... I understand now."

I still didn't want to be worshiped, but I was happier now that Yuhit had put everything in context. It was because everyone recognized the effort I was putting in that I could keep working hard. I still felt like I wasn't as amazing as everyone seemed to think, though. All of these achievements didn't belong to me alone. It was the previous Demon Lord who'd built the foundations for our current prosperity, and it was Master who'd led us in the right direction. Even my strength was just a result of being born a werewolf and not due to any special training or anything. Moreover, I was blessed with ideal bosses, coworkers, and subordinates. Even my enemies had all been reasonable people thus far.

Everything people attributed to me was a result of others' hard work. I just happened to be coasting on their competence. Had anyone else been reincarnated into my position, they would have been able to do the same. On the other hand, if I'd been reincarnated as an average Ryunheit citizen, I wouldn't have been able to do a single thing, which was why I found it hard to be proud of my accomplishments. Though I didn't really know how to explain that to Yuhit without exposing my secret.

"Thank you, Father Yuhit. I'm blessed to have someone like you I can turn to for advice."

Yuhit scrutinized my expression for a few seconds, then sighed. "Sadly it seems I was unable to be of much use... Your deepest worries appear to be something I cannot hope to understand."

I gulped. *Is Yuhit onto me?* He was the bishop overseeing all of southern Meraldia, so it was hardly surprising he was so perceptive.

"...I'll tell you about them someday."

More like some day, for sure. As I started walking back to the viceroy's manor, I passed by a large crowd. It looked like everyone was waiting for one of the *Black Werewolf King* plays to start. I didn't want to deal with their fawning right now so I slipped into a back alley before anyone noticed me. *Man, why do I have to skulk around my own home city?*

"Ah, it's the Black Werewolf King!"

"Really!? Wow, it's really him!"

"Transform for us, Lord Veight! Show us how scary you are!"

A group of kids who'd been playing in the alley spotted me and excitedly ran over.

"I'll cause a commotion if I transform here, but I'll show you kids later, okay?" I waved to the kids with a smile while trying to figure out what route I could take to avoid running into any more people.

After I got back from my meeting with Yuhit, I just sat in my room and zoned

out. Everyone seemed to be expecting great things from me, but there wasn't much more I could do to help Meraldia prosper. I was an amateur at both politics and warfare, and I had no formal study in any field. The region had finally stabilized, so there was no need for me to go around putting out fires either. As I was contemplating my future, Master floated into my room.

"You appear rather bored, Veight."

"You look more bored than me, Master," I joked.

She puffed her cheeks out and replied, "I happen to be quite busy crafting plans to improve relations between humans and demons. Curse you, Friedensrichter. Why did you have to die and leave all the truly difficult tasks to me?"

The start of the demon army had been when the Demon Lord had made Master his advisor. Then he'd gone and died before realizing his dream, so now everything was on Master's shoulders. She sure had it rough. I got up and walked over to her.

"Did you need something, Master?"

"I did indeed. I was hoping I could leave the city for a short while."

You're Meraldia's ruler, you can't just leave.

"It'll be a problem if the highest authority in Meraldia leaves the city, Master."

"As if you have any right to talk."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Master floated up higher until she was eye-level with me. "The current state of the western forest has been weighing on my mind. Surely you haven't forgotten how many monsters live there?"

"No, I haven't."

After being driven out of human society, us werewolves had been forced to live in the western forest. However, the woods were teeming with monsters. Werewolves were strong enough that they'd managed to carve out a habitat for themselves, but the forest was still dangerous. My hometown was only surviving because the demon army had sent soldiers to guard it.

Master unfurled a map and looked up at me. “Thanks to your efforts, Meraldia has nothing to fear from its northern or eastern borders. There are no threats from beyond the Sea of Solitude to the south either. Which means our next objective should be the Demon Forest to the west.”

“Yeah, the monsters there are too strong for humans, so if anyone’s going to do something about them it’d have to be us.”

The forest was too dense to field a large army within it, and most of the weapons and tactics Meraldian soldiers used were only effective against other humans. I doubted they’d fare favorably against the monsters of the forest.

“I intend to investigate this issue personally... After all, as the Demon Lord, it is my responsibility to ensure the safety of my people.”

Aha! I see what’s going on here now!

“What you mean is, as a scholar you’re burning to investigate the ecology of the forest and look for new monster species, right?”

“U-Urk.” Master awkwardly looked away.

“Can you look me in the eye and say this is really because you’re worried about our safety, Master?”

“Leave me be! Am I not even allowed to enjoy my hobbies in peace!?”

Master looked like a little kid, but on the inside she was an old lady. Of course, I wasn’t gonna say something that rude to her face, but I still felt like teasing her.

Clearing her throat, Master tried a different tack. “I can use teleportation magic, so even if I get lost within the forest I will be able to easily return. Moreover, no monster can pose a threat to me. Besides, I have been investigating the forest in secret for months now.”

“You have a point...”

Master flashed me a playful smile. “If you’re still worried, would you like to serve as my assistant?”

“You want me to come with you? Well, I guess it’ll be hard to run an investigation alone.”

Master could only take one person with her at a time with her teleportation magic, so it made sense to pick someone strong as her assistant-cum-bodyguard. It was certainly true that I was one of the stronger generals in the demon army. Actually, all the other strong generals had died during the fiasco in the north, so I was the only one left.

“You are also a mage, and you have kept up with your studies, so you’re perfectly suited to be my assistant.”

“Thanks.”

Honestly, I was curious about how things were going in the forest too. Right now, the most ubiquitous source of fuel in the world was wood. Lumber was also a sturdy and popular building material, second only to stone. If I wanted to expand the scope of Meraldia’s cities, I would need a lot of wood.

Right now, Meraldia was making do with the forests in its borders, but if we ramped up production, the deforestation would start getting severe; Kurtz and the other dragonkin engineers’ calculations had made that clear. There was a forest close to Rynheit as well, but we’d already harvested a significant chunk of it. At this rate, it would vanish completely within a few years. Fortunately, there was a massive source of timber just west of us. Unfortunately, it was filled with monsters.

“Another good reason to secure the forest would be so we can start harvesting lumber from it,” I said.

“Indeed. We should investigate the full size of the forest, as well as which tree species are abundant.”

