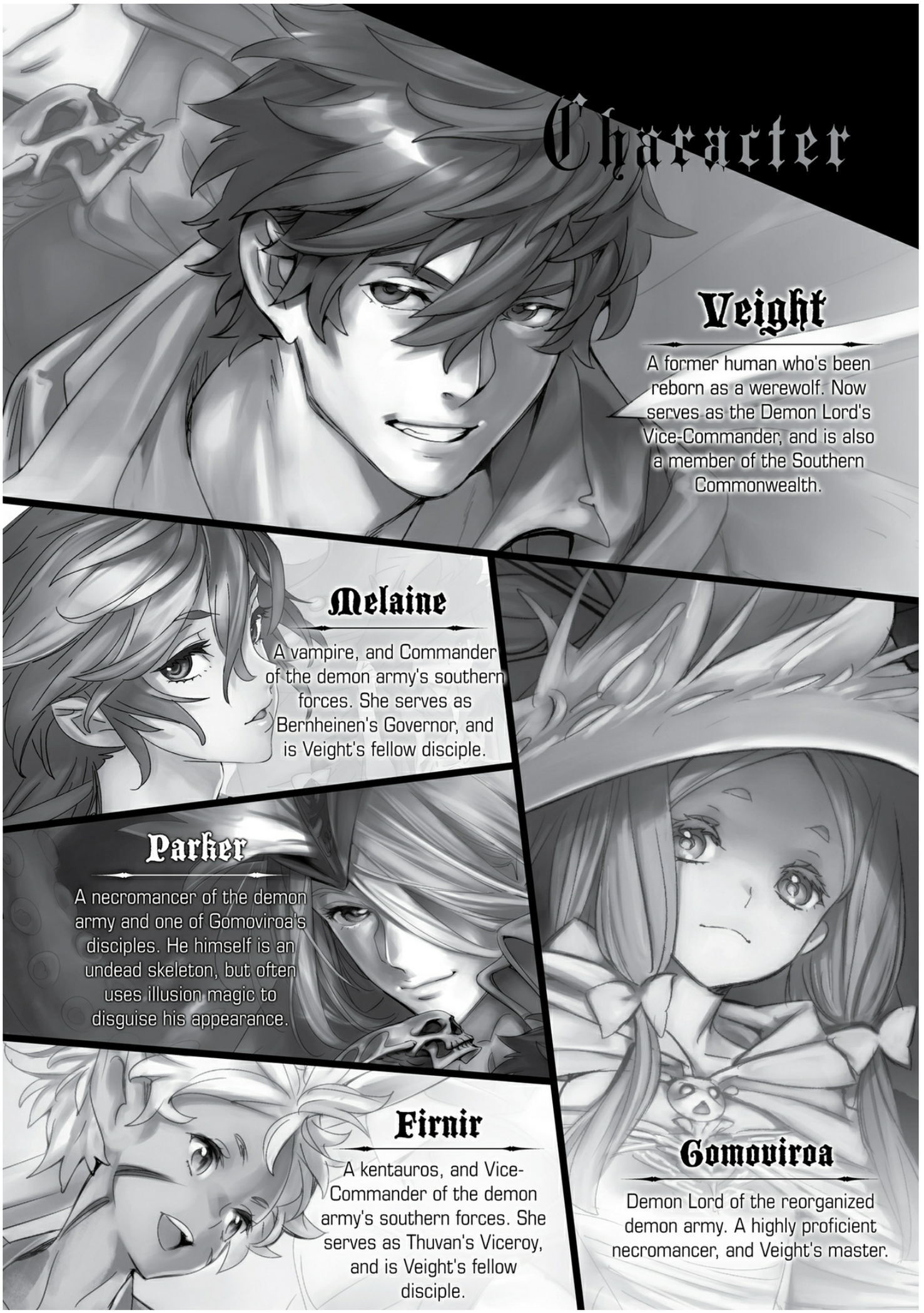

Der Werwolf
05
Der Werwolf:
The Annals of Veight
—Empire of Ice—
Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da





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.

Melaine

A vampire, and Commander of the demon army's southern forces. She serves as Bernheinen's Governor, and is Veight's fellow disciple.

Parker

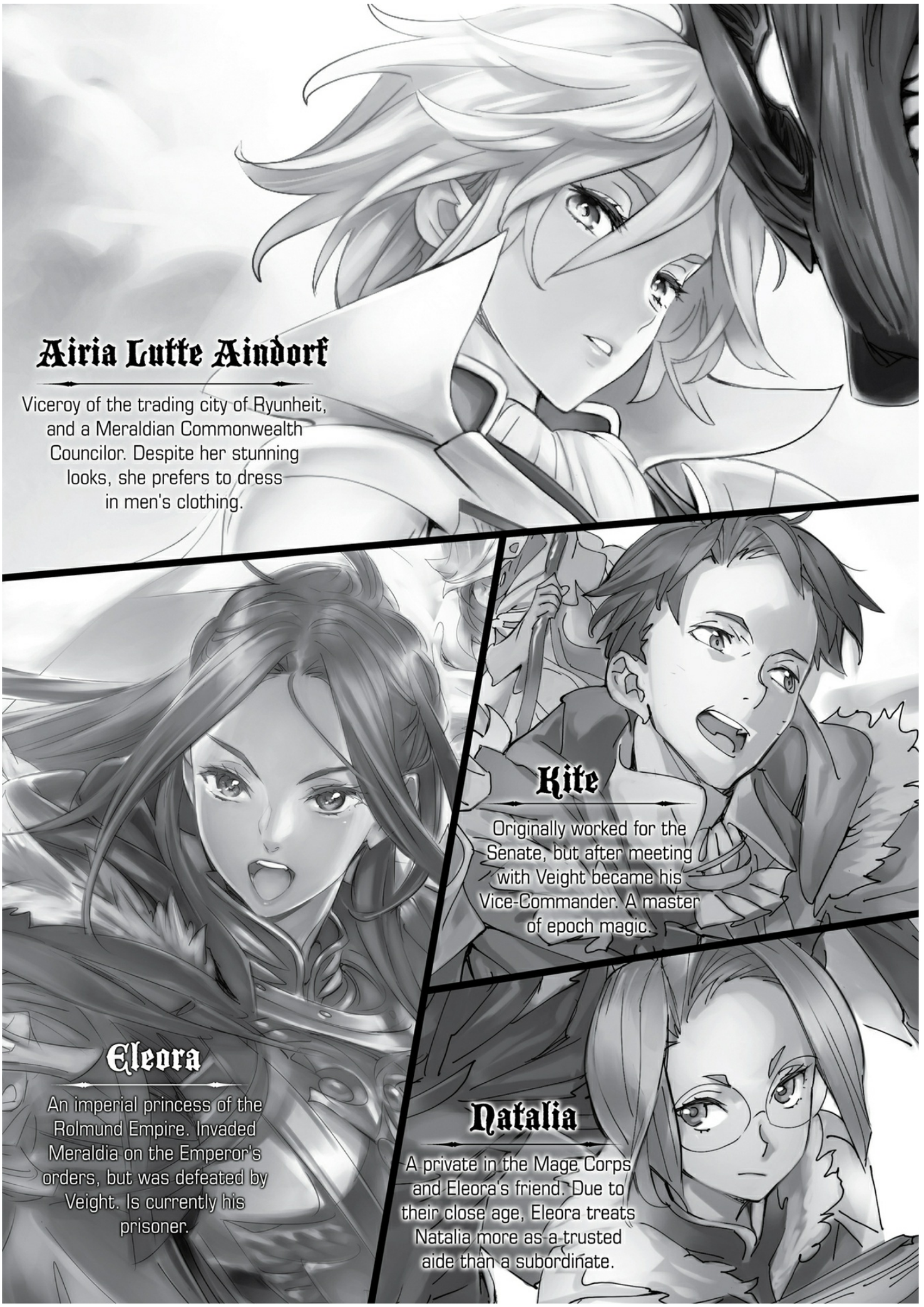
A necromancer of the demon army and one of Gomoviroa's disciples. He himself is an undead skeleton, but often uses illusion magic to disguise his appearance.

Firnir

A kentauros, and Vice-Commander of the demon army's southern forces. She serves as Thuvan's Viceroy, and is Veight's fellow disciple.

Gomoviroa

Demon Lord of the reorganized demon army. A highly proficient necromancer, and Veight's master.


Airia Lutte Aindorf
Viceroy of the trading city of Ryunheit, and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor. Despite her stunning looks, she prefers to dress in men's clothing.
Kite
Originally worked for the Senate, but after meeting with Veight became his Vice-Commander. A master of epoch magic.
Eleora
An imperial princess of the Rolmund Empire. Invaded Meraldia on the Emperor's orders, but was defeated by Veight. Is currently his prisoner.
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.


The Frozen Sea
Doneiks Territory
Castle Kinjarl
Bolshevik Territory
Creech Castle
Sveniki Castle
Capital
Demon Forest
Kastoniev Territory
Originia Territory
Fort Novesk
Windswept Dunes
Draulight
Krauhen
Northern Peaks
Schverm
Bahen

The story so far

The eight cities of Southern Meraldia have banded together to form the Meraldian Commonwealth, a new nation where humans and demons can live together in harmony.

During that time, it is discovered that the sword Veight recovered during the battle of Zaria is a treasured heirloom of the viceroy of Krauhen. With this knowledge, Veight sets out to return the blade to earn the viceroy's favor. As he's scouting the city of Krauhen, he finds its viceroy meeting with Eleora, a princess from a nation even further north than Meraldia, Rolmund. He knows they're planning something, but he's not sure what.

While he's keeping an eye on Eleora's movements, five cities from the Meraldian Federation suddenly declare their independence. They're protected by the Meraldian Liberation Army, an entity created by Eleora to serve her own ends. The Liberation Army's strength grows by the day until they manage to bring down the Senate and destroy the Federation.

Using her newfound popularity, Eleora takes the Liberation Army south to invade Ryunheit. However, her plans are foiled by Veight, and she is ultimately captured. As a result, the Meraldian Commonwealth unifies all of Meraldia, and a new chapter in history begins.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Characters

Map

The Story So Far

Chapter 5

Flower and Wolf

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Chapter 5

Once I finished negotiating with Eleora, I returned to my office. She'd come here as a vanguard of the Holy Rolmund Empire, but her ambitions had died here in Ryunheit. She and her soldiers had become my prisoners. But Rolmund itself hadn't given up yet. The ancient empire that lay beyond the Northern Peaks was still in prime condition, and it desired Meraldia's lands for itself. Unfortunately, the empire was too powerful to defeat in a direct confrontation.

"Now then, what should we do?"

I sipped the tea Kite had brewed for me and mused on our next course of action. After interrogating the prisoners, I had a good grasp of Rolmund's internal political situation. Sixth in line for the throne, Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund wasn't the emperor's daughter but his niece. She was the emperor's sister's daughter, meaning she wasn't even in the patriarchal line. Which was why, officially, she was an auxiliary princess. Princesses born to male members of the royal line were considered chief princesses.

Eleora's family was the Originia family. It was one of the few families in Rolmund that was officially in the line of succession. The current Originia family consisted of Eleora and her sister. Her sister's name was Sophie. Though Eleora hadn't stated it explicitly, it was easy to guess that her sister was being held hostage to make sure she was obedient. The Kastoniev part of her name was inherited from her father's side. It seemed her father had married into her mother's family. Apparently, he'd died some years past, but he'd undoubtedly had a hard life. As I relayed everything I'd learned to Kite, his expression turned thoughtful.

"It's interesting how everyone in Rolmund has family names. We don't have any custom like that in Meraldia."

"Demons don't bother with them either. I'm just Veight, and you're just Kite."

"It's simpler that way."

The only people that had anything resembling family names in Meraldia were the families of viceroys and nobles. The residents of the north were all

descendants of slaves, so most of them didn't possess family names. On the other hand, the seafarers who'd arrived from the south used their parents' given names as their family names, so it was a different system than how Rolmund worked. I picked up a nearby stack of documents and said to Kite, "This is all the information I've gathered on the Rolmund imperial family. I know it's a lot, but please memorize it."

"You got it."

Rolmund's current emperor was Bahazoff the Fourth. Most considered him to be a capable, but mediocre, emperor. He hailed from the Schwerin family, and he had two heirs: a younger son who was first in line for the throne, and an older daughter who was fifth. Both took after their father, and the prevailing opinion was that they too would be capable, but mediocre. In general, the noble families preferred stable emperors like that. *Alright, we'll call these guys the "generic family."*

Next up was the emperor's younger brother, who was head of the Doneiks family. He was second in line to the throne and had two sons who were third and fourth in line. All the Doneiks family needed to do was remove the crown prince and one of their own would become the next emperor. Which was of course why they were the ones plotting the most. *Let's call these guys the "ambitious family."*

Eleora's sister was seventh in line, and beyond that were several distantly related noble families. Typically, the order of succession started with sons of male members of the imperial family, then went to daughters of male members of the imperial family, then sons of female members of the imperial family, then daughters of female members of the imperial family. There were, however, a number of exceptions, so mapping the order of succession often got messy. Emperors who hadn't left behind any sons had introduced some amendments to the system to try and get their daughters on the throne, which was the main source of the exceptions.

I finished checking through the documents, then looked up at Kite.

"You memorize them all yet, Kite?"

"Hell no."

Kite shook his head. He was in the middle of copying the information down.

“It’s not easy to remember all the branches of another country’s imperial family, you know. Were you able to memorize it all, Veight?”

“There’s no way I’d be able to memorize all this.”

All I’d really learned was that Eleora had a lot of rivals. This was starting to give me a headache, so I started pacing up and down the hall muttering, “The emperor’s brother’s family is dangerous,” to myself over and over. *Alright, got it memorized.* Next I started muttering, “The emperor’s kids are first and fifth in line for the throne,” over and over. *Perfect, memorized that too.*

The question was, would I still remember these details tomorrow morning? I passed Lacy in the hallway as I was doing my mnemonic exercises, and she gave me a puzzled look. But I waved her off and continued pacing. During the battle the other day, Lacy had used her illusion magic to camouflage the entrance to the city’s old district as a wall. Thanks to that, none of Eleora’s mage corps had been able to make it inside, which had made it easier to systematically eliminate them. *Okay, that’s enough studying for one day.*

I poked my face inside the prisoners’ barracks.

“Excuse me. Mind if I come in?”

“Ah, Lord Veight.”

Warrant Officer Natalia got to her feet and gave me a Rolmund-style salute. The other soldiers followed suit. I replied with a demon army-style salute and said, “Are you finding your accommodations satisfactory? You’re all valuable hostages to make sure the princess doesn’t try anything rash, so if there’s anything bothering you, let me know.”

I smiled ruefully, and the prisoners smiled ruefully back. They understood the princess well. Even though they’d lost close to half of their troops, the 209th Imperial Mage Corps was surprisingly obedient. When I asked Borsche why none of them were nursing grudges, he’d immediately replied, “Imperial soldiers are trained from day one not to hold any grudges once the fighting is over. We fight not for profit or personal reasons, but for our country; we pride ourselves on being able to put past grievances behind us.”

The fact that he was able to say that with a straight face sent chills down my spine. *You're allowed to hate me, you know? I thought the people of Rolmund were supposed to be tenacious.* However, it seemed Rolmund soldiers considered holding grudges to be the mark of an amateur, and valued order and rationality above all. As a member of the demon army, that was an outlook I couldn't comprehend. But then, we were more of a rural guerrilla force than a real army. Which was why I decided to respect the Rolmund soldiers' professionalism.

One of the soldiers looked up and said, "Thank you again for giving our slain comrades a worthy funeral. You even asked a cardinal to oversee it."

"The Sonnenlicht religion might be a little different here than it is in Rolmund, but we have cardinals too."

Natalia turned to me and explained, "In Rolmund, cardinals only oversee funerals for military generals or soldiers who've been awarded prestigious medals. So, thank you very much."

I was glad I'd been able to show my respect to the Rolmund soldiers.

"If only I'd had an opportunity to talk to you soldiers before the fighting had begun...but I suppose that would have been impossible."

One of the officers, Lenkov, nodded apologetically.

"I'm afraid so. Rolmund's regulations are very strict. If we'd done such a thing, we would have been stripped of our position and demoted to serfs."

"That certainly does sound strict."

Lenkov nodded again, "Indeed. Which is why if we returned to our homeland after surrendering, we would either be executed, or sent to join the disciplinary squad. Our families would be punished similarly."

The disciplinary squad was a special squad that was sent on all the most dangerous operations. None of its members lived long.

"Yet you surrendered knowing what fate awaited you."

To soldiers of Rolmund, surrender was a fate worse than death. The mage corps' battle wasn't over yet. Only this time, it wasn't against us. While these

soldiers were important hostages to keep Eleora pacified, they were also a valuable force that could be used against Rolmund.

Even if it was for the sake of peace in Meraldia, I couldn't afford to bring Meraldian citizens with me on this campaign. Expeditions into foreign nations were extremely perilous—both for the commander in charge and the troops he was leading. Ideally, I'd be able to make use of Eleora's family's troops and what remained of the mage corps to complete my mission. Of course, I needed to win them over if I wanted to do that. As I was thinking such wicked thoughts, Natalia turned to me, her eyes sparkling.

"Umm, Your Highness Black Werewolf King!"

Did you just call me "Your Highness"?

"What is it, Lady Natalia?"

Brimming with curiosity, she said, "I've seen all of the Black Werewolf King plays."

"Yes, you told me before."

In fact, we'd even gone to see one together. That had been quite an exhausting experience. Natalia blushed slightly and finally asked, "Well, I was wondering, which one will you choose?"

"What do you mean?"

For a moment, I didn't understand her question. But after a few seconds of stiff silence, I suddenly realized she was asking about my romantic interests. *Man, how exactly does she see me?* Those events were all embellished for the play, they had no bearing on reality.

"I'm too busy with work to be thinking about romance."

It was an unexpected question, but I answered honestly. Natalia nodded gravely to herself.

"I see... You're too busy. Thank you very much."

She obviously didn't trust my answer. *Well, believe whatever you want.*

After discussing things with Eleora's officers, I reaffirmed that I'd need to

orchestrate a coup in Rolmund if I wanted to keep these soldiers safe. Since they'd die if they went home as-is, they all promised to cooperate with my plan. *I guess having overly strict rules can backfire on you. I better make sure the demon army doesn't end up like Rolmund's.*

Once I finished talking to the mage corps, I returned to my office and found Master loitering around. *Our new Demon Lord doesn't do much work, huh?* Master had finished her daily checkups on the wounded soldiers and was lazing about on my table. She was eating her way through a large plate of expensive sugared bread.

"Master, if you eat that much, you'll get fat."

"You should know best of all that I won't," Master replied with a pout. Her lips smeared with sugar, she stuffed her mouth full of another chunk of bread.

"I have depleted a lot of mana these past few days, tending to so many injured people. I need this food to replenish my energy reserves."

"Why not just stand in a fire for a few minutes?"

Master could absorb any form of energy, be it chemical or heat, so she didn't *need* to eat high-calorie foods. She ignored my question and said, "Imagine how surprised the people will be when they learn that the mysterious beauty who has been healing enemies and allies alike is actually the Demon Lord."

"Ah... sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Master tapped her legs excitedly on the seat of my chair as she chewed on a mouthful of bread.

"I thought it'd be rude to our allies to keep them in the dark, so I told them you were the Demon Lord."

"Wha!?"

"I told you the other day that it was time we started revealing to everyone that you're actually the Demon Lord, remember?"

Master washed down the bread she was eating with a glass of milk and shouted, "I thought I was meant to be the one to reveal that! Don't steal away

one of the few pleasures this old lady has left in life!”

“You never told me you were looking forward to doing it yourself...”

I wolfed down a loaf of bread myself, then asked, “By the way, Master, you’ve rendered the prisoners unable to use magic, right?”

“I have been absorbing the mana in the city, so they should be powerless, yes. Right now, no one should be capable of using magic in Ryunheit without my permission.”

I knew it, Master’s ability to absorb mana supersedes mine.

“The truth is, I think I’m capable of doing something similar, Master.”

“Mmm. It appears you were able to safely inherit a fraction of my power.”

“Yeah, but is that really alright?”

Master smiled gently at me.

“You were granted an instinctive understanding of the vortex during my ritual. Because you’ve been keeping up with your studies, you can tap into the principles that govern it, but you yourself remain unchanged.”

“It would be nice if I could absorb the phenomena magic creates too.”

Eleora’s flames had been pretty hot. Master’s smile grew wider and she said, “As I taught you when you first became my disciple, mana is a currency. It is because it has yet to be exchanged for power, that it is manipulable. Once that currency has been converted into heat or motion, it is difficult to revert to its original form.”

Meaning my vortex powers would only work on extremely specific weapons like the Blast Canes. If I was to put it in video game terms, I could only negate energy weapons. Master picked up the last loaf of sugared bread, tore it in half, and offered one half to me.

“However as long as that currency has yet to be converted, you can absorb it. If your opponent intends on casting a spell, absorb the surrounding mana before they can do so.”

“You mean like Energy Drain!?”

“What is that?”

“Uhh, nothing.”

It appeared I had a new offensive option now. Master finished off the last of the bread, then smiled at me again.

“You have become a werewolf capable of devouring mana. Truly, the title of Weremage suits you. As your master, I am proud of you.”

“Thank you very much. Hehehe.”

I should try this power out next time I get a chance. I munched on my chunk of bread, laughing to myself.

Eleora was still recovering from her injuries, but she was stable enough that I figured she’d be happier with her subordinates around. From what I could tell, she was partial to Natalia and Borsche. Borsche was an accomplished warrior as well as a mage, so I was a little unsure about leaving him with Eleora, though. In the end, I decided to let Natalia stay with her instead. They were the same age too, so they’d probably enjoy each other’s company.

Today, too, I was struggling to memorize the Rolmund imperial family’s lineage. Just memorizing the names of the royal family and its three branch families wasn’t too bad. It was remembering the respective levels of influence each had that made the task so difficult. I also needed to learn who the important figures in Rolmund’s military and court supported. Plus, I needed to know who the feudal lords, Sonnenlicht clergy, and rich merchants were backing as well. This task was further complicated by the fact that all of these people switched allegiances frequently. My information wasn’t even completely accurate, since a lot of these deals were made behind closed doors, and Eleora’s men didn’t know everything.

God, what a pain. I was ready to just give up on trying to memorize everything.

“I can’t do it. Kite, you memorize it all.”

“Oh, I already did. All of it.”

“Seriously? Including all the various factions backing the princes and

princesses?”

“Yep. I was originally an investigator, remember?”

I’d forgotten he used to be a bureaucrat. *A true coastal elite.*

“Kite, want me to make you some tea?”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?”

I was lucky I had such an excellent vice-commander. The least I could do was brew his tea. Just as I got to my feet, there was a knock on the door.

“Open up, you damned werewolf! I know you’re in here!”

The loud knocking was coming from a much lower spot on the door than normal. Kite gave me a confused look. I smiled and nodded to him.

“Don’t worry. He’s one of Master’s fellow disciples.”

Kite hesitantly opened the door, and a fluffy something barreled into the room.

“Die, you fucker! Today’s the day I settle the score with you, Veight!”

A rabbit the size of a canine launched itself at me, its ears flopping around. Its fur was brown, and its ears were on the short side for a rabbit. I wasn’t too familiar with rabbit breeds, but it most resembled a Netherland Dwarf Rabbit to me.

“You look well, Ryucco.”

“Of course I do! I’ve gotta be in top shape if I’m gonna squeeze the life outta you!”

Ryucco thumped the ground repeatedly with his leg. Like me, he was one of Gomoviroa’s disciples. Though he wasn’t part of the demon army, he’d go anywhere and do anything for Master. Kite stooped down and examined Ryucco’s face.

“Veight, who’s this rabbit-looking person?”

“He’s a lagomorphus. They’re a race of timid, peaceful demons that live in forests and plains.”

“This guy doesn’t look timid or peaceful.”

Everyone who met Ryucco said that at first.

“Just watch.”

Grinning, I transformed into my wolf form. Ryucco hopped several feet into the air and shouted, “PYAAAAAAA!”

He bolted to a corner of the room, and wrapped the window curtains around him, trembling.

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-You damned werewolf, I-I-I-I-I’m not scared of you at all!”

He was panicking so much he couldn’t even get the right words out. Kite’s jaw dropped open, and I transformed back into my human form. As I put on a fresh shirt I said, “Because they’re cowardly by nature, a lot of lagomorphus try to intimidate people with belligerent attitudes. They’re especially terrified of werewolves, by the way.”

“Who *isn’t* scared of werewolves?”

Kite’s got a point. Just then, Monza came by with another sheaf of documents. Since she was already here, I asked her to get Ryucco out from behind the curtains.

“He’s got a soft spot for women. Treat him gently, though.”

“Ahaha, sure. Come here, little bunny.”

Seeing Monza’s face, Ryucco breathed a sigh of relief and hopped over.

“Ah, alright, I give up. I was planning to greet you with my ultimate fatal ambush, but it wouldn’t do to brutalize someone in front of a woman.”

You shouldn’t have said that, Ryucco. Monza lifted Ryucco into her arms and grinned.

“I love brutalizing people though.”

Monza transformed into her werewolf form and Ryucco screamed so loudly the windows shook.

“You werewolves are a barbaric race. You could stand to learn a thing or two from us delicate, intellectual lagomorphus.”

Ryucco was sitting on Airia's lap with a towel wrapped around himself. Judging by the fact that he was still trembling, Monza's transformation had scared him good. Airia, who'd come running when she'd heard Ryucco scream, patted the tiny lagomorphus kindly and smiled.

"Is this the skilled artificer Her Highness the Demon Lord spoke of?"

"He's so timid that he's always running, but he's also a really cautious, detail-oriented craftsman. You can put your trust in any magic tool Ryucco makes."

Ryucco's tail wagged back and forth excitedly; he was clearly enjoying the praise.

"Indeed. You can count on me. I'll analyze those Blast Canes or whatever and upgrade them into the ultimate weapon."

No one asked you to upgrade them too. But now that I think about it, that might not be a bad idea. I placed one of the Blast Canes I'd confiscated on top of my desk. Every time I saw one I was struck by how eerily similar they looked to matchlock muskets. Ryucco hopped off of Airia's lap and appraised the Blast Cane with a practiced eye. He then sniffed it and said, "Oho. Ohohoho... Now *this* is interesting."

Ryucco slung off his oversized—well, oversized for him—backpack and rifled through it. He pulled out a few tools and puffed his chest out proudly.

"Watch. If I do this here and take this part off here, and fiddle with this bit here, then clamp this in place so it doesn't come off when I do *this*... You get this."

He disassembled the Blast Cane with the same finesse a sushi chef might fillet a tuna. Even though it was his first time seeing this weapon, he didn't hesitate at all.

"This is a pretty easy weapon to understand. Taking it apart was a piece of cake. Tinkering with this is gonna be so much fun."

"Really?"

"Yeah. This weapon's been simplified to the extreme. The magic circles it uses are all textbook. Plus..."

Ryucco pulled out a lustrous purple rod and hefted it in both hands. I recognized that rare metal.

“This magesteel has a lot of capacity. Which is why it’s got a twofold emission magic crest engraved onto it. It’s also got a redundant failsafe in case... Hey, do you even understand what I’m saying, Veight?”

I’d heard similar words in a less fantasy setting back on Earth, so I could more or less follow along.

“If you didn’t have all those spare crests it’d be more likely to break down right? That’d be fatal in the middle of a battle.”

“Tch,” Ryucco spat, irritated. “Yeah, that’s right. How the hell are you following along though? This ain’t your specialty.”

I smiled awkwardly and brushed him off. Ryucco continued giving me an explanation as he analyzed the various parts of the Blast Cane. Put simply, it was a water pistol that shot mana instead of water. It was charged with mana instead of pressure, so to wield it you needed to be able to manipulate mana. The more mana you charged it with, the stronger the shot and the more shots you could fire. Increasing the mana input also increased range.

“So only mages can use these?”

“Yep. Well, anyone can learn to manipulate mana with a bit of training, but you’ve gotta have as much mana as a mage to get any firepower outta this guy.”

The fact that you needed specialized skills to use one meant Blast Canes were inferior to gunpowder muskets. They were closer to bows. It seemed I’d misunderstood how the Blast Canes functioned. Fortunately, Ryucco loved messing with magical tools.

“Do you think you could remodel them so that anyone can use one? I only need 60 or so, even that’ll be enough to make things easier.”

“Hmm... I’m not sure that’s...” Ryucco trailed off, realizing what he’d been about to say. “Of course! Who the hell do you think I am!? I’m the greatest artificer to have ever studied under Gomoviroa, the great Ryucco! Upgrading weapons is even easier than killing a few shitty werewolves!”

Ryucco stretched his back, his nose twitching. *No duh, it's easier than killing a few werewolves. Anyway, looks like you can do it at least.*

I left remodeling the Blast Canes to Ryucco. Meanwhile, I decided to put the information he'd given me from analyzing one to use elsewhere. Both the Blast Canes and the Blast Grimoire had been developed by Eleora. From what members of the mage corps had told me, Eleora had done her best to stay out of the succession scuffle.

"From a young age, Princess Eleora was more focused on her studies than anything else."

I'd gathered all the important people in Southern Meraldia for a meeting. There were a mixture of councilors and demon army generals present. We all sipped on some tea as I explained what I'd learned. Since she was a toddler, Eleora had been studying at Rolmund's imperial university. She'd started out in the branch meant for children, but once she graduated, she moved to the adult branch. Part of the reason she'd been so devoted to research was that she'd wanted to show to others that she had no interest in the succession and just wanted to be left alone. Assassins still made attempts on her life, but not with nearly as much frequency as they did the other princes and princesses.

"Unfortunately, she was too smart for her own good."

"What do you mean?" Kurtz asked, picking up one of the communication devices I'd confiscated from the soldiers.

I flipped through my notes and explained, "She developed too many useful things."

Such as communication devices that utilized mana resonance theory or night vision goggles that used light-gathering magic. She'd even invented optical camouflage. Everything she'd made was to keep herself safe from assassination, but the military took a vested interest in her inventions. Anything developed by Rolmund's imperial university was considered property of the state.

"Things got a lot worse once she invented Blast Canes. It was that invention that got the Rolmund army to mobilize."

"Why did she make something like that?"

Kurtz's question was a valid one.

"Eleora's specialty, destruction magic, is extremely difficult to utilize in actual combat. That's why neither Rolmund nor Meraldia care that much about destruction mages."

Parker nodded in agreement.

"If you summon up flames or a lightning bolt, they'll hit you. In order to strike a specific target, you need a lot of complicated support spells that specify coordinates and the like. But because it's normally such a pain, our friend Veight here—"

Before he could finish, I shoved a rusk into Parker's mouth.

"Eat up, fellow disciple."

"Hoh heeh hoo he sho shy!"

I have no idea what you're saying. Having successfully concealed my dark past, I continued my explanation, "Eleora wanted to improve the standing of destruction mages, so she tried to create a weapon that effectively utilized destruction magic's firepower. And thus, the Blast Canes were born."

From what Ryucco had told me, the weapon itself was as simple in design as a water pistol. But it was clear that a lot of research had gone into making it as powerful and safe as possible while also keeping it simple enough that it could be mass produced.

"Rolmund's destruction mages quickly mastered this new weapon, and their standing in the military rose considerably. Destruction mages tend to have more mana than those who study other fields, they just have trouble utilizing it for anything other than destruction magic."

When I stopped for breath Parker once again interrupted, "However, the Blast Canes are able to channel a destruction mage's vast mana pool effectively, making them the ideal soldiers!"

Wondering what had happened to the rusk I'd shoved into Parker's mouth, I glanced around. I saw Kite making a troubled face and looked down to see it on his tea saucer. *Sorry.* After Parker finished his explanation, Kurtz nodded in

understanding.

“So that’s why the military couldn’t afford to leave Eleora alone. As a result, she was forced back into the world of politics.”

“Yeah. Once she’d been given military authority, she had no choice but to participate in politics.”

This was something Eleora’s soldiers likely didn’t know, but she’d told me that the military had a lot of authority over the imperial university. Something had likely gone on behind the scenes that had forced Eleora to leave the university and become an officer. After quelling several rebellions, she was given permission to form the mage corps.

“Sadly for Eleora, she was skilled at both research and strategy. And because she valued her men’s lives, she also grew popular.”

Everyone present sighed sympathetically.

“I can see why the other members of the royal family would be wary of her,” Baltze muttered, and the others nodded.

Munching despondently on the rusk Parker had left for him, Kite said, “Not only was she an exemplary tactician, but she was also a genius researcher *and* popular with the people? It’s a wonder they didn’t lynch her.”

“Ah, but if I’d been one of those nobles, I would have respected her,” Lacy said, trying to cover for Eleora.

Unfortunately, good people like you aren’t the people who survive in the world of politics. Airia looked up and muttered, “Normally a skilled person with no ambition can seek protection from one faction or another, but when that person also has the right to ascend the throne...”

“They’re nothing but a nuisance to most factions. If one side decided to take Eleora under their wing and something happened to her, they’d suffer the consequences too. Worse, if Eleora suddenly decided she did want power, they’d be in a precarious position. So naturally, no faction took her in.”

As a result, she’d had no choice but to build her own faction. Students, military engineers, and mages ended up being the core of her base. They were

all intellectual types with little connection to religion. Plus, antisocial as she was, Eleora had little standing with her older cousins and the people at court. Which was why she was saddled with the troublesome task of conquering Meraldia. Not only was the mission difficult, but there was little glory waiting for her if she succeeded. Unfortunately, she'd had no choice but to accept or she and her subordinates would all be executed. In the end, all her plans failed.

"The rest is as you know. She fought us and lost, and now she's our prisoner."

Everyone present smiled sadly. I was reminded of something I'd read in a manga back in my old life. "If I get serious, I could reach S-class. But I don't want to stand out, so I'm staying C-class." Those might have been words of wisdom. Had Eleora spent her life inventing useless junk, she might still have been enjoying a quiet life at the imperial university.

I then called a council meeting and told the viceroys what I'd told everyone else. They'd all suffered under the tyrannical rule of the Senate, so they could empathize with Eleora's plight.

"That lass doesn't have it in her to just sit back and do a half-assed job. No wonder she had such a hard time of it. Aram, ya should learn from her example."

Petore smiled wryly at Aram.

"Wh-Why me!?"