“But, Master, I can’t leave my work on the council to anyone else...”

Sighing, she tapped her shoulder with her staff. “I know you have been feeling uneasy as of late. You are worried you cannot live up to the exaggerated expectations the people have of you, correct?”

“How did you know?”

“How many years do you think I have watched over you now?” Master chuckled. “I know what things spark your curiosity, what it is you like, and what it is you hate. I am your master, remember?”

“...Fair enough.”

She's my master alright. I don't think I'll ever match up to her.

Master brought her face closer to mine. “Leave your responsibilities in Meraldia to someone else. Humans and demons have already started down the path toward coexistence. You now have plenty of human allies you can trust, such as Viceroy Airia or Bishop Yuhit.”

“It's rare to hear you talking about politics, Master.”

“A true scholar is a student in all fields—words of wisdom I inherited long ago.”

Inherited from whom?

“So, Airia, is this arrangement acceptable to you?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Airia said as she walked into the room. *I see, so Master briefed her ahead of time.* Airia bowed to Master, then turned to me.

“I am in charge of the demon capital's administration, and we still have two other demons on the Commonwealth Council, Melaine and Firnir. The three of us should suffice for representing the demon army's interests in Meraldia.”

“I know, but...”

“Or do you not trust me to take over your job?” Airia asked sulkily.

Panicking, I hurriedly shook my head. “Perish the thought! There's no human I trust more than you!”

Airia's expression brightened instantly. “It's all thanks to you that the demon army was able to integrate into human society. It would be no exaggeration to call you our savior.”

I was speaking from the heart, but for some reason, Airia's expression clouded over. Master, who was now floating above my head, grumbled, “You truly are utterly, completely, hopelessly incorrigible.”

“Am I really that bad?”

Master completely ignored me and bowed to Airia. “Forgive me, Airia. It is partially my fault he ended up like this. I, too, am unskilled at communication,

and it seemed he picked up many of my habits.”

Why're you apologizing? I'm praising Airia, aren't I? Isn't that a good thing?
Airia smiled awkwardly and shook her head.

“It's fine, Your Majesty. I'm happy just knowing Veight trusts me.”

“I am terribly sorry... I shall do my best to fill the gaps in his education, so do not be too hard on him.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I will put my faith in you.”

What exactly did I do wrong here? Trying to fix whatever mistake I apparently made, I walked over to Airia and looked her in the eyes.

“Of all the people that I have met, you are unique. I... I'm not sure how to put this, but...”

Crap, I'm already falling apart. Why am I so bad at talking to people? This is why everyone gets scared of me when they first meet me. Now that I think about it, maybe Master's right, I do need to learn how to socialize better. I took a step forward and placed a hand on my chest.

“I am eternally grateful that I met you. This may seem strange, but I'm glad Ryunheit was the city I was ordered to conquer first.”

Was I able to get my feelings across?

After a few seconds, Airia's cheeks started to redden. *She looks really cute when she's blushing.* However, a painful experience in my past life had taught me not to jump to conclusions. Back in sixth grade, there'd been this girl in my class, Nacchan. I thought for sure she had a crush on me, and because of that assumption, I did something I shouldn't have. After that, I'd learned to be cautious, and had since avoided making the same mistake.



Human emotions were complex, and most of the time completely illogical. Business transactions were easy enough to understand, but relationships were far more intricate. Airia was the demon army's greatest human ally, and the human demons trusted the most. I needed to be careful not to make her hate me.

Airia stared at me for a few seconds, then finally opened her mouth to say something. But she seemed unable to find the right words and closed her mouth again. Finally, she forced herself to smile and said, "You're always causing me trouble, you know that? Ever since you broke into my room, my life has been turned upside-down."

"I, uhh... Sorry."

I was a coward who was terrified of disappointing people, so I always chose to run away from their expectations. In a way, I was clinging to my own fame to protect me. Even though I hadn't done a single thing to earn it. And yet, Airia had been nothing but kind to me despite knowing how timid I was.

"Don't worry, this isn't anything new. Leave Ryunheit and the Commonwealth Council to me. I'll be waiting here for your return."

"Airia..."

Before I could thank her, Airia smiled and gave me a salute. "I'm afraid only a few of us will be able to see you off. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to make preparations to ensure your departure doesn't cause an uproar."

She ran out of the room without giving me a chance to say anything. As I watched the door swing shut, I felt an inexplicable wave of guilt wash over me. Seeing my expression Master muttered, "Do not think things will stay the same forever, my cute little disciple."

"I know. I have to make sure this investigation goes well for Airia's sake too."

Master lay down in midair and sighed, "That is *not* what I was referring to... Is work the only thing you think about?"

"I don't think so, at least..."

Compared to my past life, I barely spent any time on work.

And thus, I snuck out of Ryunheit to help Master with her top-secret investigation of the Demon Forest. As Master and I walked through the prairie separating Ryunheit and the forest, I said, “Airia told me to go visit my home village while I’m gone.”

“Mmm, she’s quite a nice girl. Be sure to treasure her, not just as an ally but as a friend.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Master smiled wryly as she looked up at me. “I suppose even you have trouble communicating with those of a different race.”

Technically, she’s the same race as me. Communication is hard, regardless of what race it’s with.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I first met the previous Demon Lord—Friedensrichter?” Master asked suddenly.

“Yeah, back during your coronation ceremony. You barged into my room and made me listen to the whole story, remember?”

“Are you still hung up over that? I was doing you a favor.”

“Anyway, I’ve heard the story already.”

Why do old people love telling the same tales over and over? Master pushed up the brim of her hat and looked up at the sky.

“He may have been a dragonkin, but he undoubtedly possessed the heart of a human. It was thanks to him that I began to warm up to demons.”

That’s because he was a human originally, just like you. That being said, it was amazing how that small misunderstanding eventually led to where we were today. *Nice going, Demon Lord.* As she skipped on ahead, I asked, “Master, Can you tell me more stories about the old Demon Lord? Like how he stopped the wars between the dragonkin tribes and stuff.”

“Ahh, I never did tell you how he managed that, did I? Erm, I believe the blue-scaled dragonkin and the red-scaled dragonkin were...”