"Cause you take everything far too seriously too."

The other viceroys grinned. However, I came to Aram's defense.

"It's thanks to Aram's quick-witted thinking that we were able to drive away the enemies at the eastern gate without a fight. I'd say he knows what he's doing. Thanks for that, by the way."

"Oh, I'm just glad to have finally been of use."

Aram smiled in relief, and Petore sighed.

"Thanks to that clever trick of yers, our army didn't even get a chance to do anything. I'm leaving a hundred of my soldiers here in Ryunheit. I can't keep getting shown up by you youngsters."

Hearing that, Garsh shrugged dismissively.

“Only a hundred, geezer? You’ll just get in the way of my landing force with that few.”

“Pah, this is why you’re still a brat. Just having Lotz’s flag flying from Ryunheit’s walls will mean no mercenaries will attack.”

That certainly is true. That was the scary thing about Petore, he had influence all over the continent. However, Beluza’s landing force had put their lives on the line to protect us demons. For the first time in history, humans had fought for us. I said as much to Garsh, thanking him and his men. Blushing, Garsh shrugged his shoulders and said, “What’s the point in promising friendship if we don’t back those words up with actions? Besides, you erected an entire monument for the louts that died. Thank you.”

“I only did what was natural.”

The discussion then moved on to how the Commonwealth would assimilate the north. None of us held any grudges against the northern viceroys, so we decided to let them join the council. It was clear Rolmund still intended to conquer Meraldia, and the citizens of Northern Meraldia seemed to already be sick of Rolmund rule. Exhausted from the constant strife that had plagued the region, Northern Meraldia’s only option was to join hands with us.

The Meraldian Federation of 17 cities may have collapsed, but now we were about to become a Meraldian Commonwealth of 17 cities. Students who learned about this period generations later would probably hate our naming sense.

“In the end, we’re basically the same thing as before, just without the Senate,” Shatina said. Firnir poked her cheek indignantly and replied, “Aren’t you forgetting something? Now that we’re a demon-human alliance, we’re way bigger than before.”

Melaine nodded and muttered, “The Senate has existed since the time I was human. It’s strange to think it’s gone now. Well, no one will miss them at least.”

I nodded as well, “Indeed. The true Senate served its purpose centuries ago. These guys were just a historical relic.”

Since they were fleeing a feudal empire, it made sense that the escaped slaves turned to a republic. But before long, the Senate turned just as corrupt as the emperors they'd been fleeing. Their one saving grace had been that even in the end, they hadn't reinstated slavery. Though they'd treated the south almost as bad as slaves, so perhaps they couldn't really be praised for that.

Tired of the gloomy atmosphere, Forne clapped his hands loudly and said, "I think that's enough discussion for one day. Come, let us watch a play and unwind. I'd like to show you all the latest installment in the Black Werewolf King series, 'Ageless Girl.'"

"You're still making more?"

We don't need propaganda anymore. Wait a second, is this play about Master? Forne smiled and said, "Well you see, the plays did so well that people are raving for more. And a lot of demons have been clamoring for one starring the Demon Lord. By the way, the one after this is going to be one focused on Shatina. I've already figured out the title. 'Guardians of the Labyrinth.'"

You're gonna make those events into a play too? Feeling somewhat embarrassed, I looked away.

"Sir Forne, don't you think you're indulging in your hobbies a little too much?"

"Well, I'm only doing this because it's making me money... The plays themselves aren't that profitable but selling art and other merchandise brings in a lot of revenue. Business is booming for Veira's artists and craftsmen."

Ah, I totally get that. You just feel compelled to buy merch of series you like. As always, Forne was a shrewd viceroy.

* * * *

—Eleora's Walk—

I feel as though I have woken from a long dream, and yet am also still inside that dream. This is the first time in my life that I have tasted defeat. Yet despite having failed, I am still alive. Even though I'm a prisoner, the Black Werewolf King allowed Natalia to remain by my side to nurse me. He's more thoughtful than he appears.

“Princess, we have permission to go out into the old district as long as there’s someone to chaperone us. How about we go out for a walk? It might be a nice change of pace.”

That doesn’t sound like a bad idea. We can inspect the city’s layout. We may even obtain some valuable information. Just as I’m thinking that, Natalia says, “Oh yes. They’re showing the Black Werewolf King plays in Ryunheit as well. Do you want to come see one with me?”

“What Black Werewolf King plays?”

Now that I think about it, I did promise Natalia I would go see a play with her. But what on earth are these Black Werewolf King plays? Natalia turns to me and replies, “They’re a series of plays that showcase the Black Werewolf King’s life. They cover a variety of events and all have a different focus, but they’re all very well made.”

“...Tell me more.”

After hearing her explanation, I finally come to understand one of the reasons why I lost. By cleverly fusing fact and fiction, the Black Werewolf King managed to change the people’s perception of him. Without putting in any effort at all, he increased his own popularity and that of other key members of the demon army. The Demon Ambassador Airia was portrayed as a wise, rational, yet passionate beauty who led with a capable hand. Viceroy Melaine was portrayed as a tragic vampire queen, forced to fight against her will for the survival of her species. Viceroy Firnir was portrayed as a valiant hero, always fighting at the front lines to protect her people’s honor and way of life. And lastly the Vice-Commander of the Demon Lord, Black Werewolf King Veight was portrayed as a gentle yet powerful man who supported the demon army from the shadows but was heralded as the werewolves’ Champion.

It’s little wonder that the citizens formed a more favorable opinion of the demon army after seeing so many of these plays. The plays were also a great way of getting people to understand the demons’ circumstances. There’s no doubt that this is just one of the many strategies the Commonwealth is using to expand its influence.

I really was a fool if I didn’t even realize the strategies the Commonwealth

was using. However, my mage corps are unsuited to spying in the first place. They're used to moving in coordinated groups, so splitting them up into tiny units and having them infiltrate various cities wouldn't have been possible. No, that's not quite right. I was just scared of letting my troops leave my side.

Either way, the end result was that the Commonwealth was free to do as they pleased in any city I wasn't present. Furthermore, the Commonwealth had eight viceroys and various demon army generals they could deploy. Meanwhile, I was the only one capable of political maneuvering on the Rolmund side. I should have been more aware of my disadvantages. As frustrating and pathetic as it is to admit it, I've come to realize something. The Meraldian Commonwealth isn't an enemy I could have ever hoped to defeat on my own. I should have nurtured goodwill and forged alliances between the members of Meraldia's northern cities, but I didn't. That's why I failed. I smile sadly to myself.

"Princess, is something wrong?"

"No. I'm just thinking, what a farce this was."

"Umm, what exactly do you mean?"

Natalia is the daughter of a bishop. It's not in her nature to doubt others. If I tell her we might have won if we'd spent more time spying and manipulating people, she'd just blame herself. So I shake my head and say, "It's nothing. More importantly, you said we have permission to walk outside?"

"Ah, yes. They'll be assigning someone to watch over us, but we're free to go wherever we want. I was thinking since you have permission to explore the city too, we might be able to go see a play together."

Damn Black Werewolf King, you must think nothing we can do would hurt you. We're just pawns to you now, huh? Not even a threat.

I leave Natalia behind in my room and head out alone. I want some time by myself to think right now. The lizard-headed demons who've been assigned to guard my room crisply salute me as I leave. I salute back, impressed by how orderly they are. I suppose I should have expected as much from the Black Werewolf King, but the troops he's trained are nothing like the barbarians we've been led to believe demons are.

I step outside my prison, and Ryunheit stretches out before me. It truly lives up to its name as the demon capital. Nowhere else would I witness a sight as bizarre as a Sonnenlicht bishop chatting with a lizard-headed demon. As I'm watching, a demon with the face of a dog and a human child weave between the priest and lizard. Aren't that child's parents worried about letting him play with demons?

All I can say is, this is quite a peculiar city. But at the same time, it's quite a peaceful one. I just stand there for a while, gathering my bearings. Natalia said there'd be someone monitoring me if I went out, but I don't sense anyone nearby. I'm guessing my chaperone either has a werewolf's senses or is using magic to observe me from afar.

As a test, I start heading toward the city's outer gates. The moment I do, a familiar woman draws near. She's one of the Black Werewolf King's lieutenants. She passes by me, pretending as though she didn't even see me. But as our paths intersect, she whispers, "Aha, are you testing me? I wouldn't recommend that."

With that single warning, she vanishes into the crowd. I'm too annoyed by the ease with which she caught me to turn around, but I doubt I'd catch sight of her even if I did. Looks like I'm being observed after all. This town is peaceful, but it's also a birdcage trapping me in.

As I wander the streets of Ryunheit, I ponder why the Black Werewolf King is treating me like this. It doesn't take me long to come to a conclusion. He's giving me freedom of the city because he thinks I'll be more likely to yield to him once I've seen it. Unfortunately, he's right. The people I pass by, both human and demon, look happy. There are no beggars in the streets or corpses in the alleyways.

As I begin to grow tired, I find myself in an open plaza with a fountain. There are a few stalls set up around the fountain, as well some benches. I pick an empty one and sit down with a weary sigh. I should have accepted that I had no hope of winning this campaign long ago. But I was too afraid of changing my plans once I'd made them.

While I'm relaxing, an unfamiliar demon wanders over to me. He looks like a

cross between a human and a rabbit. And he seems to be in an awful hurry.

“O-Oi! You over there! Can you hide me for a bit, missy!?”

Before I can even reply, the rabbit hides inside my cape. I think of refusing him, but I am still a captive here. If I cause problems, it’ll be my subordinates who suffer. Holding my tongue, I watch as three dog-faced demons run into the plaza. Their faces resemble hunting hounds.

“Ryucco! Ryucco!”

“Come on, let’s eat together!”

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

One of the dog-faced demons sniffs the air, then suddenly shouts, “I smell grilled meat!”

“With that special sauce!”

The three demons temporarily halt their search for the person known as Ryucco and run over to a nearby stall. They buy four skewers of chicken meat and walk away, satisfied.

“Phew, I finally shook ‘em off.”

The rabbit-faced demon crawls out of my cape. Context would suggest that he’s Ryucco. After glancing about a few times, he sighs in relief.

“Those damned mutts, baring their canines at me. How dare they look at my tail like that.” The rabbit then turns to face me and bows in an exaggerated fashion. “I am in your debt, young lady. Err... just making sure, but you’re not secretly a werewolf, right?”

“Nope.”

I may be a foreigner, but I’m still human. Looking visibly relieved, the rabbit-faced demon plops down next to me on the bench.

“Then I think I’ll take a break here.”

The rabbit takes a cigar case out of his pocket. With practiced movements, he taps one out of the box. But to my surprise, it’s not a cigar that comes out, but rather a dried, cylindrical vegetable.

“Want one?”

I shake my head. I’ve been trained since a young age not to accept any food or drink offered to me by an unfamiliar face.

“Ahh, that hits the spot. Tastes like home. I only got here two days ago, but I’m already missing it.”

The rabbit lowers its ears and closes its eyes. He’s clearly relaxed. From the looks of it, he’s not a demon army soldier. If he only arrived two days ago, then he probably wasn’t involved in the battle to defend Ryunheit either. This might be a good opportunity to converse with a demon not part of the demon army.

“Your name is Sir Ryucco, correct?”

“Yeah, I’m Ryucco. Who’re you?”

After a moment’s hesitation, I decide to answer truthfully.

“Eleora.”

Fortunately, it seems he’s completely unaware of the battle that took place a few days ago. Nor does he seem to know who I am.

“Did you come here on business?”

“Yeah. I’m an artificer, and one of my master’s fellow disciples called for me. He looks like a brute, but he’s a good man. There’s no way I can turn that guy down.”

He doesn’t seem to be lying. I guess he really has nothing to do with the demon army. Relieved, I decide to ask him about Ryunheit.

“What do you think of this city, by the way?”

The rabbit thinks for a moment, then says, “It’s a damn fine city. Even a defenseless demon like me is safe here. No one’s attacking me or tormenting me. Honestly, I’m kinda surprised.”

“I see.”

It seems harmony between humans and demons really has been achieved in Southern Meraldia. Hard as it is to believe, it’s true. The scholar in me wishes to try and preserve this miraculous peace. And the strategist in me realizes just

how difficult conquering the south would be knowing that humans and demons are truly unified.

For a long time now, Rolmund has been waiting for the political situation in Meraldia to destabilize. Unfortunately, the moment it did, the demons swooped in to strengthen their influence before we could. There's no doubt that Black Werewolf King is the mastermind behind the demon army's movements.

As I fall silent, the rabbit turns to me and asks, "You're a soldier, aren't you?"

"You could tell?"

"Sorta. Only soldiers get that tense. Plus, the way you talk is all stiff, and you've got the look of someone who risks her life on a daily basis."

Do I really look like that? He puts another stick of dried vegetable in his mouth and winks at me.

"Us lagomorphus ain't cut out to be soldiers, and we don't much like 'em anyway. Oh, but I don't hate you, since you smell a lot like me. You some kinda military engineer or something?"

He's not wrong, so I nod.

"Yes, I am."

"Hah, knew it."

I ask him another question.

"What do you think of the demon army?"

"Told you before. I hate soldiers. They're scary as all hell. But..."

"But?"

"The strongest guys in the demon army are really humble. They ain't anything like most demons, but that's why I can trust 'em. Cause they're willing to protect us weaker demons."

Though it's only the opinion of a single person, it seems even demons not in the demon army support it. The rabbit-faced demon points to a corner of the plaza.

“Look at that. The demon army built that.”

I turn to see a brand-new stone monument with flowers and fruit lying around it. The flowers and fruit are probably some kind of offering, though in Rolmund we don’t honor the dead like this. Curious, I walk over to the monument. Inscribed into the stone are these words: “We pray that the brave men and women who tragically lost their lives during the battle of Ryunheit find happiness in the afterlife.”

On the other side of the stone are the names of 19 members of Beluza’s landing force, 4 members of the Azure Knights, and 34 members of the 209th Mage Corps. The Black Werewolf King erected a monument not just for his allies, but his enemies too. I can’t help but be shocked. Why’s he honoring his enemies? What’s in it for him? Is this another ploy to win me over? If it is, why didn’t he say a word about it to me? I don’t understand. As I gaze at it in confusion, the rabbit-faced demon calls out to me from behind.

“For most demons, it’s just common sense that the dead died because they’re weak. But this guy’s honoring not only his dead comrades, but the enemies he killed too. Surprising, ain’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

It really is. Is this normal in Meraldia? No, I doubt it. At the very least, I haven’t seen anywhere else in Meraldia where they put up memorials for their enemies. The rabbit takes another dried vegetable out of his case and leaves it at the foot of the monument. He then brings his hands together and closes his eyes.

“I wonder why we even do this. It’s not like the dead can eat any of these things. But you know, it does feel nice to remember them like this.”

I copy the rabbit. The only thing I have on me is a Rolmund silver coin, so I make that my offering. Inside my heart, I apologize to my subordinates. But I can’t bring myself to wish for my enemies’ happiness in the afterlife. Those feelings impress upon me just how generous the man who built this epitaph must be. The rabbit artificer looks up at me.

“As long as the demon army’s erecting things like these, I think I can trust them. But what do you think, human?”

“I’m inclined to agree.”

“Right?”

The rabbit nods in satisfaction, then stretches his legs.

“Alright, I better get outta here. I got work to do. See ya, Eleora.”

“Take care. And thank you, Ryucco.”

I watch the rabbit hop away. Looking up, I’m surprised to see the sun already setting in the west. I am still technically a prisoner, so I should get back soon. I need to have a good long think about what to do next. There’s a lot I have to take into consideration. I may have lost, but my life’s not over yet. So long as I’m alive, I can continue fighting.

* * * *

“Take aim!”

At my command, 56 werewolves took aim with their Blast Canes. Half were on their knees; the other half were standing.

“Back line, fire!”

The 28 standing in the back fired simultaneously. Of the 30 rotting wooden pillars I’d set up as targets, half were so riddled with holes that they snapped. The reason I’d decided to have the rear line fire first was to prevent them from accidentally shooting their allies. Since the front line would be closer to the enemy, it’s possible some of them would panic and stand after shooting. If the rear line hadn’t fired already, they might end up getting shot at point-blank range by their own allies.

“Front line, fire!”

This time the kneeling werewolves fired. Most of the remaining half of the pillars were destroyed. Only three pillars remained standing.

“Front line, charge!”

The kneeling werewolves transformed and loped forward. Meanwhile the rear line was reloading for another volley. Training ended once the transformed werewolves finished knocking over the last three pillars.

“That’s enough! Good job guys, you’re getting a lot better.”

I smiled, and my werewolves smiled back. At my request, Ryucco had modified the Blast Canes to be usable by werewolves. The term “Cane” didn’t really seem fitting for werewolves, so I’d renamed the weapons to Blast Rifles. Personally, I thought my name sounded a lot cooler too. Ryucco scratched his cheek and said proudly, “You werewolves can only circulate mana within your bodies, but you’ve got a lot of it, so I just modified the weapons to suck mana out of their wielder.”

I turned to him and asked, “Just to make sure, but you can load up to two shots at once, right?”

“Yeah. They’ll suck enough mana initially to fire two shots at that level of power. But for your werewolves, it’ll take ‘em...from breakfast till lunch before they’ve recovered enough mana to fire another shot.”

A few hours, huh? Since they only got two shots to start with, it’d be difficult to fight consecutive battles with these.

“You can’t increase their shot count at all?”

“I can, but then they’ll be so exhausted they’ll barely have the energy to transform.”

For us werewolves, our human form was our energy saving mode. It also helped us blend in with human society, so we’d evolved to only transform when necessary. Contrary to popular belief, werewolves weren’t a super strong race that also had the ability to transform, but rather a normally docile race that only fought when absolutely necessary. Our base energy reserves weren’t that high, so if we put too much into the Blast Rifles, we’d have none left to transform.

But at least now my werewolves had a way to fight at long range. Plus being able to fight without transforming would come in handy for future planning.

I smiled in relief, and Ryucco tugged at my cape.

“Oi, aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Oh yeah, the reward. Don’t worry, the demon army’ll pay you.”

Ryucco sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

“This is why I can’t stand werewolves. That’s not what I’m talking about, you big lug. Here.”

Stretching as high as he could, Ryucco held out an apple.

“Is this for me?”

“No, you blithering moron!”

Irked, Ryucco started thumping the ground. *Oh yeah, now I remember.*

“Could it be you want that?”

“Finally, you get it! Now hurry up!”

I took out a knife and sliced the apple into eight pieces. I then made a few incisions into the skins of the pieces, making them look like little bunnies. I’d first made them for Ryucco back when we were both studying at Master’s place. He’d kept his distance from me, so I’d made them in the hopes he’d open up a little. The first time he’d seen them, he’d been so excited he’d hopped around the room for a full hour. It seemed cutting apples into bunny shapes wasn’t a custom that existed in this world. Meaning I might go down in history as the inventor of the bunny apple. *It makes me kinda happy knowing that.*

“Is this good?”

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted. Now hand them over.”

Ryucco hopped into the air, pawing at the apple slices. I put them on a plate and handed them to him. He sat down on the spot and started staring at the apples with great intensity.

“Hoooh... They’re beautiful...so, so beautiful...”

“Hey, Ryucco, why do you always ask me every time? You can make them yourself too, can’t you?”

Biting into one of the slices, Ryucco shook his head in exasperation.

“You just don’t get it, you ignorant werewolf! They’re that much tastier when someone else makes ‘em for you!”

“Really?”

Well as long as he’s happy, I’m happy. Ryucco had a foul mouth, but he was

always helping me out, so the least I could do was cut him some apples.

Of the Blast Canes I'd confiscated from Eleora's troops, I'd had 60 or so modified into Blast Rifles. Modifying one was already quite a feat, so I was amazed Ryucco managed to do all 60. The job was made a little easier by the fact that the design for the Blast Canes was relatively simple, but by the end of the project, I often found Ryucco dozing off in his chair, a carrot dangling from his mouth.

Grateful to my fellow disciple, I continued training my werewolves. Unfortunately, everything I knew about guns came from video games, movies, and airsoft, so I wasn't sure what the best way to train them was. I could have asked the mage corps to help out, but most of them were either cavalry or snipers, so they used their weapons in a different way than us. More importantly, the mere existence of these modified Blast Rifles was classified information. While I was planning on enlisting the 209th Imperial Mage Corps' help temporarily, I wasn't going to divulge military secrets to them.

So in the end, I was stuck devising a way to train the werewolves on my own. *I guess even if my training methods aren't the best, the Blast Rifles are powerful enough that it doesn't matter.*

"Ryucco, is that other thing I asked for usable yet?"

Ryucco stared sadly down at the last apple slice and nodded.

"It can fire just fine. But I'm worried about the axle's stability, so I've asked Jerrick to smith me a new one."

I was staring at something that resembled a cannon. It had been made by sticking six Blast Rifles together and was effectively a Gatling gun. Mages like me could freely control their mana, so we could reload a Blast Rifle faster and more often. I'd asked Ryucco to make me something more powerful so I could provide covering fire.

Charging up six Blast Rifles at once took a considerable amount of mana. The combined Gatling gun had pretty good range and could fire rapidly. But I wanted to keep its existence secret, so hopefully I wouldn't have to use it. Kite and Lacy were here as well, and they leaned against the Gatling gun.

“Kite and I can handle one rifle each, and Mister Parker can load up to two at once. But that’s as much as we’re capable of.”

“So could you take care of the last two, Veight?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

Operating it took multiple mages, so I’d decided to bring Kite, Lacy, and Parker with me to Rolmund. All three of them were capable of using other magic that might come in handy as well. Mao was also in the room, standing off to the side.

“I fail to comprehend why I have to accompany you as well.”

“I don’t have enough diplomats, so I figured I’d take a certain crafty merchant along. You don’t look very busy, anyway.”

If my plan was to succeed, I’d need skilled negotiators. Since trade had started to slow down, I figured Mao would be free enough to come. Mao shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose I am free.”

“Besides, you would have complained if I didn’t invite you.”

At that, Mao smiled and said, “But of course. Rolmund is bound to be rife with profitable trading opportunities. And I’m sure to make it home safely if I’m traveling with you.”

“I’m not making any promises about anyone’s safety.”

Why do you trust me so much?

* * * *

—Ryucco’s Grading Scale—

Ryucco stood at the corner of one of Ryunheit’s streets, a loaf of fried flatbread in his hands. He took a carrot and a slice of pumpkin from his vegetable case and wrapped the bread around them. *That moron, why does he always ask me if I want to put sauce on this?* Ryucco preferred savoring the taste of the ingredients themselves, so he wasn’t a fan of sauces. But a certain werewolf seemed to love them. The first time Ryucco had met Veight, he’d

thought he was a human. He'd completely let his guard down, and just when he'd started becoming friends with Veight, the werewolf had shown his true colors. The first time Ryucco had seen Veight's werewolf form, he'd fainted.

Damn werewolf. According to Veight, werewolves specialized in hunting humans, but that didn't mean lagomorphus weren't scared of them. In fact, lagomorphus were instinctively terrified of anything with a wolf's face.

But despite being a werewolf, Veight had been a gentle person. Of course, all of Gomoviroa's disciples were kind people, but Ryucco felt Veight was especially kind. He wasn't like Melaine, who was always fussing over people, or Parker, who was always messing around while hiding his true feelings. Veight was also the first of Gomoviroa's disciples who wasn't a necromancer. His talent was just that great.

But I ain't losing to you! Ryucco saw Veight as his rival, since they were the only two non-necromancers among Gomoviroa's disciples. By nature, Ryucco had always been extremely wary of his surroundings, and that wariness had cultivated a talent for teleportation magic. Even now he was constantly sniffing the air and straining his ears to catch any hint of danger. He was ready to draw the miniature Blast Rifle he'd made for himself at a moment's notice. And if a threat proved too strong to defeat, he was also ready to run.

We have to always be on guard, or we won't survive. Smiling ruefully to himself, Ryucco started eating his vegetables wrapped in bread. The warm bread paired well with the dried vegetables. *I bet if that guy was here, he'd say it'd taste better with some honey, or dipped into some leftover stew or something. His constant yapping's a pain in the ass, but I'm kinda glad he's like that.*

Ryucco had been surprised when Veight of all people had accepted Gomoviroa's invitation to join the demon army. *Does that guy even have it in him to kill another person?* Ryucco had thought. Veight was the kind of person who'd shown pity even to evil spirits. He'd doubted Veight was capable of killing living humans.

But to Ryucco's surprise, Veight had proven a skilled general and quickly risen through the ranks. Ryucco began to worry that his kind friend had been

irreparably changed by war. He'd wanted to see what had become of his beloved friend, but at the same time was terrified of what he might find. After agonizing over what to do for months, he finally came to Ryunheit when Gomoviroa sent him a summons.

Miraculously, Veight hadn't changed at all. As always, he was worried more about others than himself, and he kept trying to take on all the burdens alone. *You really are an idiot, you damned werewolf.* When he'd seen Veight in Ryunheit, all the worries he'd been carrying for the past few months had melted away, and Ryucco had been able to sleep soundly for the first time in ages. And now he was here.

Like Gomoviroa had said, Ryunheit had become a city where humans and demons live together in harmony. *How the hell did that werewolf get humans to accept us?* Normally humans fled from werewolves and hunted lagomorphus. That was what humans were to Ryucco. But it seemed that wasn't the case here. A transformed werewolf walked down the street, carrying a large wooden box on her shoulder.

"You just need me to take it to that corner, right?"

"Sorry for troubling you with this, vice-captain. But all of the carriages were booked."

"Don't worry about it, this is no trouble at all."

An old human woman smiled at the werewolf. *It's kinda scary how nice everyone is.* Shrugging, Ryucco sighed to himself. The hunter and the hunted had become friends in this city. He'd never even imagined such a thing would be possible. *But I guess the demon army really managed it.* Having finished his meal, Ryucco brought out his vegetable case for a small snack. Since he'd had carrot and pumpkin for lunch, he decided to make a bit of potato his snack. *That guy really is different from the rest.* Munching on his dried potato, Ryucco smiled to himself.

* * * *

I headed back to my office with everyone and picked up the silver coin I'd left on my desk. It was a Rolmund silver coin, which was a good deal bigger than a Meraldian one.

“Why show us this?”

I replied, “It was found left as an offering at the memorial I had built. Apparently, the canine soldier in charge of cleaning it has found one there each night.”

“So what you’re saying is there’s someone going out and leaving an offering at the memorial each day. Rolmund silver coins are quite valuable.”

There was only one person rich enough to afford leaving a silver coin as an offering each day. It had to be Eleora. The person I’d put in charge of tailing her had reported that she visited the memorial often too. I placed the silver coin inside the tiny box I was using to collect all of them and sighed.

“Since she’s leaving these offerings for the dead, I was thinking of using the money to pay for the memorial’s maintenance, and maybe hold another service for the dead next year. But even so, I can’t help but feel bad about collecting it.”

“I understand how you feel. The responsibility of using others’ money is a heavy burden to bear,” Mao replied, looking pensive. Parker butt in cheerfully, “A service for the dead? Allow me to assist. If you’d like, I can gladly summon the spirits of the dead to reenact the battle of Ryunheit.”

“Mao.”

“Yes?”

Mao cocked his head slightly, but nevertheless handed me the cushion by his elbow. I then stuffed the cushion into Parker’s mouth.

“Karma’ll come back to bite you if you’re not careful, Parker.”

“Swash jush a jesh!”

As someone who was reincarnated, I technically had experienced death, so I punished Parker on behalf of all spirits.

“Remember what Master said? Necromancers who treat the dead as toys will meet a grisly end.”

“Like I shaid! Ish wash a joke!”

“Some things shouldn’t be joked about. I’m afraid I have to punish you in

Master's stead. It's my job as your fellow disciple."

Necromancers often dealt with subjects that were taboo for normal people, so they needed to be careful not to lose their humanity. People like Parker who'd long since lost their mortal bodies were especially at risk. Of course, he was well aware of that, but if he let himself slip even a little, he was prone to making jokes belittling the dead. Master had specifically ordered me to be strict with Parker. And since Parker's earlier joke had seemed a little too insensitive, I'd decided to scold him somewhat. As annoying as he was, I would be pretty depressed if he turned into an unfeeling monster.

Anyway, the biggest issue right now was Eleora. I'd given her permission to explore the city because I'd hoped it would raise her spirits, but considering where she spent most of her time, I had the feeling it wasn't working. Even the common folk were talking about how a foreign princess came to pray at the memorial every day. *I'm starting to get worried about her. Maybe I should ask Natalia how she's doing.*

* * * *

—Eleora's Prayer—

Since becoming a prisoner, I've gone to the memorial in Ryunheit's old district every day. I was unable to build graves for my dead comrades with my own two hands. The least I can do for them is pray for their happiness in the afterlife. In Rolmund, the dead are rarely honored so lavishly. After all, thousands die every winter. Everyone, even royalty, is more focused on keeping people alive than mourning the dead. They have to be, or they'd be unable to survive in the harsh land of Rolmund. No one has time to pray for their loved ones, let alone their enemies.

But it seems that isn't the case in Meraldia. Here I see more and more flowers at the memorial every day. Perhaps I should buy some flowers myself.

As I'm lost in thought, a burly man walks up to the memorial. He's clad in heavy armor, and has a nearly shaved head. The single section of hair he has left has been styled to stand on end. Going from appearances alone, he appears rather barbaric. Contrary to appearances however, he gives me a proper greeting as he walks over.

“Yo, Rolmund Princess. I’m Grizz, Commander of Beluza’s landing forces.”

That would make him the commander of the unit that engaged my subordinates. I never would have imagined the group that gave us such trouble was led by a man like this. But now that I think about it, his gait resembled that of a seasoned soldier. And though he appears to be slouching now, he’s keeping his center of gravity low in case he needs to act quickly. Furthermore, he’s keeping enough distance between us that I can’t easily reach him with a surprise attack. Warily, I introduce myself.

“I’m Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund, the sixth auxiliary princess of the Holy Rolmund Empire. Though here I’m just a captive.”

“You got that right.”

Grizz smiles affably, then kneels in front of the memorial. He puts a porcelain bottle of wine at the foot of the monument, makes an unfamiliar gesture of prayer, then turns to me.

“You here to pray for your dead men too?”

“That’s right. Sorry...”

There’s no need for me to apologize, but my men did kill around 20 of his. Is it really alright for me to pray for them? Grizz smiles again and says, “Don’t sweat it. Besides, it’s thanks to you that there are all these flowers here.”

It’s thanks to me? I shoot Grizz a confused look and he explains, “It’s ’cause you come here every day that the other people living here started giving offerings.”

I see, so that’s why there are so many flowers here.

“Y’see, they’ve got no idea who you’re praying for. Did you know? People are calling you the Silver Princess.”

It seems my intentions have been misunderstood by the citizenry. I’m only praying for my men and no one else.

“Anyway, after we saw all these flowers, we figured we should leave some too. Never thought I’d ever end up offering flowers to my men. If those hooligans were here, they’d probably laugh and tell me to do something more

useful with flowers than leave ’em on a grave.”

I’m not sure how to reply, so I stay silent. While I know a lot about military strategy, I know very little of making conversation. Grizz watches me with a puzzled expression for a few seconds, then says, “Uh, anyway. I feel like it’s probably fate or something that we met here. I’ll pray for your subordinates, so how about you pray for mine?”

“What?”

Grizz smiles.

“These guys never even got to see a real princess in their whole lives, so I bet they’d be real happy if a princess prayed for their happiness in the afterlife.”

For a moment I wonder if he’s messing with me, but there’s no deception in the fierce-looking brute’s smile. People like him are hard to talk to. However, it’s not as if I hold a grudge against the commander of Beluza’s landing force. I’m sure my subordinates would forgive me if I prayed for them.

“Very well. Teach me what prayers I should say.”

“There isn’t anything special you need to do. Just pray however a princess would.”

“I see...”

I offered a Rolmund-style Sonnenlicht prayer for my former enemies. May their souls be enveloped in everlasting sunlight and their journey through the afterlife bright. Grizz offered another prayer for my men, then got to his feet.

“The battle’s over, so there’s no need for grudges. Right?”

“Indeed. That is what we’re taught in Rolmund as well.”

“Man, you’re one stiff princess! You can lighten up, you know!”

Grizz laughs, then turns his back to me. He takes a few steps forward, then comes to a halt.

“Hey, can you tell me just one thing? Were my men strong?”

My words catch in my throat. I never personally crossed blades with any of them. Furthermore, the deciding factor in that battle was the werewolves and

the Black Werewolf King. The vast majority of my men were killed by werewolves. Beluza's landing force had a lot of troops, and they certainly were brave, but their weapons were outdated. They were clearly much less of a threat than the werewolves. However, I understand why Grizz is asking. He wants to hear from the enemy commander that they were valiant soldiers. So, I decide to oblige him.

"They had outstanding morale and leadership. It was your men that prevented my forces from invading the city. Not once during my campaign in Northern Meraldia did I face enemies so fierce. Your troops were, without a doubt, strong."

I chose my words carefully, but they're no lie. In truth, if such a veteran force had been on my side, I would have had many more strategies available to me. Grizz looks over his shoulder and nods to me.

"If even a foreign princess thinks so, then they really must have been all that. Thanks."

Unable to come up with a reply, I can only watch as the massive man walks away. Once he's out of sight, I turn back to the stone memorial.

"Was that the right choice?"

Who am I asking that question to? Even I'm not sure. However, there is one thing I'm certain of. Though I haven't spoken a word to any of the city's residents, they're emulating me. And I myself am emulating whoever first left a flower at this memorial. I remember as a child my tutors taught me to lead by example. I believe I've done a good job of that by personally leading my men and taking charge of negotiations. But I'm beginning to learn that there are other ways of leading by example. My conversation with Grizz has given me yet another thing to think about. At this rate, I'll have so many things on my mind I'll be buried by unsolved questions. It's time to stop thinking and start acting.

* * * *

Eleora came to me seeking an audience right before my daily morning grave visit.

"Sir Veight, I'd like to talk to you about something."

According to the people around her, she'd been looking despondent recently, but today she seemed in good spirits. *I'm kind of scared now.* The moment she stepped into my office, Eleora said, "Do you know what the social hierarchy in Rolmund looks like?"

I hadn't received any information regarding that topic from the mage corps, so I shook my head. Noting my reaction, Eleora continued, "About ten percent of Rolmund's population is comprised of the noble class. Of that ten percent, most are low ranking nobles who hold no land."