Man, it feels nice to just relax for once. How long has it been since I haven't had to worry about anything? I must have spaced out for a bit because when I came back to my senses, Master was staring at me.

“Hey, are you actually listening to me? This is the best part, so pay attention.”

“Oh, yeah. Umm, Master...”

Noticing the look on my face, Master smiled softly. “What is it, Veight?”

Blushing a little, I said, “I’m really glad I ended up being the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

After a few seconds of silence, Master resumed her story, “Errrm, how far did I get again?”

“You were talking about how Sir Baltze messed up the peace talks.”

“Ah, yes, now I remember. It’s funny now, but at the time I was terrified all our efforts would be for naught...” Master’s cheerful voice melted away into the clear night sky.

I really am lucky. I’ve been blessed with so many things. I need to make sure not to take this happiness for granted. I looked up at the stars, grateful that I’d been reincarnated as a werewolf.

Beyond the Stars

The werewolf village was near the edge of the forest, where the trees and the darkness weren't too thick.

"I can see it, Master."

"Mmm, the village appears to be bustling."

My old hometown slowly came into sight. After coming under the demon army's protection, the village had grown quite a bit.

"It doesn't look anything like when I left it," I said, glancing around.

The pathetic fence that had surrounded the village when I'd left had been replaced by a wall of sturdy logs stacked on top of each other. It was large enough to keep monsters out, and didn't have the holes our old fence did. A new well had been dug to replace the old dry one, meaning no one had to go to relatively dangerous streams to get water. The main gate flew the flags of the Meraldian Commonwealth and the demon army. My old village was now formally a part of Meraldia.

Master smiled. "Friedensrichter wanted to repay you and the other werewolves for all your help, so he spared no expense in supporting your village."

"I really can't thank him enough."

"He only did what was right for a leader. Were it not for that personality of his, no one would have followed him."

"You've got a point."

If I'd been rewarded this much for my work in my past life, maybe I would have cared more about my company.

"Well, we know the village is safe. Let's keep going."

"Now hold on just a minute here. I am not so cruel a taskmaster that I would deprive my disciple the opportunity to spend some time with his family."

“No really, I’m good. Come on, let’s go.”

I really didn’t want to return home with Master in tow. Unfortunately, just as I was about to turn around, a young child poked his head over the wall.

“Ah, is that you, Mister Veight!?” he exclaimed.

Did you have to shout it to the whole world? In seconds, everyone was crowding around the gates.

“Whoa, it’s really him. I thought I smelled Veight’s scent, but I figured I was just imagining things.”

“Oh my, and he’s brought the Demon Lord with him. Elder, we have to prepare tea.”

“Why do I have to do it? These old bones are tired. We still have those high-quality leaves from Ryunheit, don’t we? Someone just go steep those!”

“The Demon Lord just came from Ryunheit! We can’t serve her tea from there!”

“Ah, who gives a rat’s rear. Oiiii, Vanessa! Yer kid’s back! Stop plowing and get yer ass over here!”

Oh god, this is so embarrassing. I’m sorry, Master.

I was blushing to the tips of my ears, but it was too late to slip away now. Quite literally everyone in the village knew about my return.

“Let’s leave after we’ve paid our respects to everyone, Master.”

“Have you forgotten that Airia told you to *relax* and spend time with your family?”

It’s gonna be impossible to relax as long as you’re here. Surrounded by everyone, they dragged us into the village. The excitement in the air was palpable.

“Heeeeeeey! Veight came back, guys! And he brought the Demon Lord with him!” someone yelled.

“I heard you got promoted to vice-commander. Doesn’t that make you second in command!?”

Not exactly. Since all the battle-hardened werewolves had joined my unit, the only werewolves left living in the village were ordinary civilians. Granted, they were still werewolves, so even “civilians” were strong enough to subdue a bear with only their hands. The reason most of them had elected to remain in the village was because they were either too old, or had chronic conditions that made fighting consecutive battles difficult. That, or they were busy raising kids. My mom, Vanessa, had a condition that prevented her from transforming for too long too.

As we drew closer to my house, she came out to greet us. She was carrying a hoe in one hand, and a basket in the other. Smiling, she set the basket down and wiped the sweat off her forehead. Though she was much older, she still looked like she was in her early 30s.

“Welcome home, Veight.”

“Uhh, yeah. I’m back, mom.”

God, this is awkward.

After catching the village elders up to speed on what I’d been up to, I went back to my house with Master.

“I see this house has grown significantly compared to when I first arrived here,” Master said with a smile as she looked around the living room. My mom grinned ruefully and replied, “Our old house was destroyed by monsters, so Jerrick and his friends built me a new one.”

Incidentally, it was the demon army who funded the construction. This new wooden house was much sturdier than the one I’d grown up with, and bigger too.

As she put a plate of roasted potatoes in front of us, my mom said cheerfully, “It’s all thanks to you that our lives are so much better now.”

“Oh no, don’t thank me. This is all because the werewolves have all rendered such distinguished services. Especially Veight.”

“My, is that so?”

Mom looked genuinely surprised. Considering how ignorant she was of politics and current events, I expected her not to know what I'd been up to this past year.

Nodding emphatically, Master replied, "His achievements will no doubt go down in history. Without him, werewolves—no, perhaps demons as a whole—would have no future. Demons everywhere are indebted to your son."

"My my..." Mom blinked in surprise, seemingly unable to grasp the scope of what Master was saying. "I always knew he was a smart kid, but I never imagined he was such a huge help."

"You raised him well, Vanessa."

"Oh no, this is all thanks to your guidance. You taught him not only magic, but the ways of the world as well."

Dang it, this is exactly the direction I didn't want the conversation to take. Whenever Master came to my house, she and Mom spent hours talking about me; it felt kind of like having a parent-teacher conference. They hadn't stopped, even after I became an adult. *Please give it a rest, this is embarrassing.* Unfortunately, once Master started bragging about her disciples, it was impossible to shut her up.

"Your son is a masterful warrior as well," Master replied. "He personally conquered two Meraldian cities and negotiated with five others to bring them to our side."

"Oh my."

"Moreover, he was responsible for halting Rolmund's invasion from the north, and he even captured their general after a duel. After that, he led an expedition to Rolmund and captured the enemy prince."

"Did he really?"