Wait, why are you explaining this to me? Eleora ignored my confused expression and continued her explanation, "There are several dozen noble families, most of which were formed when the republic fell and Rolmund was split into North, East, and West Rolmund. The kings of each respective section of Rolmund granted peerage to their most influential supporters in order to keep them loyal."

Hold on, I'm not following you here. What are you trying to get at, anyway? There was no way I'd be able to memorize all of this on the spot. I needed to call in my vice-commander, the demon army's walking memory bank.

"This seems to be important information, so let me call my vice-commander to record this."

"Feel free. This is indeed extremely important."

As I called for Kite, Eleora fidgeted impatiently. *Why's she in such a hurry?*

Once Kite, who had been in the middle of his breakfast, arrived, I signaled for Eleora to continue. She turned to me and asked, "Did anything strike you as strange about what I just told you?"

Uhh, let me think. I sifted through my memories, then pointed out the one thing that stood out to me.

"You have an awful lot of nobles."

"I expected you'd notice. That's correct."

The only place that had that many nobles back on Earth during the medieval era was Poland. Eleora's tone grew frustrated as she continued her explanation,

as though she were venting.

“Because of how cold the climate in Rolmund is, the majority of our territory isn’t suitable for agriculture. Despite that, eighty percent of the population is forced to support the privileged twenty percent.”

Didn’t you just say the nobles are 10% of the population? In that case, wouldn’t 20% be a miscalculation?

“The other ten percent are the clergy.”

I see now. That certainly did seem like an imbalanced system. However, now I understood why Rolmund wanted Meraldia so badly. They needed slaves to maintain their system. Serfs who would obediently grow food for the ruling classes.

“You can’t reduce the number of nobles there are?”

“As I said before, most of these noble titles have a history longer than that of the empire itself. If we strip nobles who’ve done nothing wrong of their titles, the empire will crumble.”

Yeah, that does make things difficult. Eleora looked at my expression and smiled sadly.

“An emperor must possess absolute wealth and absolute authority. They need to be capable of doling out punishments that strike terror in the hearts of dissidents while simultaneously showering their loyal supporters with lavish rewards. However, our empire is out of land to gift nobles with.”

“So you decided to cross over the mountains and take Meraldia’s land by force.”

I understood Eleora’s situation now, but that didn’t mean I could just give Meraldia’s land up. I looked at the city of Ryunheit through the window and replied, “Not only is Meraldia’s land fertile, but we also have few nobles. Even members of a viceroy’s family tend to have other occupations.”

“Precisely.”

Take for example the Aindorf family which Airia was from. All the members of her family were merchants. The same was true for the families of all the other

cities' viceroys. They were all lawyers, bureaucrats, or the like. Only the Senate had been filled with what could be classified as nobles.

However, that wasn't the case in Rolmund. When Rolmund had been split in three, the different factions had handed out peerage like candy in an attempt to bring powerful families over to their side. Eleora sighed.

"Things were better at least when the empire was first founded. West Rolmund, which won the power struggle, wiped out families who refused to submit. As a result, it took possession of vast swathes of land it could then redistribute to its own followers."

Wait, did you just casually mention a literal genocide?

"Wiped out, you say?"

"In order to uproot any seeds of rebellion, any recalcitrant family was annihilated down to the last woman and child. Furthermore, all of their serfs were slaughtered. There's a saying in Rolmund that goes 'The reaper comes for all equally.'"

"Not even demons are that brutal."

"I'm inclined to believe that. Even the noble families who surrendered to West Rolmund were stripped of their nobility and reduced to serfs. On top of that, the cultures and religions of the other two factions were systematically eradicated. In some ways, submission was an even worse fate than death."

It was true that if you half-assed a purge it would come back to bite you in the ass later. So, in that respect, West Rolmund's decision had been rational. *But if you ask me, methods like that are barbaric. Man, the sun's barely risen, and I'm already depressed.* But thinking about it, this meant that Eleora's methods had been surprisingly peaceful.

"But you didn't harm the families of any of the Senate members."

"I chose not to because I feared the citizenry would hate me if I did. It was a political decision, nothing more."

Was that really all? That right there smells like a lie. You're a nicer person than you let on, huh?



I ruminated over Rolmund's current situation. At present, the empire was a closed nation whose options were limited. The reason for that was simple. The empire had taken the carrot and stick policy too far. Because past emperors had rewarded all of their allies with nobility, there were too many nobles. But it was too late to reduce the number of nobles. There was also no land left to give to current nobles.

The empire produced barely enough food because most of its citizens were serfs. But if you turned that around, it meant that they were only surviving because they'd implemented a system of pseudo-slavery. The only lasting solution to Rolmund's problem was to improve its agricultural technology, but even then, there wasn't much you could do that far north. Even if I succeeded in putting Eleora on the throne, Rolmund would collapse under its own weight before long.

After carefully considering all of my options, I quietly muttered, "From what you've just told me, it's clear the empire is at its limits. In which case, it might be better to destroy it before it destroys itself."

Eleora flashed me the same dangerous smile she had when I first met her.

"I concur. For a long time now, I've believed that to be the best solution."

This princess was way too dangerous. I needed to make sure she wasn't planning anything rash.

"However, if we are to do it, we'll leave mountains of corpses and foster countless grudges. Are you prepared to walk the path of carnage, Eleora?"

"Who the hell do you think I am?"

An awkward girl who's bad at socializing. Seeing my expression, Eleora smiled ruefully.

"Is it just me, or are you worried for me and the citizens of Rolmund, Sir Veight?"

"I told you before, I am a merciful leader."

"So you did." Eleora nodded, then asked, "Incidentally, do you remember the story of Cold Micha that I told you before?"

I don't think I could forget that one even if I wanted to. I had nightmares after you told it to me. But why was she bringing that up now? Trying to look as calm as possible, I nodded.

"You mean that horrid fairy tale?"

"You don't have to sound so displeased. That story teaches important lessons about the harshness of winter, the importance of preparing for emergencies, and the value of self-sacrifice, as well as the resolve needed to sacrifice others."

I figured as much, but couldn't you at least make the ending a happier one?

"Until now, I've believed the choices of the characters in Cold Micha were the correct ones. Because I was unaware that there were other choices and other values. But now that's changed. I've seen so much here that flies in the face of what I learned growing up. Sir Veight, if you were in Micha's place, what would you do?"

I agonized over that question for a few minutes, but then realized I'd had an answer all along.

"Werewolves live in packs, and we have an ironclad rule to never abandon one of our own. If there wasn't enough food, we'd share what we have and search for more. Surely if we all worked together, we'd be able to scrape by. That way all of us would be able to greet the spring together."

I was terrible at these trolley problem questions, so I'd rather pick one of the answers not provided by the script. *Who the hell would want to go along with a crappy question like that?*

Eleora nodded in understanding.

"I see... I suppose for werewolves, that might just be possible." Eleora looked me in the eyes and said resolutely, "O merciful Black Werewolf King, I would like to ask your assistance in putting an end to the sad tale of Cold Micha once and for all. I'm sure that will be beneficial to Meraldia as well, so please cooperate with me."

Eleora wasn't asking for something as simple as usurping the throne. No, she wanted me to help her transform the Rolmund Empire. But if we did that, it would take decades for Rolmund's political situation to stabilize. It might even

take a century. However, it was also true that a stable Rolmund would be beneficial to Meraldia, so my answer was obvious.

“I can help you put an end to this tale, but once it’s over you will be on your own. So long as you are prepared to carry this burden, I shall aid you.”

My responsibilities lay with Meraldia; once the revolution succeeded, I would need to return. Which meant Eleora would be left to deal with the clean-up on her own. I needed to be sure she was okay with that. Eleora smiled faintly.

“I see. You really are as merciful as you claim.”

“You think so?”

By all rights, I should have pledged to stay and help Rolmund, but I unfortunately had too many important duties waiting for me in Meraldia. There was only one of me, and I wasn’t all that special. I couldn’t lend my aid to the entire world at once.

Regardless, it seemed an agreement had been made. I picked up the bouquet of flowers on my desk and got to my feet. I’d made it a habit to leave flowers at the memorial every morning.

“We can discuss the details later. I’ll gather my men and yours for a meeting this afternoon. Does that work for you?”

“Yes, in that case...” Eleora nodded, then trailed off. She glanced at the bouquet in my hand and asked, “What are those flowers for?”

They were just an offering, but I felt embarrassed to admit that.

“A personal affair. You have yet to eat breakfast correct? I’ll send for some.”

“Wait, could it be that...”

“I have business I need to attend to, so please excuse me.”

I cut her off before she could inquire any further and shooed her from the room. Praying for the dead was something I preferred doing in private.

That afternoon, we hashed out the details. The plan was as follows: The Meraldian Liberation Army had already surrendered and dispersed. Meraldia’s northern cities would join our coalition, creating a Meraldian Commonwealth

that spanned all of Meraldia. Rolmund, which had supported the liberation army behind the scenes, would be granted a large measure of influence over matters in Meraldia. On the surface, Meraldia would appear to be independent, when in reality it would be Rolmund's vassal state. Or rather, that was the plan I was going to present to Rolmund's emperor when I went there as a diplomat.

"That should be fine, right, Master?"

"I am not well-versed in matters of politics and governance, so I suppose so."

Master took a sip of tea and sighed. The two of us were in my office.

"I must say, it's wonderful how industrious my disciples are. It makes my job that much easier."

"I can only negotiate so freely because you've unified the demons, Master. I'm sure your other disciples are thankful for what you've done too."

The previous Demon Lord had been both a master warrior and politician, so he'd steadily earned respect and loyalty from those around him. He was effectively the father of the demon army. Master, on the other hand, was a master mage and a gentle soul loved by everyone. So, she was more like the mother... or rather, the aunt of the demon army. Which made me one of the many sons of the demon army. I informed Master that I'd be taking Lacy and Parker with me. Since they were part of the Gomoviroa family too, I couldn't just borrow them without her permission. We would be gone for quite some time, so I needed to make sure their absence wouldn't hurt Master's ability to govern. I also needed to make sure I kept up with my training.

"Master, about that mana manipulation training you've been telling me to do..."

I still hadn't mastered the last thing she'd told me to practice, so hopefully she wouldn't mind if I kept doing the same training while I was gone. Master smiled and said, "Fear not, you have the basics down already. All that's left for you now is to put those skills into practice."

"Thanks for letting me keep working on this, Master."

I needed to make sure I was an expert at this when I returned, or I'd disappoint Master. Fortunately, I would likely be facing opponents armed with

Blast Canes in Rolmund. Magical weapons were the perfect things to test my mana manipulation abilities against. *Bring it on, I'll take all the bullets you've got.*

"Master, who are you going to have act as your counselor while I'm gone?"

The term "counselor" sounded cool but really all that happened when you were in that position was that Master came to you when she was lonely and needed someone to talk to. She chuckled and said, "Fear not. Ryucco agreed to stay here a while longer."

"I'm surprised that misanthrope's willing to live in a city full of humans."

"Mmm, it seems that after conversing with humans, he's come to understand that they're not as horrible as he first believed."

"That was probably when he talked to Eleora."

The werewolf I'd tasked with tailing the princess had reported that she'd talked to Ryucco a few days back. They were both eccentric people, so they'd likely gotten along.

Together with our eccentric princess, I completed my final preparations for departure. In total, I would be taking with me 3 mages, 56 werewolves, and 61 members of the mage corps. We would be meeting up with the 12 members of the mage corps that had been left behind in Krauhen to defend the tunnel, giving me command of a grand total of 132 men. There were also a few volunteers from among the canines and the city garrison who would be accompanying us until Krauhen. Supposedly they'd be helping us with miscellaneous tasks along the way. Though, I had a sneaking suspicion the canines just wanted an excuse to travel. I let them come anyway since I felt this would be a good opportunity to showcase to the north how friendly demons could be.

"Sir Veight, how fares the werewolves' training?"

I didn't want to reveal all my cards to Borsche, so I gave him a roundabout answer.

"They're nowhere near the level of skill your mage corps are at. I finally managed to get them to fire in formation, but really it'd just be faster if they

transformed and beat their enemies to a pulp."

"Surely you're just being humble."

No really, things would just go faster that way. I'd given the werewolves all of the mage corps' spare equipment, and they would serve as reserve members if the mage corps needed more gunmen. The reason I'd done that was to hide the fact that they were actually using modified Blast Rifles, which they'd gotten surprisingly proficient in.

"Hey, can I use this as a club after I've fired it?"

"That's a genius idea, bro!"

Why are the Garney brothers so stupid? The plan was to tell Rolmund that these were the Meraldian Commonwealth's elite troops. In doing so, I could hopefully make it look like Eleora had succeeded so well that Meraldia's army was willing to follow her orders. That would also imply that Eleora had a significant amount of authority within Meraldia as well as Rolmund, which would serve as a useful bargaining chip in negotiations.

Meanwhile, I'd be introducing myself as the commander of this elite force, as well as a Commonwealth councilor. Since Rolmund was unaware of the true situation, they would just assume I was a nobleman seeking to secure my position when Meraldia became a vassal state of the empire. I was also planning on hiding the fact that I was a werewolf. Parker and the other werewolves were going to be hiding their true identity as well, to avoid any trouble with the Sonnenlicht church there. For better or worse, Rolmund had long since eradicated demons from their lands, so they were no longer on the lookout for them.

"Maybe I should ask Melaine to come along and have her turn all of our political opponents into vampires."

"Our nobles aren't *that* foolish, Black Werewolf King." Eleora shook her head. She was riding atop her old horse. "In fact, the ruler of Northern Rolmund, Archduke Vafuk, attempted that very strategy after the fall of the old republic. He was the one who invented the technique for transforming others into vampires."

Your history sure has some amazing people in it.

"He sounds like an interesting person."

"Unfortunately for him, the people noticed even the slightest changes in their nobles' behavior. Before his plan had even gotten off the ground, someone spotted him sucking the blood of one of his maids."

For such an ambitious man, he sure lacked caution. Though I supposed I'd stopped being very cautious once I'd reincarnated as a werewolf too. *Instead of laughing at this guy, I should probably learn from him.* Eleora looked ahead and said with a smile, "After learning his true nature, his retainers abandoned him. East and West Rolmund banded together to form a joint army to eradicate his forces. The Sonnenlicht Order also sent its own crusaders, and even Vafuk's serfs rose up in rebellion. In the end, the vampires were eradicated."

Figures. Rolmund's branch of Sonnenlicht claimed all demons were evil, so the moment Vafuk's identity was compromised, he was doomed. I'd already heard from Eleora how brutal the political battles in Rolmund were. Apparently one noble had killed his older brother and tried to impersonate him. Another had assassinated his father and tried to pin the crime on his rival. Yet another had slept with his brother's wife and used his nephew, who was actually his son, as a political tool. I was amazed people could stoop this low, but I supposed that just meant they were that desperate. The scariest thing was that these were just the plots that had been discovered. There was no telling how many other shady things had gone on completely undetected. Thinking about it that way, it was clear the darkness inside Rolmund extended far beyond my imagination. Hopefully I wouldn't have to stay there long.

Once everyone was ready, we gathered in front of the viceroy's manor to inform Master and Airia of our departure. Melaine and Firnir had come to see us off as well. We got off our horses and Master said in a solemn voice, "Veight. You often toss and turn in your sleep, and you have a bad habit of not covering up properly when it gets cold. Make sure to keep yourself warm, or you'll fall ill."

Master, do you really have to say these kinds of things in front of everyone? You're the Demon Lord, not some old granny. While I was happy she was

worried about me, this probably wasn't the best way to show it. Trying my best to look dignified, I respectfully bowed my head.

"I appreciate your concern. I swear to complete my mission and return safely to your side."

"Mmm, good. Oh, also..."

Please just stop. Melaine hurriedly slapped Master on the back, interrupting her. Before Master could resume her litany of warnings, Airia stepped forward. She seemed to be in pretty good sync with Melaine.

"Lord Veight, I shall be praying for your success."

"You have my thanks, Lady Airia. But fear not, this mission is no harder than any of the others I've undertaken. I'll return before you know it."

That sounded a bit like a death flag, but I'd raised plenty of death flags before, and smashed my way through all of them. Airia gave me a worried look.

"Be careful, Lord Veight. To my knowledge, no one from Meraldia has ever attempted to visit Rolmund."

Of course I was a little worried about visiting an unknown land, but when I'd first been reincarnated, everything had been unknown. Naturally, I couldn't tell Airia I'd been reincarnated, but I still smiled reassuringly.

"Don't worry, I'm a werewolf. The borders of humans mean nothing to me."

To my surprise though, Airia didn't back down, which was unusual for her.

"I suppose not. However... please make sure to return safely."

"Don't worry, I will. As fast as I can, too." As I said that, I realized something interesting. "How strange that both you and I seem to believe that Ryunheit is now the home I return to."

"Fufu, I don't think it's strange at all."

Airia smiled, and I smiled back. I'd left plenty of capable people to take care of Ryunheit in my absence. Baltze, commander of the Azure Knights, and Shure, commander of the Crimson Scales, would be in charge of the demon army. Wengen, the garrison captain, and Grizz were here to ensure that the streets of

Ryunheit remained safe. And Airia and the other councilors were more than capable of handling all political affairs. They'd be able to negotiate with the north, no problem. Since all of Meraldia's viceroys already had connections to each other, it made more sense to leave the entirety of negotiations up to them while having the demon army remain quietly stationed in the south.

On the technological front, Ryucco and Kurtz would continue analyzing and improving upon Eleora's Blast Canes. Hopefully they'd be able to start mass-producing Blast Rifles soon, in case we needed them to fight a full-scale war against Rolmund. If I was lucky, they'd be standard army equipment by the time I returned. After making sure I had everything, I remounted my horse. Firnir and Airia had been giving me horsemanship lessons recently. If it was just leading a horse along at a walk, I could do it. Once I'd remounted, I turned to my party and said, "In accordance with the council's decision, we ride to assist Princess Eleora in taking the throne of Rolmund. Move out!"

After setting out from Ryunheit, we made our way to Krauhen, a city located in the most northeastern point of Meraldia.

"You're late."

Mao was waiting for us as we approached Krauhen's gates. He grumbled to himself for a few seconds, then said, "I've secured the assistance of the mage corps stationed here. Convincing them was a simple task. Though they did say they wouldn't wholeheartedly commit to the cause until they met with the princess."

I smiled knowingly.

"By the sound of it, convincing them wasn't easy at all. Did any of them try to commit suicide?"

"Personally, I don't see why we have to save those who wish to die. But yes, some did, and yes, I succeeded in keeping them all safe."

Mao shrugged his shoulders dismissively, but I knew it couldn't have been an easy task. However, this proved to me that Mao's negotiation skills were good enough to work on even Rolmund citizens.

"Sorry for making you go through all the trouble. More importantly though,

did you get what I asked for?”

“But of course. I even procured a few spares. Though I am unsure whether or not they will be suited for Rolmund’s climate, so please let me take care of them.”

Mao could easily let someone else handle this, but his personality meant that he always had to do things himself.

“Thanks. If you’re in charge I can be sure nothing will go wrong at least. But...”

“Yes?”

“You’re really addicted to work, huh?”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

What’s that supposed to mean? We passed underneath Krauhen’s gates and found ourselves face to face with Belken, the city’s viceroy.

“Well met, Lord Veight.”

Belken had been the only viceroy to remain loyal to Rolmund. It had taken all the other viceroys to persuade him to surrender to the Commonwealth. I understood the situation he was in though, so I’d told the councilors to not punish him for his stubbornness. Naturally, no one had objected. It was for that reason that he treated me with such deference. I smiled at him and said, “Today I’ve come to visit not through your window, but rather your front door. Though I suppose I’ll be leaving through your secret back door.”

Belken, who was known for being strait-laced, smiled awkwardly at my bad attempt at a joke.

“Y-Yes, I suppose you will. I’ve made sure the tunnel is maintained and will post soldiers to defend it.”

His serious nature was probably part of the reason why he’d gotten along so well with Rolmund’s men. Meanwhile, the temperament of the southern residents must have rubbed off on me, since I was now making bad jokes. As Belken walked away, I heard my werewolves start whispering behind me.

“What would you rate the boss’ joke at?”

“Hmm... I’m feeling a light to decent seven maybe?”

“I’d give it a strong six.”

How rude. I’ll have you know I’m much better at making jokes now than I was in my old life.

We made our way into the tunnel and began trekking toward Rolmund. The tunnel was quite long and had taken Rolmund’s engineers many years to dig. And they’d had the help of a magic-powered excavator.

According to the reports I’d received, Rolmund’s level of engineering technology was quite high, with a focus on safety. It was obvious Rolmund had a great deal of skilled researchers and workmen. This would be a tough empire to beat.

The tunnel exited right into the middle of a mountain range. Though it was still summer, the air outside was cold. Naturally, Rolmund was at a higher latitude and elevation than Meraldia, but the biggest factor contributing to the temperature difference was the mountains. There were many of them, and they served to trap cold air in the valleys. In fact, all of Rolmund seemed to be surrounded by mountains. Down below, I could see settlements and cities huddled in the valley. The landscape reminded me somewhat of Japan. Eleora pointed toward a far-off peak.

“Up there lies Rolmund’s frontier fort, Novesk. That fort belongs to me.”

I pulled out my telescope and peered through it. A formidable-looking castle sat atop the mountain peak. It reminded me of the castles they had in amusement parks and looked very similar to that one famous German castle. I wasn’t really an expert on castles though, so if there was a better comparison, I wasn’t aware of it. Unlike the fantasy castles in amusement parks though, Novesk had been built with functionality in mind.

“I’m surprised a princess only gets such a plain-looking castle.”

“Upon reaching adulthood, I’d asked the emperor for a quiet place to conduct my research, and he granted me that castle.”

Sounds like he just wanted to get you out of his hair.

Eleora smiled bitterly, “At the time I’d been happy because I thought being sent this far away would get me out of the court’s political squabbles. I had no idea the emperor was planning an invasion of the south. Thinking back on it now, I should have been more cautious. At least now I’ve learned my lesson.”

I see, so this is what caused her to have such a twisted personality. As a remote border fort, Novesk likely wasn’t luxurious, but it at least possessed enough supplies to comfortably house 150 soldiers.

“Right now there are only thirty or so men guarding the fort. Including them, that’s everyone in the 209th Imperial Mage Corps.”

While that was a reasonable number of personal bodyguards for a low-ranking princess to have, it was too small a force for conducting military operations.

“Are there any other troops nearby that you could muster?”

“My father’s uncle, Lord Kastoniev, is the lord of this area. He’s been given three thousand troops from the emperor to defend our southern borders.”

“Are they professional soldiers?”

“Yes, they’re not militia. Though they do spend part of the year farming, they have all received proper military training. Most of the difficult farmwork is done by serfs and tenant farmers, so they have enough free time to train.”

It appeared that unlike in Meraldia, anyone in Rolmund who possessed wealth used it to receive military training. The lower ranks of Rolmund’s nobility were basically like old-style Japanese samurai. And it seemed even a lord had enough power to command 3,000 soldiers. Meanwhile Meraldia as a whole could maybe field 10,000 regular troops, max.

“He’s your ally, right?”

Eleora shrugged in response.

“Who knows.”

I hate this place already. Fortunately, Rolmund was in no position to send any significantly large force into Meraldia. Most of their troops were needed to combat bandits and rebellion. Even if their forces were free, sending a large

force through the mountains was a challenging prospect, especially since any army they sent couldn't be reinforced or resupplied during the winter. That was the reason Rolmund had avoided invading Meraldia for so long. But now the situation had changed. Thanks to the newly built tunnel, it took only half a day to reach Eleora's castle from Krauhen. I doubted she would betray us, but it still felt like we were walking into enemy territory. Even if my werewolves were strong enough to escape any traps, Kite, Lacy, and Mao weren't. I turned to Parker.

"Parker."

"Yes?"

"If anything happens, can you protect the humans for me?"

He manipulated his illusion to make it smile and said casually, "Of course. As a fellow human, I shall put my life on the line for them."

"A fellow... human?"

"You seem to forget this frightfully often, but I was originally a human, remember? Just because I've died doesn't mean I reincarnated into a different race!"

Yeah, I'm the one who did that.

"Seeing as you're already dead, I wouldn't really call you human either. If anything, you're more like a zombie."

"Why are all you strengthening mages so focused on the body aspect of things!? A human's true essence lies with their mind and soul, not their body!"

Except the mind was just a cocktail of chemicals that could easily be altered. In fact, since I had a human's soul with the brain of a werewolf, I often ran into issues. No one apart from me understood the fear of letting a werewolf's instincts take over my human rationality. Whenever I thought about how much carnage I caused every time I went on a rampage, chills ran down my spine. However now that I thought about it, Parker was an even more mysterious existence. He somehow still had thoughts and a personality despite having no brain at all. *I should probably be nicer to him considering how hard he has it.* Unfortunately, the moment I thought that—

“Oh, are you one of the evil spirits who has taken residence in this castle? I am Parker, a necromancer! I see, you were executed for breaking the rules. Ah, if you would like, I can send you on to the afterlife.”

“Oi, stop helping evil spirits.”

Never mind, I’ve gotta be strict with him.

Once we reached Fort Novesk, I began training for what was to come.

“That’s not how you say it, Mister Veight.” Warrant Officer Natalia shook her head. “You don’t pronounce it like ‘Feh.’ It’s a ‘Fuh’ sound. ‘Fuh.’”

“I see.”

I looked back down at the Sonnenlicht scripture in front of me and resumed reading it aloud.

“Neit, Ivawfeh...”

I glanced back up at Natalia and saw her frowning.

“That’s not quite it either. Ah, I know what the problem is. Your inflection is off.”

Natalia read the scripture in a perfect Rolmund accent. Using her voice as a reference, I once again tried to read it aloud. Rolmund and Meraldia shared a language. It made sense, considering Meraldia’s northern citizens had once been part of Rolmund. And it was the north who had won the Meraldian Unification War. But because Rolmund and Meraldia had been isolated from each other for so long, and because North Meraldia had borrowed words from the southern languages, there were slight differences in pronunciation and grammar. Furthermore, because the environments of Meraldia and Rolmund were so different, they had different phrases, and the few phrases they shared often meant different things.

For example, “like snow” had two separate meanings in Rolmund and Meraldia. In Meraldia, things were “white as snow,” but in Rolmund, things were “harsh as snow.” I needed to be careful of what I said. While I could make conversation with the people of Rolmund easily enough, I needed to understand the nuances of their dialect if I wanted to avoid making any

blunders while negotiating. This was something Eleora had taught me. Before, she'd said, "I am well aware of my shortcomings. My biggest weakness is my inability to win enemies over. So I'll be relying on you for that."

When she was in Meraldia, Eleora had always made sure to use Meraldia's style of speech to avoid being misunderstood. Likewise, to someone of Rolmund, Meraldia's dialect sounded something like this: "Didja know? I 'ready figured out why ahm bad. Da ting I suck at most's persuadin' folk, ya hear. Y'all er better at that den me, so take care of it for me, luv."

I'd mixed a bunch of dialects in there together, but that was basically how Meraldian speech sounded to people of Rolmund. Naturally, there was no way I could negotiate sounding like that. Eleora's mage corps was made up of elites who'd all mastered Meraldian dialects for the upcoming invasion. So it was both fair and completely possible for me to learn Rolmund's dialect in exchange.

There did exist magic to translate languages, but since my mother tongue was Japanese, all the translations came out reading like garbled machine translations. The one time I'd tested it out, the sentence it produced caused Natalia to blush and run out of the room.

The people who were currently participating in Natalia's Rolmundese lecture were me, Kite, Mao, and Fahn. Lacy had given up on the first day, while Parker had mastered the language in just a few sessions. Though he looked like a moron, my fellow disciple was quite the genius. There was a reason he was the only one of Master's disciples to have crossed the final threshold. He definitely looked like a moron, though.

At the moment, Natalia was correcting Fahn's vocabulary.

"Fahn, you can't use words like slaughter. Nobles tend to be disgusted by words like that."

That seems more like a human reaction than a noble reaction. Slaughter wasn't a word that saw much everyday use in Meraldia either. It was about time to tame Fahn's wilder side.

Language wasn't the only difference between Meraldia and Rolmund. Rolmund had different customs as well. For example, Rolmund had different table manners. Eleora was personally teaching us how to integrate into

Rolmund's culture.

"Rolmund's court etiquette is similar to Meraldia's but is needlessly more complicated."

Needlessly, huh? Eleora snorted derisively and deftly picked up a knife and fork.

"In order to reinforce social hierarchy, court etiquette has become subdivided by class. Furthermore, the more complex rites you know, the more dignity you're perceived to have."

Even simple things like where you placed your knife was different depending on whether you were a priest or a knight. And the direction it faced when you put it down depended on your rank and the rank of those around you. If you placed your knife in the same way as someone with higher status, you'd be mocked. Depending on the situation, you could even be executed.

God, this country sucks. Fortunately, I was claiming to be a Meraldian noble, so people couldn't complain too much about what I did. All of these customs and gestures were for reinforcing hierarchy within Rolmund, so foreign nobility was mostly exempt.

"Sure would be nice if you could at least relax when eating dinner."

Upon hearing my grumbling, Eleora put a hand to her chin.

"Well, you're not required to follow the proper rules during a banquet. I suppose that's why nobles hold so many banquets."

In that case, the only meals I'm showing up for are banquets. However, Eleora's next words dampened my enthusiasm.

"Alas, I wouldn't recommend eating at banquets. Though rare, people have been poisoned at them before."

God I hate this country.

"So are most dinners also meetings?"

"You could say they are *just* meetings. It's standard practice to hand your plate over to a server and get a new one. Likewise with your glass. But even then, most people don't risk eating at a formal event and take their meals

beforehand.”

So you guys are just wasting all the food your serfs slave away to grow. How utterly pointless. However, the Rolmund social event I was most dreading was the ball.

“Rolmund nobles do not dance at balls. They consider it improper and uncouth.”

These guys are a real stick in the mud. However, it seemed commoners always danced at festivals, as they had no other form of entertainment available to them. The real reason nobles didn’t dance was to differentiate them from commoners. Either way, I was relieved to learn I wouldn’t actually have to dance at any Rolmund balls.

* * * *

—Veight’s Letter to Airia: 1—

Dear Airia,

We have successfully arrived in the land of Rolmund. Currently, we are staying at Princess Eleora’s castle, Fort Novesk. For the present, we are learning Rolmund’s customs and language from the mage corps. As one would expect of a country with a history as long as Rolmund’s, its culture is deep and complex. I must say, I find myself fascinated by it. I’ll tell you all about it when I return home to Ryunheit.

How are things on your end? While East Rolmund’s climate is milder than the empire’s other regions, it’s even colder than Krauhen here. In Ryunheit, temperatures only dip this low in late autumn. That being said, the days are growing colder in Ryunheit as well, so make sure to stay warm. I pray you do not fall ill.

Sincerely, Veight.

* * * *

Once I finished penning my letter, I resumed studying Rolmund’s culture and language. I needed to work hard to cultivate my persona as a mysterious foreign noble. The unknown was capable of manipulating people’s emotions in

all sorts of ways. The reason why demons were so feared by humans was that humans didn't know anything about us.

While I was busy learning, Eleora was focusing on camouflaging our movements. In order to make it seem as though her campaign to conquer Meraldia had been a success, she needed to do a lot of preliminary things. Eleora was the mastermind in charge of the deception, while we Meraldians simply signed whatever documents she needed us to. As I'd expected, she was quite used to political maneuvering. Her being so skilled made my job easier. It took only ten days for Eleora to finish all of her preparations.

"His Majesty's condition has improved somewhat, so we have permission to report to him directly. It took a while to sort things out since the crown prince doesn't want us to meet him."

"Well done, Eleora. This is a good opportunity to build connections inside the royal palace."

I was a little apprehensive about appearing in public so soon, but we needed to hurry before the emperor died. We had to gather as many allies as possible while he was still alive. My palace debut would also be a good opportunity to learn more about Rolmund's internal situation.

* * * *

—Airia's Reply—

Dear Veight,

Thank you for taking the time to write to me despite how busy you must no doubt be. When I saw your straight, sharp penmanship, I felt as though you'd returned to my side for a moment. By your account, Rolmund is as cold as the rumors claim, so I'm grateful you remain healthy. Naturally, I'm worried about the rest of the expedition party as well, but seeing as you've not said anything about them, they must be well.

Back here, Sir Ryucco has made great progress in analyzing and upgrading our new weapons. As the details are classified information, I cannot tell you much more in this letter, but he has managed to implement many of your suggestions. There is much regarding domestic and international affairs that I

wish to speak to you about, but as there is a chance this letter may be intercepted, I shall refrain from doing so here. Fortunately, everyone is in good health, including the councilors and the residents of the demon capital. I shall take care of things here in Ryunheit, so worry not about us. Focus on your mission, Veight. Everyone here is praying for your safe return.

* * * *

"She sure replied fast..."

I slipped Airia's letter into my breast pocket and remounted my horse. We were getting ready to depart Fort Novesk. It would be me, my werewolves, and Eleora going on this expedition, while her mage corps stayed behind to defend the fort. I wasn't planning on getting into any battles, so the fewer troops I took with me, the better. If I brought too many, people would start to suspect I was scheming something. For that reason, Eleora was only taking Borsche and Natalia with her.

Fort Novesk lay on the southern tip of what had once been Eastern Rolmund. On the other hand, the imperial capital Schwerin was at the center of Western Rolmund. The capital naturally was named after the royal family that ruled it. Regardless, it lay a good distance away.

Various lords ruled the territories between Novesk and Schwerin, and we'd have to pass through at least one of their lands on our way to the capital. Since Eleora was an imperial princess, courtesy demanded that we pay a visit to whoever's lands we passed through. Naturally, that would mean we'd need to dine with the local lords and possibly spend the night at their castle. If we refused, it would make them look bad. However, this was a land in which people were poisoned on a daily basis, so I wouldn't be able to relax in a stranger's castle.

We'd be spending our first night with Eleora's uncle, Lord Kastoniev. Lord Kastoniev's castle was built on a wide, empty plain and surrounded by a deep moat. Though it had been built for war, few soldiers guarded it and there was a laid-back atmosphere around the castle.

"Your Highness Eleora, congratulations on your successful campaign. Come in and rest. You must be tired."