Nothing Master had said was a lie, but it still felt like she was exaggerating the facts.

"And just the other day he went to Wa in the East and negotiated a very complex alliance with ease. He also exterminated a dangerous monster known

as the 'nue,' earning him the gratitude of the locals.”

“That’s quite something... I’m sure this is all because you taught him so well, Master. Thank you very much.” Mom bowed her head and Master smiled.

“Oh no, don’t thank me. I am just as surprised by his growth as you are. None of my other disciples are as accomplished in both the academic and martial arts. Some possess as much magical talent as he does, but they’re not masters of diplomacy like him.”

Out of all of Master’s disciples, I was the one who’d had the most contact with human society. I was a former human though, so it only made sense for me to handle the role of a mediator. *Can we please just go already?*

“Master—I mean, Your Highness. Shouldn’t we return to our investigation?” I said, trying to cut into the conversation.

“Now, now, no need to rush. Since we are already here, why don’t we measure the mana levels around the village and see what species have made their home in the vicinity? We would need to do it eventually anyway.”

“Well, I guess starting by recording the levels around an inhabited zone would be useful, but...”

We were planning on seeing how the mana levels within the forest differed between places where people lived and untamed wilderness. Master’s hypothesis was that densely populated areas altered the flow of mana. I was still interested in seeing if that hypothesis was true, but right now I just wanted to leave. Unfortunately, my suggestion derailed the conversation into an even worse direction.

“Veight is a diligent, wise, and hardworking aide. He fulfills both his duties as my vice-commander and a Commonwealth Councilor without complaint. However, though he is an ideal assistant...” Master trailed off, sighing. “He works too much for his own good.”

“Oh yes, he’s been like that ever since he was a kid.” Mom nodded, her expression suddenly growing serious. “He’d give it his all for everything he did, and he wouldn’t be satisfied until his work was perfect. Honestly, I kind of wish he’d been a more clumsy child.”

“I understand your feelings completely. Having such a studious disciple was nerve-wracking. His overly serious nature is causing problems for the humans around him too.”

Wait, what problems? You’re joking, right, Master?

Mom seemed to have figured out exactly what Master was implying, since she nodded in understanding. “I think I know what’s going on. He’s just like his father was.”

That caught my attention. My dad in this world had died before I was born so I didn’t know much about him.

“I’m like him? How?” I asked, brimming with curiosity.

“Your personality’s the same. You always prioritize others over yourself. That’s why you never do what you want to do, but rather what you think is the right thing.” Mom sighed loudly. “I wish you’d relax a bit more. I don’t want you to end up like your dad did. He always pushed himself to help others, and in the end, he died for it.”

My personality was inherited from my past life, so I found it kind of funny that I was identical to my dad from this life. If he’d survived, he probably would have been a good father. Mom gave me a stern look as I fantasized about the dad I’d never had.

“You better not die before me, you hear. I don’t want to be left all alone.”

“Don’t worry, I know.”

This time, Master sighed. “No, you don’t know anything. I have no children of my own, but even centuries later, the pain of losing my parents has yet to fade.”

“Master...”

Didn’t Master say her entire family was massacred before her eyes?

Smiling sadly, Master said, “No matter how much I long to meet them again, I will never be able to. Once lost, a life can never be recovered. Not even someone who has mastered the deepest mysteries of necromancy like me can bring someone back to life.”

“Sorry, Master. I promise I’ll be careful.”

I’d even experienced death once before, so I understood its gravity better than most. *Actually, maybe it’s because I’ve died already that I don’t feel that much attachment to this life, since part of me’s thinking I’ll just be reincarnated again.*

Seemingly reading my thoughts, Master floated up and patted me on the head. “The fate of many demons rests on your shoulders. You need to treasure your life more.”

“Understood.”

That’s right, I can’t forget that I have responsibilities now.

Looking at my expression, Mom sighed and said, “Master, I don’t think he understands at all.”

“Indeed. This disciple of mine is quite a handful.”

I mean, I know what you’re actually trying to say, but...

That night, the villagers held a feast in our honor. The Demon Lord who’d done so much to improve this village’s standard of living had personally come to visit, so the townspeople went all-out on the celebration. They grilled all of the deer and boar they’d killed in their last hunt, and served enough food to feed an army. The long dining table in the town hall was piled so high with food that I couldn’t even see Master, who was sitting right next to me. I could still hear her though.

“Hrmm, this deer is the white-speckled deer that inhabits the eastern fringes of the forest, correct? I see their population has recovered to the point where dozens can be hunted in a single day.”

“Yep, thanks to the demon army, there’s no monsters near our village anymore. We can farm in peace now, and there’s way more game to hunt.”

“Their numbers bounced back much faster than I predicted. This is a significant discovery.”

“We’re very grateful for everything you’ve done for us.”

She was talking with the village elder, and from the sound of it, their conversation wasn't quite aligned. But even if it was for different reasons, they were both happy, so it wasn't that big a deal.

"Your Majesty, try sprinkling this salt over your meat."

"Mmm, thank you. Did you know, the white spots on this deer's back are meant to emulate sunlight filtering through the trees? They're a form of camouflage."

"The back's got a lot of fat so it's the tastiest part of the deer."

It's kinda funny how their conversation isn't matching up at all. That aside, this was exactly the world I'd dreamed of. People of differing values and backgrounds all coming together to live in harmony—the kind of world I wanted to live in.

Just then, the old geezers who lived next door walked out of the kitchen with a plate full of medium-rare meat. "Oi, Veight, we finished grilling the boar legs. It's all thanks to you young'uns that we can hunt so much meat, so you better eat up."

"Cheers."

The only seasoning they'd added to the boar was a bit of salt, but simple dishes like these had their own charm to them. I grabbed one of the boar legs and ripped a chunk out of it with my teeth. Delicious meat juices spread out over my tongue.

"Whoa, that's good!"

The old men gave me wrinkly smiles and slapped me on the back repeatedly. "Honestly I thought our time was up, but thanks to you, the werewolves are back. You're one hell of a kid, you know that Veight?"

"Fwanks."

"Don't talk, just eat."

Food tasted twice as good when you were being praised while you ate.

After the banquet, Master and I went out for a walk. As we looked up at the

starry night sky, Master muttered, “So, what do you think, Veight?”

“About what, Master?”

Master waved her staff back and forth, indicating the village in general. “Your clan is safe, and humans and demons are learning how to coexist. Even the human nations are no longer at war with each other. Moreover, Meraldia’s government is stable. It’s as if we are living in a completely different era from when you first joined the demon army, no?”

“Yeah. I can finally relax a little.”

“Good, good.”

Of course, I knew I couldn’t afford to get complacent.

“But I’ll keep working hard to make sure this peace lasts.”

“How hard must you drive yourself before you’re satisfied?” Master lamented. “I know full well that you have no interest in wealth or fame, but isn’t it about time you started pursuing your own happiness instead of the happiness of others?”

Why bother?

“I’m pretty happy already. I have a wonderful master, good friends, and an environment where I can work without worry.”

I gave Master a smile, but she just sighed again and slapped her forehead. “Curses, this is worse than I thought... I suppose this is partly my fault for relying so much on your assistance. I allowed myself to be spoiled by your competence.”

No really Master, I’m having a lot of fun. This is way better than my last job, where I wasn’t even rewarded for my work. People appreciate what I do, and I feel like I’m actually helping people. Plus the work hours are way better. Honestly, there’s nothing to complain about.

However, Master just looked at me like I was insane and said in a stern voice, “Do you have any idea what those around you think of you?”

Hah, of course I do. They think I’m a somewhat plain but hardworking and dependable guy, right?

“Everyone believes you possess unparalleled wisdom, the benevolence of a saint, and unfaltering courage. You are the demon army’s greatest general—our first and last resort.”

That’s a bit different from what I expected...

“Moreover, you seem wholly uninterested in prestige, and devote yourself entirely to your duties. Demons may find that endearing, but there are many humans who think of you as uncanny.”

Wait, why? I’m just trying to do a good job so people don’t end up hating me.

Master sighed for the third time. “Many of the other important members of the demon army are deeply indebted to you. But because you have a tendency to take on all the burdens yourself, they feel powerless to aid you.”

Okay, I admit I’m bad at delegating tasks to others so I tend to take care of stuff on my own. I’m not really good at managing people, either. I had no idea how to respond, so I just remained silent. After a few seconds, Master smiled kindly and looked up at me.

“However, there is not a single person who speaks ill of you. Every person in Meraldia trusts and respects you, Veight.”

“I’m glad to hear it, though it’s kinda embarrassing to be told that.” It felt good to be needed. I smiled at Master, and a tinge of sadness filled her eyes.

“However, you do not need to push yourself so.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“Umm, does it really look like I’m pushing myself?”

“It does.” Nodding, Master gently admonished me. “You run from battlefield to battlefield like a man possessed, always throwing yourself into danger. It’s as if you would be unable to live with yourself if you were not always giving it your all.”

Now that you mention it, you’ve got a point. I guess my bad habits from my past life carried over.

Frowning, I scratched my head. “Sorry. I guess I just feel uneasy if I’m not constantly proving my worth to others.”

Exasperated, Master tapped her shoulder with her staff.

“You have long since proved your worth to the entire world. If everyone has to work as hard as you just to be worth anything, then I’m afraid there’s nothing but worthless people within the demon army.” Master gave me a concerned look. “Just what is it that terrifies you so? Were you to retire today and live out the rest of your days in indolent luxury, not a single person would blame you. You would still be one of history’s greatest Champions.”

“I guess it just doesn’t really feel like that to me...”

“You really are a handful, you know that? If nothing else, know that I, the Demon Lord, believe you have already accomplished more than enough. If you live your life in such a hurry, you’ll end up following in Friedensrichter’s footsteps.”

Master’s expression grew stern.

“That man pushed himself far too hard as well. He fought tirelessly, spurred on by the belief that the righteousness of his cause would only be recognized if he possessed the might to back up his words.” She looked up at the night sky and wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye. “I will not allow you to share his fate.”

“Master...” I felt my chest tighten.

Her eyes still a little red, Master smiled wanly at me. “So please, let yourself relax. Stop running blindly forward and take some time to see what’s behind you as well.”

“What’s behind me, huh?”

The only thing behind me was a past life that I detested. *In the end, I guess I’m still trapped by the chains of my past life.* Somewhere in the depths of my heart, I still believed I wasn’t allowed to rest, but it was that very belief that had led to my first death. I knew I had to break free from this curse eventually, or I’d suffer for it again.

I nodded solemnly to Master. “I’ll take your words to heart.”

“Did you not hear anything I said? It is that exact serious attitude of yours I

want you to change.” Sighing, Master patted me on the shoulder. “Well, no matter. If people could change who they were at the drop of a hat, life would be so much easier. I am going to return to the others, but feel free to do as you please.”

Floating up into the air, Master bobbed back to the town hall.

Left alone with my thoughts, I looked up at the night sky. Because there was no electricity in this world yet, the stars were clearly visible. In a small town like this there weren't many torches lit at night either, and the stars were so bright they were almost blinding. It felt as though I could reach out and grab them if I wanted. But though this sky was a far cry from the one visible in Japan, it reminded me of my past life. For a moment, it felt as though I'd been transported back to my old world, and I was still living my old life.

Reflexively, I muttered in Japanese, “Ahhh, it's already so late...”

Oof, that phrase brings back a lot of bad memories. I casually waved up at the stars, thinking back to Tokyo's night sky. I'd been reborn as a new person, and I was living every day to the fullest. If possible I would have liked to tell my family and friends from my old life that I was much happier now. However, my past life was in a place far beyond the stars above. No matter how much I wanted to, I'd never be able to talk to my old family or friends again. *But so what?*

“Tomorrow's gonna be another busy day.”

Stretching, I went back to the town hall to wolf down more meat.

The Lone Colony

“Master, they’re ready.”

I had just finished grilling mushrooms over our campfire. It was late at night, and we were deep within the Demon Forest. I took the mushroom skewers off the flame and sprinkled Krauhen’s famous rock salt over them. Getting enough sodium was vital to wilderness survival. Though, Master didn’t really need a proper balance of minerals and vitamins to survive. She had long since passed the boundary of life and death and was more a giant mass of mana than a properly living creature. Right now, she was in the middle of setting up our campsite.

“It smells delicious.”