The man who came to greet us at the castle gates was Lord Kastoniev himself. He seemed like a good-natured, middle-aged man. Apparently, there was a ten-year difference between him and Eleora's father, and he'd doted on Eleora's father quite a bit in their youth. *I guess it should have been obvious, but it seems even among Rolmund's nobles there are people with proper human emotions.* But despite the warm welcome, Eleora's tone was formal.

"It's only thanks to you keeping my lands safe in my absence that I was able to fight without worry, Lord Kastoniev. I'm deeply grateful for your help."

I didn't see why she had to be so formal with her own uncle, but it wasn't my place to butt into other people's family affairs. While Lord Kastoniev prepared a feast for us, I asked Kite, Lacy, and Parker to gather information. There was a lot I wanted to know about this empire, but the most important thing was to find out how the bulk of the empire's citizens, in other words its slaves, lived. Even if they were slaves, it was important to know how they were treated. And more importantly, what they thought of their lives.

After lunch, I sought out Kite and asked him what he'd found.

"Almost all of the slaves around here are serfs. There are few things differentiating them from free men, but there are some restrictions they need to abide by."

Serfs had to live in the villages their lords told them to, and they could take up no trade other than farming. They were unable to move and could not choose their career. Personally, I'd hate a life like that. However, in return for being forced to live a simple life, they were guaranteed food and shelter. During years where the harvest was bad, the serfs' lord would provide them food. A feudal lord's serfs were his main source of income, so naturally he wouldn't want them to die.

Kite added darkly, "They're basically being treated the same way I was when I was working for the Senate... though I guess farming's less dangerous than my job was."

"I suppose farming would be preferable to negotiating with a werewolf one on one."

One huge perk of being a serf was that serfs weren't conscripted into the

army. Within Rolmund's culture, using serfs as soldiers was a huge taboo. Even the most powerful nobles would have their lands and titles stripped if they attempted it. When I heard that, I smiled ruefully.

"I see the empire's nobles are terrified that if they give their slaves military training they'll rise up in revolt."

"Huh? Ah... I see. I guess if trained veterans started a revolt, they'd be a lot harder to suppress than disorganized rabble."

Kite nodded in understanding. On paper, it seemed as though serfs had an easy life, but I doubted that was truly the case. I stared absentmindedly out the castle window. Past the plains surrounding the castle was a dark conifer forest. Behind the forest towered a series of massive mountains. From what I could tell, Rolmund was situated on a highland plateau.

"What's wrong, Lord Veight?"

I turned back to Eleora and said, "There's something I need to know. Is Lord Kastoniev loved by his people?"

"He is. He's been very prudent during his rule to ensure no one is inclined to revolt. He's even kind to his slaves so that they don't think of fleeing beyond the mountains."

Eleora spoke with pride; it was clear she thought highly of her uncle. Though she remained vigilant even around him, it seemed she still loved him. At any rate, this meant that Lord Kastoniev was one of Rolmund's better nobles. *Perfect.* I decided to explore the castle town while I waited for evening. Of course, in order to do so, I'd need Lord Kastoniev's permission. Fortunately, my position as a foreign noble meant he couldn't be rude to me.

"Lord Kastoniev, may I have your permission to explore your domain?"

"Of course, feel free. I shall assign you a guide, so you don't get lost."

I guess that's one way of keeping an eye on me while seeming polite.

Together with Kite, I visited a nearby village. Two of Lord Kastoniev's knights followed silently after us. They were armed and dressed in lightweight armor. Most of Rolmund's soldiers were expressionless and taciturn, and these two

knights were no exception. However, I could tell by the smell of their sweat that they were nervous. *Man, this is awkward...*

The first thing I noticed was that the village had no fence or watchtower.

“Meraldia’s citizens only feel safe behind sturdy walls, but it seems Rolmund’s citizens aren’t worried about demons or thieves.”

“Plus, if villages have no defensive structures to speak of, they’ll be easy to quell if they revolt.”

“I see.”

We kept our voices low, so the knights behind us wouldn’t hear. It was oddly quiet when I entered the village. There were no villagers in sight. But when I strained my ears, I could hear the faint breathing of humans coming from within the houses. They were trying to make no noise, but they couldn’t fool my senses.

“Looks like they’re pretty wary of us.”

“It makes sense.”

It seemed foreign nobles were something to be afraid of. That made sense, since there was no telling what they might want. Most villages in Rolmund were made up almost entirely of serfs. There were also a few free men, but they mostly worked as tenant farmers, so they weren’t much different. Not long after I entered the village, the village’s overseers came to greet me. They were two middle-aged men. Overseers were granted the authority to bear weapons, but the sword belts at the men’s hips were empty. However, there were tassels hanging from the belts to denote their status. One of the knights walked forward and whispered into the overseers’ ears.

“That man over there is a Meraldian noble and a guest of Her Highness, Princess Eleora. Don’t do anything to offend him. But don’t reveal too much, either.”

“Understood.”

Of course, my hearing picked their words up easily. Granted, I’d expect the knight to say something like that. I’d been hoping to have a chat with some of

the serfs, but they were all hiding in their houses. If this were a movie or novel, right now would be when I'd reveal some special skill to attract people's attention. Then kids would start slowly coming out to watch or something. Unfortunately, with how closely the knights and overseers were watching me, I wouldn't be able to pull off something like that. Not that I had any special skills that kids would find interesting to begin with. *Guess I'm stuck talking to these guys.*

"I am Veight, a visitor from Meraldia. Our country doesn't have a slavery system, but after speaking with your princess, we are considering instituting one. Is there anything important I should know about how to handle slaves?"

Of course, I wasn't going to do anything of the sort, but I needed to make these guys less suspicious of me. The other knight standing behind started signaling something to the overseers with his eyes. I cleared my throat in order to interrupt him.

"This seems like a good village to learn from. It's why I came all the way out here. For the sake of Her Highness' invasion, I need to understand more about slavery."

By bringing up Eleora's name, I hoped to cow them into acquiescence. My position as her guest seemed to give me a good deal of authority, as the overseers caved to my demands.

"O-Of course. Our serfs are all obedient. Not once has this village risen up in revolt."

One of the knights hurriedly added on to the overseer's words, "In fact, none of the villages within our lord's territory have revolted in the last fifty years."

The report I brought back to Eleora would have a huge impact on their lives, so they were naturally worried. I decided to assuage their fears a little.

"I see Lord Kastoniev is as wonderful a ruler as the rumors claim. But I'm sure such stable rule is only possible thanks to the efforts of you knights and overseers, correct?"

Relieved, the overseers' expressions softened a little.

"Indeed! They may be serfs, but they live together with us and eat the same

bread we do. If you treat your serfs harshly, they'll grow rebellious and become less productive."

I see the people here understand the importance of treating your workers well. Depressing as it was, the serfs here probably had better lives than I had in Japan. I wish I could tell my old self that.

I gave the overseers a gentle smile and attempted to butter them up further.

"I have heard from Her Highness that Lord Kastoniev is a truly wise lord. I suppose he must be, if he has surrounded himself with such capable retainers. I am impressed by his insight."

Anyone would be happy if a foreign lord started praising them. The overseers gradually grew more talkative, and they started letting important nuggets of information slip. I heard the knights behind me sigh, but naturally I ignored them. Attempting to revolt or flee was a capital crime, so serfs tended to remain obedient unless they were pushed to the brink. They had no real rights, so it was up to their overseers to fight for the stability of their livelihood. From what these guys told me, when a village's overseers were cruel or incompetent things got really bad.

"But of course, we make sure to protect our serfs."

"These lands are safe, so we rarely even wear our swords. Of course, we can only walk around unarmed because the serfs trust us, hahaha."

I examined the two overseers' sword belts. There were no traces of the wear that would normally occur if you hung a sword from them. It was true that they'd only be able to walk around unarmed if their relationship with their serfs was good. If the village was at risk of revolt, they'd need their weapons to keep the serfs cowed.

I'd hoped to talk with some of the serfs directly, but I couldn't afford to stay for too long. I told the overseers I'd return tomorrow morning before we left, then headed back to Lord Kastoniev's castle.

"Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me. I'll be sure to tell Lord Kastoniev and Her Highness how hardworking the two of you are."

With that, their positions were secure. As expected, the overseers smiled and

bowed deeply.

"Thank you very much. By all means, please come again tomorrow."

A short distance away, I heard the knights whispering to each other.

"Did you see that? I've never seen someone so eloquent."

"That must have been how he persuaded Her Highness to let him join her inner circle."

You know I can hear you, right?

Lord Kastoniev's family had only recently risen to the ranks of nobility. After the fall of the republic, West Rolmund had conquered North and East Rolmund. Kastoniev the First had made a name for himself in the bloody battle that had seen East Rolmund defeated. As a reward for his services, he'd been granted the territory he helped defeat.

While all of the other newly minted nobles had been struggling with poor crops and serf revolts, Kastoniev had successfully won over his people. Soon after, he absorbed the lands of nearby nobles who'd failed at managing their territory and greatly expanded his power. Before long, he'd become the most powerful noble in East Rolmund. However, his actual rank within the nobility had remained low, so he'd been looked down upon by other nobles.

"It was only by cleverly navigating the political minefield that is the imperial court that the Kastoniev house is where it is today. Lord Kastoniev had his younger brother marry the emperor's sister. In doing so, his family became part of the royal line, and he was given a title befitting his influence."

Sounding bored, Mao finished his report. He dug a piece of dried fruit out of his pack and started chewing on it. Apparently, despite marrying for political reasons, Eleora's parents had gotten along well. However, Eleora's father, Lord Kastoniev's younger brother, had passed away from illness soon after the marriage. Whether it had truly been illness or just poison, no one knew. Either way, Lord Kastoniev now had two nieces with the right to inherit the throne.

That was significant. It meant that Eleora had the backing of the Kastoniev clan. *So you've got supporters after all, huh?* Not only that, there was little chance they would betray Eleora. There was no future for the Kastoniev family

if they abandoned Eleora and backed another heir. Because in doing so, they'd go from being a key player in the inheritance dispute to just another vassal of some other prince or princess. And even if they switched sides, it was possible they'd be wiped out if Eleora's position was compromised. In which case it made more sense to throw their lot in with Eleora.

"Mao, keep investigating the Kastoniev family for me."

"You want even more information?"

Mao wasn't enjoying gathering intelligence in a foreign land. I'd need to persuade him.

"Because of how close they are to Eleora, they're a prime target for assassination. Or bribery. We need to choose our allies carefully, or we'll be in trouble later."

Mao lapsed into thought for a few seconds, then nodded.

"Alright. I'll keep that in mind when I'm digging for news."

"Sorry for pushing this onto you. I'll let you handle how you want to do it."

"I'll figure something out using the merchandise I brought with me. You won't mind if I line my pockets a little while I'm at it, do you?"

"Not at all. There needs to be something in it for you too, or you'll have no incentive to do it."

The two of us grinned at each other. We really were a pair of scoundrels.

I still hadn't made my formal debut into Rolmund high society. If I were comparing this to a game, I'd still be in the tutorial part of the Rolmund chapter. Meaning it would be to my benefit to lie low a while longer. The moment I started moving in earnest, nobles within the empire would begin learning of Meraldia's true intentions. I wanted to learn as much as I could about the enemy before that happened.

That being said, this wasn't by any means a safe tutorial. Failure here would still be catastrophic. *Man, real life is such a crappy game.* For now, my best move was probably bringing Lord Kastoniev around as an ally.

The next morning, we departed from Lord Kastoniev's castle. As we walked

through the main gates, I heard Lord Kastoniev whisper to Eleora, “Your Highness. Please take a break this winter and come rest at my castle.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, Lord Kastoniev.”

Though Eleora’s expression gave nothing away, there was genuine sadness in her voice. It seemed this uncle and niece had a good relationship, at least. As we were leaving, I dropped by the village I’d visited yesterday. This time Eleora came as well, which overjoyed the overseers. I’d asked her to say a few words to them beforehand. She smiled solemnly and said, “My lord uncle’s lands are only as prosperous as they are because of the hard work of you officials. As his niece and as a member of the royal family, I am proud of what you’ve achieved. Please continue to give my uncle your unwavering loyalty.”

Eleora had seemed somewhat reluctant when I’d asked her to speak to the overseers last night, but in the end she did it. Her bearing and appearance were just as regal as the kings and queens I’d seen in movies.

“We... We’re not worthy of such praise, Your Highness...”

Despite being fully grown men, the two overseers choked up and started sobbing. *You’re not half bad at this, Princess.* While Eleora was keeping the overseers occupied, I slipped inside the village to talk to the serfs. They’d given me permission to come in yesterday, so no one challenged me. It was easy to tell the serfs from the tenant farmers, because the serfs had no ornamentation whatsoever on their clothing. Most of them looked pretty busy, so I went over to an old man who seemed free. An injury or something was likely preventing him from working, which was why he was sitting by a barn repairing farming tools.

“Hello, sir. Would it be alright if I took some of your time?”

“Hm? W-Well...”

The man was guarded at first, but eventually I managed to drag him into a conversation. It seemed his family had worked this land as serfs for generations. His children and grandchildren were serfs as well, and they all worked in this village. Once we’d built up a rapport, I asked the question I most wanted an answer to.

“What would you want to do if you became a free man?”

Surprised, the man glanced about suspiciously. *Oh yeah, I guess that’s a dangerous topic to discuss. Please answer, though. I really need to know.* The man finally put a hand on his chin and started thinking.

After a few seconds, he said, “I’d wanna drink beer every day...”

That’s it? Serfs had little entertainment in their lives, but it appeared their overseers occasionally handed out liquor as a treat. The amount depended on the overseer and the village. That was their carrot part of the carrot and stick. As Rolmund was a frigid land, their liquor was quite strong. Naturally, this meant most people could hold their liquor, and they loved drinking it. Most of them worked hard for the sake of getting more.

“Beer, huh? How much would you want?”

“Haha. If I could, I’d stick my head in a beer barrel and keep drinking ‘til I’m puking my guts out.”

Oh boy. He’s an alcoholic. I asked some of the other serfs who’d wandered over out of curiosity and their answers were much the same. All they wanted was wine, women, and food. If they were suddenly granted freedom, they’d probably indulge themselves in excess.

“You’ve never thought about moving to the city, or trying a different trade?”

The old man gave me a wrinkly smile.

“I’m fine here, boss. It’s a nice peaceful village, and I’ve got my whole family here. I do wish I had more booze, though.”

I could tell from his scent that he wasn’t lying. He then added, “The lord and the overseers take care of all the difficult stuff. As long as we till our fields, we don’t go hungry. That’s enough for us.”

He didn’t sound at all like he was just enduring. He truly was happy with his life. Since serfs had their food and shelter guaranteed to them by their feudal lord, they weren’t responsible for themselves the way free men were. Since they’d been born into these circumstances, serfdom was natural to them. They didn’t desire anything more.

I went around and asked a few more serfs as well, but everyone in this village seemed happy. They were a far cry from what I'd imagined slaves would be like. They knew no other life and so were content with theirs. And even if they did learn of a life other than this, they probably wouldn't be interested in it. Of course, they were mildly dissatisfied with some of the restrictions placed on them. But even then, their desires were simple ones. "I want to drink more booze," or "I want to be able to boss someone around sometime." Those kinds of things. It was possible they were just hiding their true desires from me. Even if they weren't, it was possible other villages weren't like this. But at least here, no one seemed dissatisfied with the fact that they were slaves. I left the village and headed to Eleora, who was on horseback.

"Uniting the serfs and orchestrating an organized revolt will probably be difficult."

Eleora gave me a shocked look. It seems she hadn't been expecting those words.

"You... think up some rather daring plots, Black Werewolf King."

Perhaps because of what I'd learned back in Japan, but when I heard the word "slavery," my thoughts naturally turned to liberation. Which was why I'd considered the possibility of using the slavery system against the empire and orchestrating a full-scale revolt. However, it seemed Eleora hadn't even considered that a possibility. After thinking for a few seconds, Eleora shook her head.

"Barring a few exceptions, all serfs have been serfs for generations. They grew up watching their parents live the life of a serf, and they expect their children will do the same. So long as they work, their lives are guaranteed. On the other hand, if they revolt and their revolt ends in failure, their whole family will die."

"So even those unhappy with their lives find it easier to obey, huh?"

Eleora nodded.

"Correct. After the fall of the republic, many slaves fled the empire. The exodus continued until the empire was unified once more, so those who truly hated their lives have all left."

“And those slaves’ descendants sure made your mission difficult.”

Eleora gave me a troubled look.

“Please don’t say that. You’re the one who gave me the most difficulty.”

She’s really hung up about that...

“Regardless, our empire isn’t comprised of fools. Having learned from past mistakes, the empire has reformed the slavery system to be more lenient.”

So that’s why the empire provides basic necessities for all of their serfs as well as granting them some measure of leisure. Furthermore, when serfs were bought and sold, they were customarily sold in entire village units. So even if a village’s feudal lord changed, their families weren’t split up and they weren’t uprooted from their homes. Obviously, if you went into the details of it, it was still inhumane. But for the serfs, it was a better arrangement than selling them individually. It was because they were treated with a bare minimum of decency that they weren’t interested in fleeing or revolt.

As we rode away, I turned back to the village. The overseers, serfs, and tenant farmers were watching us go. The reason everyone had come out was because the overseers would be distributing beer for everyone. Thanks to Eleora’s visit, they’d decided to turn this day into a local holiday. There was bound to be a huge party tonight.