“Master, the net is sagging.”

“I know.”

She had spread a magical rug over the soft ground of our campsite and was currently in the process of rigging a magical net over us. While that sounded impressive, she was basically just making a mosquito net. Convenient though it was, she was hardly doing anything earth-shattering.

“Anyway, let’s eat dinner first.”

I piled some mushrooms and deer meat that I’d grilled earlier onto a plate of leaves and brought it to Master. She sat with her back straight in front of the food, her legs folded neatly beneath her. Ages might have passed, but she still retained a lot of the habits she’d learned during her time as an Old Dynasty princess.

“Mmmm, grilled food really whets one’s appetite.”

“It must be nice, being able to get full off of just mushrooms.”

Werewolves were unable to properly digest mushrooms. This was true for humans to a certain extent too, but werewolves couldn’t get any calories from

them at all. We practically needed meat to get enough energy to survive. I dug into my deer thigh, relishing the taste of animal flesh.

“Man, meat’s the best...”

“It must be difficult, needing so much meat just to survive.”

“I’ve had to transform every day since we started exploring, so I’ve been expending more energy than usual too. It’s gotten to the point where I could eat a whole deer in three days.”

“Hrmm, even the largest carnivorous beasts rarely eat that much.”

Transforming drained a lot of mana and a lot of protein. If I wanted to keep transforming constantly, I needed to eat a ton and get plenty of sleep. Werewolves were one of the strongest demon species, but we paid the price in inefficient energy consumption.

Frowning, Master muttered, “Perhaps I should be using my magic to hunt after all then.”

“If you’re stuck hunting for me, you’ll have less time for your research. No one’s ever investigated this deep into the forest before, so it’d be a waste if you couldn’t make the most of your time.”

It was commonly believed that the forest west of Meraldia was demon territory. But the deeper you went into the forest, the more dangerous the monsters became, so even demons didn’t dwell this far in. Master was almost certainly the first researcher to set foot in this region. Someone of her caliber would surely be able to learn a great deal from the ecology of the area. Honestly, I was excited to see what discoveries she would make.

Just then, I sensed an unfamiliar presence in the vicinity. Whatever it was, it had an unnaturally high density of mana. At the same time, the overwhelming scent of *mushrooms*, of all things, filled the clearing. *What’s going on?*

“Master.”

“Mmm.”

I got to my feet, and Master’s mana enveloped me. She was using her strengthening magic on me.

“Something’s weird. The same smell’s coming from all directions. Are we surrounded by one giant thing? And why does it smell like mushrooms?”

Raising her staff, Master replied in a calm voice, “I think it is more likely that we have been surrounded by a large quantity of mushrooms which possess mana.”

“And they managed to sneak up on us without either of us noticing?” I was having trouble processing this situation.

“Indeed. Never put too much confidence in your abilities, Veight. The world is full of mysteries far beyond even the greatest sage’s understanding.”

I couldn’t really argue with that. As hard as it was to believe, we were surrounded by something that smelled like mushrooms, but had mana. Oddly enough, whatever it was, or they were, an attack never sprung. After a few seconds, something walked out of the darkness. As it reached the light of the campfire, I noticed it was about the size of a canine.

“Hello. You came a far way. Can you understand my words?”

The owner of the resonant voice resembled a mushroom in many ways. A shimeji mushroom, to be specific.

The people surrounding us introduced themselves as fungoids. They had round, childlike eyes and tiny limbs. All of them spoke in Old Dynastic, which fortunately was a language every mage had to study.

“Their Old Dynastic has no accent to speak of. I suspect they have not interacted with any other cultures since the fall of the dynasty.”

Master was already in full scholar mode. The fungoids huddled around us, waddling over on their tiny legs. Their bodies didn’t seem too balanced, and their heads swayed back and forth like a baby who was first learning to walk. It was surprisingly cute.

“Movwi and Vweight, we welcome you.”

“Thank you.”

How are they talking? I don’t see mouths anywhere. Upon closer inspection, I

realized the inside folds of their mushroom-cap heads vibrated every time they spoke. Those folds probably served as vocal cords. *Fascinating...*

Master conversed cheerfully with the fungoids, floating languidly in the air. “We have come here to investigate the depths of this forest. Would you be willing to allow us to examine your home? We promise not to be too intrusive.”

“We don’t mind, Movwi and Vweight.”

“Hm? Ah, thank you.” Smiling, Master started pelting the fungoids with questions, “What did you mean when you said we are distant cousins earlier?”

“We, Movwi, and Vweight, all walk on two legs. We are not plants or beasts. We are distant cousins who branched off from each other long, long ago.”

Hang on. Have these guys figured out the theory of evolution already? Damn, these are some smart mushrooms.

“I see.” Master nodded in understanding. “According to my disciple, Veight, humans and demons were the same species long ago as well. But over time, we developed different traits and became different races altogether.”

You make it sound like I came up with that theory, but I just learned about it in school. I’d pretended like it was an observation I’d made because I hadn’t wanted to explain that I was reincarnated. Sorry, Darwin.

Trembling in excitement, the fungoids whispered, “Is ‘my disciple Vweight’ different from ‘Movwi and Vweight’?”

“Hm? My disciple is that young man over there. As I mentioned earlier, his name is Veight.”

“Is that not Movwi and Vweight?”

“No, no, no. I am Movi, and he is Veight.”

We could understand each other’s words, but it felt like something was getting lost in translation still. The fungoids all cocked their heads at exactly the same angle and started vibrating simultaneously.

“Movwi? Vweight? Movwi and Vweight?”

“Hmm, what is it that I am failing to explain properly?”

After a few seconds, Master and I arrived at the same theory.

“Veight, do you think...”

“Yeah, the fungoids don’t distinguish between individuals. To them, ‘I’ and ‘we’ are the same thing.”

Even though there were dozens of them in our campsite, they all had the exact same smell. They all looked and sounded identical too. From the sound of it, they thought Master and I were a singular unit. They didn’t realize we were separate individuals with distinct names. My guess was that they were like ascidians—individual fungoids linked together to form a colony that functioned as a single unit.

Excited, I tried explaining how other humans and demons worked to them. “Most humans and demons all possess individual wills. They can’t share those experiences or emotions with other individuals, even of the same species. So everyone has their own distinct name.”

“You all have many wills?”

“Yes. That’s why sometimes people of the same species even fight with each other.”

In retrospect, it was pretty stupid that humans and demons fought amongst one another, but the Sonnenlicht Order and the Mondstrahl Church were distinct entities, as were Meraldia and Rolmund. Even commoners and nobles were clearly different groups. It was hardly surprising that various classes and organizations came into conflict all the time.

Swaying back and forth, the fungoids tried to process my explanation. “Then do deer have many wills too?”

“Deer? Yeah, they do. As far as I know, everyone but you guys are all individuals with distinct consciousnesses.”

Confused, the fungoids asked, “Then why do big deer protect little deer? If they have different wills, the big deer can choose not to protect the little deer, and escape on their own, right?”

Oh boy, this is uhh, gonna be hard to explain.

Placing a hand on her chest, Master smiled sadly and took over. “Even if we cannot share each other’s thoughts, we still wish to protect our friends and family. That is why humans and demons of all different species can come together to support each other.”

“That seems... difficult to understand.”

I smiled ruefully at the fungoids and said, “Truth is, we don’t really understand it too well ourselves. But the fact of the matter is even if it means putting ourselves in danger, there are people we want to protect.”

“How strange...”

Yeah, it really is strange. I wondered what kind of evolutionary process the fungoids must have gone through to end up as a species that shared one will. The tiny mushroom-like creatures huddled together, ruminating on my words. *What thoughts are going through their heads, I wonder?* Eventually, the fungoids said, “You are very different from us. But that is what makes you interesting.”

“Agreed. The world would be a boring place if everyone was the same,” Master replied with a smile.

“Rivers would not flow if this world was perfectly level. It is only because there are variations in elevation that we have rivers. And it is because we have rivers that people can invent wonders like water wheels.”

“We are starting to like you, Movwi and Vweight.”

Master was surprisingly good at getting people to open up to her. “Would you like to stay and talk a while longer? I am sure we can learn a lot about each other.”

Master’s eyes were brimming with curiosity. Granted, mine were too. The fungoids milled about for a few seconds, then said, “Yes, that sounds splendid.”

The fungoids—or should it be fungoid since they were technically one entity?—were a fascinating species.

“I see. So you normally remain in one location and move around only rarely,”

Master mused.

“Yes. We spread our spores to grow the colony. But if danger threatens our home, we leave.”

As always, there was a certain resonance to the fungoids’ voices. While she enthusiastically took notes, Master pointed into the distance.

“Then are the fungoids living over there a different species?”

“Those are our warriors.”

“Warriors, you say? So you each have different roles?”

“Sometimes when we spread spores it doesn’t grow the colony. So we make the fungoids at the outside of the colony warriors.”

The only time spreading spores wouldn’t lead to new fungoids joining the colony would be when those spores got eaten by any of their natural predators, or destroyed by a rival colony. It made sense that the fungoids would create a specialized warrior class within their colony in such an instance.

“Warriors cannot grow the colony, but they are very strong. They defeat our enemies.”

I turned to Master and whispered, “I’m guessing the warriors have toxic spores instead of reproductive ones.”

“That seems likely. I am curious what they are like, but they might be too dangerous to investigate carelessly.”

It didn’t look like the fungoids could fight using conventional means, considering their builds. Their limbs were tiny, and they had no fangs or claws. But the fact that they were thriving this deep in the forest meant they had to be at least as powerful as werewolves. They might look cute, but these fungoids were a force to be reckoned with.

Moreover, they were highly intelligent. Their analytical abilities rivaled that of the dragonkin, which were generally considered the smartest demon race. But while the dragonkin were more mathematically inclined, the fungoids’ intelligence had more of a philosophical bent to it. Their mode of thinking was alien to most other species, too.

“We wish to get along with other demons.” With a hint of uncertainty, they added, “But will we be able to?”

Master carefully put her notebook away and nodded solemnly to the fungoids.

“Well, the way your consciousness and your society is structured is vastly different from most other demons. Naturally, your values and lifestyles differ as well.” She glanced over at me. “But my disciple Veight is far more knowledgeable about the trials of coexistence than I. You should ask him.”

“Me?”

Master had no interest in politics or diplomacy, so I shouldn’t have been surprised she’d throw the ball into my court. *That also explains why she picked me to be her assistant.* The fungoids turned to stare at me, and I hurriedly organized my thoughts.

“It’s true that our society is built differently than yours,” I said. “Our worldviews are different, but eventually other humans and demons will come here, just like we have.”

The fungoids started trembling. My primary negotiation strategy was to speak to the other party’s fears, then make it seem like the only out was joining my side. Of course, I couldn’t go too far, or I’d just make enemies. Choosing my words carefully, I added, “The Demon Lord Gomoviroa... who introduced herself to you as Movi, aims to protect all demons and find a way to live together in harmony with humans. No human or demon living under her rule will harm you guys.”

“We see.” The fungoids stretched their heads up and down. *Is that their version of nodding? I guess they must really trust Master if they’re taking those words at face value.*

“But even if you find some of those other races unpleasant or a threat, they won’t disappear. You’ll have no choice but to find some way to compromise.”

Of course, completely eliminating a group you didn’t like was technically a viable solution as well, but that carried with it a lot of risk, and a low chance of success.

“If you join us, we can help you deepen your understanding of other races, and vice versa. We’ll help you get along with everyone else if that’s what you want, and if that seems impossible we’ll help you find a way to live in the same forest without bothering each other.”

Using the demon army to create a protected zone where other races were forbidden to enter wouldn’t be too hard.

“What do you say? Sounds like a pretty good deal, right?”

“It smells like a great deal.”

The fungoids did their strange head stretch nod again. Their body language and gestures were fundamentally different from ours. Honestly, I found them fascinating. I absolutely wanted to bring them over to our side so we could study them more thoroughly. However, it seemed I hadn’t convinced them just yet.

“We need to test you to see if we can truly entrust our future to you, Movwi and Vweight.”

“What do you have in mind?”

Please don’t be anything scary.

In the end, we decided to undergo whatever trial the fungoids had in mind. The next morning, they led us to their home colony. It was a massive fungal growth that covered the roots of multiple large trees, creating a sea of mushrooms as far as the eye could see. *These are all fungoids?*

As Master poked and prodded the fungoids around her I turned to her and protested, “Why are you making me do this trial, Master?”

“You are my vice-commander, are you not?”

This is abuse of authority! Though I guess a Demon Lord is supposed to be evil. The fungoids huddled around Master asked, “Are you sure about this, Movwi? You want to let Vweight do this?”

Master blew on the cup of hot water she’d warmed with magic and grinned. “Of course. He’s my beloved disciple. If this trial is something he cannot clear,

then no one can clear it.”

Well if you have that much faith in me, I guess I’ve gotta give it a shot.

“You can count on me, Master.”

“Good, good.”

Wait, did I just get played? Whatever, let’s see what this trial is.

“This way, Vweight.” One of the fungoids—or would it be part of a single fungoid? Either way, one of them led me deeper into the colony.

“Hm?” There were still mushrooms everywhere, but a few of them looked slightly different. “Are those fungoids too?”

“No.” The fungoid trembled. “They are stopping our colony from growing.”

“Ah, so they’re a competing species.”

“Yes.” The fungoid did its stretch-nod thing. It then looked up at me and asked, “What would you do, Vweight?”

“If I were in your place, you mean?”

“Yes.” It nodded again.

“If they’re just regular mushrooms, this should be easy.”

I could just strip off the bark the fungi were growing on and get rid of them all. That way the colony could grow again. It wouldn’t be hard for me.

“Hang on a second.”

I rummaged through my pack and pulled out a machete. *Wait. Is this really the right answer?* As a conqueror, it was only natural to eliminate rivals by force. But these fungoids weren’t conquerors. They only produced warriors when absolutely necessary. Otherwise, they lived peacefully in the depths of the forest. I needed to approach this problem from a different perspective.

“On second thought, I might need more than a second.”

I put the machete back and sat down among the fungoids. I was a foreigner who’d only just arrived in these lands. At the moment, I knew practically nothing about them, or the world they lived in. Until now, they’d lived side by

side with these other mushrooms. When I'd conquered human cities, I'd been extremely careful not to harm the residents' culture or lifestyles. I needed to do the same here.

"Hmmm..."

I examined the two mushroom colonies. Next, I looked up at the thick branches growing overhead. In plains or copses, small plants that grew quickly like shrubs or grasses had an advantage; but in deep forests like these, large trees were able to monopolize sunlight. Smaller plants couldn't find a niche to thrive. That was simply how the ecosystem of this forest had evolved, so it wasn't a bad thing. This just happened to be the domain of large trees and fungi. *Large trees and... Hang on, I just realized something.* The trees towering above the fungoid colony were a different species than the one used by the other mushroom colony. The two species fed off of different trees. *I see now. This was a trick question.* Smiling wryly, I got to my feet.

"I'd do nothing, at least for now. That's my answer."

"Nothing? For now?"

"Yes. The trees you like are different from the trees those mushrooms like, right? There's no point in stealing their habitat when you can just find more trees that you like."

The only thing I would consider doing is planting more of the types of trees the fungoids liked. *Let's see if that was the right answer.*

"What do you think?"

"Your answer smells wonderful." The fungoids started vibrating. Even the ones still attached to their host trees were vibrating. "You are the forest's ally, Vweight."

"Thank you."

To be fair, I was technically born in this forest too. After a few seconds, all of the fungoids got up. It looked like the ground had just risen up a few feet.

"We will follow you, Vweight."

"I-I see..."

Don't tell me you guys are literally going to follow me all the way back to Ryunheit?

Afterword

Greetings readers, Hyougetsu here. I can't believe I've already made it to volume 8. Around the time volume 7 released my second daughter was born, so I was busy changing diapers and buying clothes. I was worried I wouldn't have time to work on my novels, but fortunately my wife and my first daughter helped out enough that I could fit in time for work.

I realize it's a bit late to be bringing this up, but *Der Werwolf* is meant to be a lighthearted story depicting the tumultuous events of Veight's life. When I first came up with the idea for this story, I'd only planned up to where Veight created a home for demons in Meraldia and forged alliances with the neighboring nations. Meaning—volume 8 would be where this series was originally meant to end. In fact, one of the endings I'd been toying around with was Veight giving up his power and status, and going on a journey around the world.

Volumes 9 and onward are mostly going to be small episodic stories that I decided I wanted to include if *Der Werwolf* managed to stay serialized for long enough. I just finished the web version recently so if you want to know how Veight's story ends, you can check it out, or you can just wait for volume 9. (I'm pretty sure it'll get published, at least.) All the subsequent stories will still be about a Japanese werewolf changing the world through mostly peaceful means, so you don't need to worry about any sudden genre shifts or anything.

On another note, I'd like to thank Nishi(E)da-sensei for his wonderful illustrations this time around as well. We've built up a pretty good rapport now, and I just have to give him the general gist of what I want and he figures it out perfectly. (Though I suspect the real reason for that is because my saint of an editor is putting in even more effort to convey my thoughts coherently.) On that note, I'd also like to thank my editor Fusanon, aka Saitou-sama. I'd been planning on revising the nue fight from the very start, but he was the one who gave me the idea to base it off a raijuu instead. Thanks to him, I was able to make a much more interesting showdown.

I'd also like to thank Koichi Yuuchi-sensei for drawing the reboot manga, which is now on its third volume. His depictions of Veight are perfect. He really captures the essence of a werewolf using overwhelming might and diplomacy to bring peace and order to a war-torn world. Honestly, I feel like the manga does a better job than the source material. Of course, I'm doing my best to write exclusive extras and stuff for it to make it better as well, so I hope you'll all check it out.

There's a lot of setting elements and minor stories that I wasn't able to include in the web version, so I'm hoping I get a chance to fit them all into the published novels. Thank you very much for sticking with me this long, and may we meet again in the next volume!

Rough drafts of

Fumino and
the evil
merchant.



Nishi(E)da



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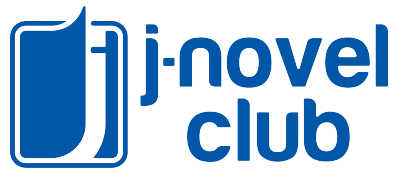
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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 8

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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