The old man I’d talked to initially was smiling happily as he saw us off. Thanks to the education I’d been given in Japan, I could see how twisted this system was. But I also realized that trying to forcibly fix it would cause more problems than it would solve right now. The people weren’t ready for change. For the present, it was better that the village remain the way it was.

“Is something wrong, Lord Veight?”

“No, nothing. Guess I’ll think up a different plan.”

I shook my head and tried to figure out how to work my horse’s reins.

* * * *

—Veight’s Letter to Airia: 2—

Dear Airia,

We're en route to the imperial capital Schwerin, so I'm afraid I'll have to keep this letter brief. I've seen a lot of things on my way to Schwerin. Some villages are ruled by cruel overseers who torment their serfs, while others are surprisingly peaceful—and the social divide doesn't seem to matter. The only common factor among all the villages is that they have a culture going back hundreds of years.

Personally speaking, I despise slavery and don't think any sane nation should have such a system. I'm sure most of Meraldia's residents would agree. However, this empire cannot even function without slavery. It's a truly twisted nation.

That being said, the living conditions of the people within the empire aren't much different from those living in Meraldia. Most have stable lives, while some unfortunate few suffer. It really is strange. Once I arrive at the capital, I'll send another letter, so there's no need to reply to this one. Oh yes, East Rolmund is famous for its sugar beets, so I've sent you a bottle of sugar as a souvenir. Feel free to put it in your tea, or bake with it if you'd prefer that.

Sincerely, Veight.

* * * *

"It's amazing how much history is in Rolmund, Mister Veight."

Lacy was treating this entire trip like a sightseeing tour, it seemed. Her enthusiasm was infectious, though, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Yeah. After the republic collapsed, the empire spent three hundred years split in three. And it's been two hundred years since it was unified again. Rolmund's got a much longer history than Meraldia."

Lacy nodded emphatically.

"I see, that explains it. It hasn't even been one hundred years since Meraldia's Unification War, and it was just a few months ago that we became a Commonwealth."

Considering the history of empires back on earth, you probably only needed two centuries for a nation to solidify their culture and customs. But at the same time, two centuries was also more than enough time to bring about the

complete destruction of empires.

While I was thinking such deep thoughts, the rest of my werewolves gawked at the sights like a gaggle of tourists. All of them could easily run back to Meraldia in no time, so they didn't feel like they were stranded in enemy territory. Their lack of wariness was both a good thing and a bad thing. And of course, Fahn was the one who seemed the most relaxed.

"Veight, I wanted to try riding one of those fluffy bird things too."

Fahn gave me a disappointed look as she skillfully maneuvered her horse with her reins. I shook my head and said, "Terabirds are easy to maneuver, so they're good for fighting in mountains and city streets, but they lack the stamina horses do."

"I see... Dang."

As always, Fahn had a soft spot for soft things. Incidentally, Fahn had just recently been promoted to the rank of Vice-Commander. Even when she'd been just a foot soldier, she'd been one of the biggest contributors to the werewolf squad. Which was why I'd had Master formally upgrade her rank to that of an officer before we'd left on this mission. Although it had felt kind of like nepotism, all of the other werewolves had endorsed the appointment as well. *Hopefully Master will have a cool title for her by the time we return too.* I looked Fahn in the eyes.

"Just so you know, Fahn, I'm going to focus entirely on negotiations once we reach the capital."

"I know, that's what you're good at."

"I'll be taking all of the human mages with me, so you'll be left with just the werewolves."

Thanks to how bloodthirsty werewolves were, it was pretty dangerous to leave them to their own devices. The last thing I wanted was my men causing trouble. Fahn grinned and thumped her ample bosom.

"Leave it to me! I'll keep the Garney brothers out of trouble, stop Monza from randomly killing people, and make sure Jerrick doesn't... actually, Jerrick'll be fine. Anyway, don't worry. I'll take care of everyone."

Man, she's become really reliable.

"Thanks, Fahn. At this rate, I'll be indebted to you for the rest of my life."

"Fufu, it's the big sister's job to take care of everyone, after all."

I really did end up relying on her a lot.

After a few days, we finally arrived at the imperial capital of Schwerin. Schwerin was separated into two districts. There was the nobles' district, which was protected by high, sturdy walls, and the outlying commoners' district. The commoners' district was protected by a flimsy wall, but since there were no monsters or thieves near the capital it didn't really need much in the way of defenses. All potential enemies had been eliminated centuries ago.

Schwerin's population was estimated to be around 70,000. Thanks to its size, it also had a garrison of over 1,000. And that population count only took into consideration those who were nobles or freemen, not slaves. On the other hand, Ryunheit's population didn't even reach 10,000, and that was including the demon army troops stationed there. Even Meraldia's largest city, Ioro Lange, only had a population of 20,000. There were plenty of rural cities that big in Rolmund.

"This place is huge..." Kite muttered in awe. I nodded and said, "If it ever comes to all-out war, we won't stand a chance."

Rolmund's size and population were on a completely different level. However, Eleora's adjutant Borsche smiled ruefully and shook his head.

"It cost us a great deal of resources to send an expedition army to Meraldia. Knights mounted on terabirds can cross the mountains separating Rolmund and Meraldia easily enough, but it takes a lot of time and supplies to send light infantry over."

Borsche paused for a moment as he collected his memories.

"For one thing, you have to pay for both their mountaineering equipment and their combat gear. That alone costs a fortune. It was for this reason that invading Meraldia was considered such a difficult mission."

Overhearing our conversation, Eleora joined in with a sad smile.

“We had to start our march before the tunnel was completed, and I lost six men on the mountain crossing alone. A less well-trained unit would lose many times that number if they attempted to cross.”

So even the princess’ elite unit which had received mountain training lost 5% of their forces on the crossing. That’s a pretty heavy casualty rate. We continued conversing as we passed through the capital’s magnificent inner gates and into the nobles’ district. If Meraldia’s technological level was somewhere in the early Middle Ages, then Rolmund’s would be somewhere in the late Middle Ages. Excluding the discovery of gunpowder, their technological progress had brought them to the cusp of industrialization.

Once we entered the palace, I had my werewolves stay in the courtyard while Eleora and I picked out a few close attendants to take with us to the royal palace proper. As we left the courtyard, Parker whispered to me, “I was expecting something magnificent, but this exceeds even my expectations. It’s a far cry from the cities in Meraldia.”

While he wasn’t wrong, the truth irked me. I replied, “The original inhabitants of Meraldia, Master’s people, were wiped out, so the people living there now have only had a few centuries of time to build up a history. On the other hand, Rolmund has the benefit of having access to the knowledge it accumulated all the way from back when it was a republic. It’s only natural there’d be a difference.”

Rolmund’s history hadn’t been interrupted by a complete annihilation of its roots and culture. Naturally, that led to a distinct difference between it and Meraldia. As we walked into the audience hall, we laid eyes on the symbolic crystallization of all that history and progress, the current emperor. Or rather, we planned to, but no one was sitting on the throne.

However, there was a handsome young man standing beside the throne. He was a bit on the thin side, but he could have been a model back in Japan. For some reason, he pissed me off. His picture-perfect smile just made me want to punch his teeth out.

“Welcome home, Eleora.”

If he was being so casual with a princess, he was likely the first imperial

prince. Meaning he was next in line for the throne. *What was his name again?*

"He's Prince Ashley," Kite whispered into my ear. *Thanks for the save, vice-commander.* Eleora gave Ashley a curt bow and said, "Is His Majesty in poor health?"

"Unfortunately so. My deepest apologies, but I will have to receive your report in his stead. Is that permissible?"

It's not like we had a choice. He was the crown prince. Eleora nodded and, after getting the formalities out of the way, gave her report. The report we'd fabricated for Rolmund was that Eleora had managed to bring the entirety of Meraldia under her control. We'd forged all of the necessary documents, but now we would find out if our lie would hold up. Prince Ashley turned toward me.

"So you're the leader of Meraldia. From what I've been told, your cooperation was an essential factor in Eleora's success."

Of course that was all a lie. Regardless, I stepped forward and bowed reverently.

"I am one of the councilors who serve on the Meraldian Commonwealth Council, Veight Gerun Friedensrichter. Feel free to simply address me as Veight."

Technically, I didn't have a last name, but I'd needed to make one for myself to sell my noble status to Rolmund, so I'd decided to borrow Master's middle name and the previous Demon Lord's first name for myself. Of course, I'd gotten permission from Master before doing so. Prince Ashley nodded and replied, "As you wish, Lord Veight. Is it true that Meraldia is willing to swear fealty to our great Rolmund Empire?"

I smiled broadly and bowed my head.

"I have come here to prove my loyalty to my new liege, Your Highness."

I probably could have worded that less ambiguously, but I really didn't want to lie any more than necessary. So I purposely didn't mention who my new liege was. Unaware of my true intentions, Prince Ashley nodded in satisfaction.

“I have received permission from the emperor to speak on his behalf. I, Ashley Voltof Schwerin Rolmund, will grant you the title of Honorary Count.”

In Western Rolmund, there had been a tradition of granting foreign nobles a special nobility rank that placed them within their own nation’s hierarchy as well. But since it was a title in name more than anything, the title was prefaced with “honorary.” Regardless, this meant I now had the right to participate in Rolmund high society as a noble. At the same time, this was my first true trial.

“But before I can do so, Lord Veight, there is one thing I must confirm.”

“And what is that?”

“I hear you are known as the Black Werewolf King in Meraldia. Your title would imply that you, yourself, are a werewolf.” Ashley then added, “The Sonnenlicht Order denounces demons as heretics. If you are indeed a werewolf, I am afraid I would be unable to grant you a title.”

A mage walked into the audience hall, flanked by a phalanx of guards. The prince gestured to him and said, “I would like to have an imperial magician investigate your true identity. Would that be permissible?”

I smiled and held out a hand to the mage.

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

The court magician grabbed my hand and chanted a spell. My guess was he was casting a detection spell. A rather thorough one at that. The wavelength of a person’s mana was generally determined by their race. Humans and werewolves had different mana signatures, which was likely what the mage was searching for.

However, I had two very reliable, very skilled specialists on my side. A mage well-versed in arts of deception, and a mage well-versed in arts of detection. The illusionist Lacy and the epoch mage Kite. Lacy was currently copying her own mana signature and using it to mask mine. She’d perfected it by practicing with Kite. Right now, her deception was good enough that not even he could see through it.

Of course, I also had the option of using my own vortex powers to absorb the spell. The mage’s detection spell acted as a sort of sonar though, so absorbing

those waves of mana would result in me appearing as an unknown to him. What I wanted was to show airtight proof that I was human, not to raise suspicion.

When Eleora had been fighting against me, she'd sent detailed reports back to her homeland. So Rolmund's higher-ups knew that the Southern Commonwealth had nine councilors, as well as their names and appearances. I would have liked to have impersonated a different councilor, but the only one around my age was Aram, and his physique was nothing like mine. It would have been difficult to continually alter my appearance with illusion magic, so I'd decided to go to Rolmund as myself and no one else.

The court mage cast a number of other investigative spells, thoroughly checking my mana's composition. Had I not put countermeasures in place, my identity would have been long exposed. After a while, the court mage called for assistance, and another few mages came and cast the same spells. But no matter how many second or third opinions he called for, the results wouldn't change. Finally, the mages were satisfied, and they bowed wordlessly to Prince Ashley. He nodded and said, "Well done. You are dismissed."

Once the mages left, Ashley smiled at me.

"I apologize for the intrusion, but I beg your understanding. As a prince, I must be cautious."

I smiled back and bowed my head.

"I can understand. You would not want demons loitering around the royal palace. If you wish, you're welcome to investigate my aides as well."

Parker was using the same camouflage as me, and Kite and Lacy were humans to begin with. Ashley smiled wryly in response.

"If I appear too suspicious, it will reflect poorly on the imperial family. I simply had to verify your identity as a matter of protocol, you may rest easy now."

With that, the empire was convinced that I was a human who ruled over werewolves. They likely wouldn't investigate me any further. We were already giving Ashley a false report on the political situation within Meraldia, so I figured I might as well throw some lies in about my identity too.

“My homeland is close to the demon army’s sphere of influence. As I have often negotiated both with and for them, I have become something like the werewolves’ official diplomat.”

Nothing I said was a lie. Originally, the werewolves weren’t part of the demon army. It was only after I’d convinced them that they formed a squad to join the army. Persuading them had been one hell of a challenge. Prince Ashley nodded.

“I see... so you have cut open a path not with martial might, but with the power of the pen.”

“Correct. However, it takes a man of a certain caliber to negotiate with humans on behalf of demons, Your Highness.”

I smiled suggestively at the prince. I’d been practicing my evil smile recently. Prince Ashley took the bait and leaned forward, curious.

“In Rolmund we have a certain saying. ‘A sheep in wolf’s clothing.’ It comes from one of our old folk tales, where a sheep wore the skin of a wolf to protect itself from other wolves.”

“As you can see, Your Highness, underneath all of my bluster I am but a sheep.”

My smile grew wider, and Prince Ashley shook his head.

“You seem to be less of a sheep and more of a horned ram.”

I hadn’t heard of that animal before, but it was probably some kind of beast-like monster. The prince called in several other nobles to introduce me to, then concluded the audience. While Eleora was able to escape unscathed, the prince seemed to be treating her rather curtly for someone who’d just successfully conquered another nation. I’d heard the court had cut back on lavish feasts to curtail expenses these past few decades, but even so, it was clear that the prince didn’t want to let Eleora have any glory. *What a shame. I was hoping to try some tasty food.*

“Our business is concluded. It would be impolite to loiter in the audience hall. Let us depart, Black Werewolf King.”

“One moment.”

Was Eleora planning on holing up in her fortress again? This was the time to be recruiting followers and winning people over, but it seemed Eleora was only interested in doing her duty. Of course, I could understand why. This palace wasn't welcoming to a princess who was only sixth in line for the throne. Borsche leaned close and whispered, "Most of the nobles living in the capital are mere esquires who possess no land. Their only hope of becoming landed is to have someone from the emperor's direct family grant them with territory, so most of them are Prince Ashley's allies."

"Are there any exceptions?"

Eleora gave me a sardonic smile.

"There are a few who have decided to back the emperor's younger brother instead. The Doneiks family holds vast swathes of territory, and many of North Rolmund's lords support him. Quite a few are hoping he will grant them his scraps."

Middle-class nobles who possessed land were referred to as "landed nobles." They earned their living by taxing the serfs that worked their land. Since they were self-sufficient, they didn't need to rely on the imperial family. In an empire, land meant power. Regardless of how Eleora seized the throne, she would need to obtain the support of the landed nobles, or she'd be facing rebellion after rebellion. Of course, she was capable enough to put them all down, but it wouldn't be pretty. As I was pondering what the best way to win over all the other nobles was, I wandered into the courtyard. Standing in front of me was a group of nobles who'd been present at the earlier audience. Borsche leaned close and whispered, "Those are all esquires affiliated with the emperor's brother. Be careful around them."

"Understood."

I wasn't very interested in landless nobles, but it wouldn't hurt to win them over if I could. However, their first words dashed any hopes I had of convincing these guys. In a voice loud enough for us to hear, they said, "Princess Eleora is quite capable. I never imagined she would win over those barbarians as allies."

"Her Highness has inherited her mother's alluring figure. It is not hard to imagine how she managed such a feat."

“From what I heard she lost over half of her precious mage corps.”

“So she’s replenished her numbers with those barbarians? It must really have been a harsh campaign for her to stoop so low.”

I see, so that’s how it is. By purposely acting cold toward Eleora, they were publicly affirming their loyalty to the Doneiks family. Regardless of what their status or abilities were, I had no intention of teaming up with such scum. That being said, they weren’t completely worthless. Since I was already here, I figured I might as well make some use out of them.

Smiling, I swaggered up to the nobles. For a moment, they looked shocked. Before they could react, I said in perfect, unaccented Rolmundian, “Your statements are an affront to Her Highness Princess Eleora. Retract them at once and apologize.”

The nobles whispered furiously to each other. Then one of them smiled awkwardly and said, “Now this is a surprise... I never imagined a rural Meraldian noble would dare raise his voice against a great Knight of Rolmund.”

Who the hell’s this guy? Among the esquire ranks, knight was the lowest of the low. In fact, a knight barely ranked as nobility. I knew guys like this. If I backed down here, he’d just get even cockier. I’d learned that the hard way back in Japan. Just remembering those days pissed me off. There was no need to treat someone like this as human. I’d deal with him the demon way, not the human way. I sneered at the man and said, “I’m even more surprised a powerless Rolmund noble like you isn’t bowing down to me, the man who holds all of Meraldia in his grasp. I see Rolmund’s nobles are too uneducated to understand the intricacies of government.”

Though Meraldia’s population was small, it did hold a vast expanse of territory. And I was one of the councilors on the Commonwealth’s ruling body. Disparaging me was the same as disparaging Airia, or Firnir. Not only had this fool insulted Eleora, but he’d insulted all of Meraldia. I was itching to beat his face in, but I decided to hold it in for a little while longer.

The noble was so stunned by my belligerent attitude and the unexpected turn of events that came with it. Because these nobles knew so little about me, they’d assumed I was just some lowly noble coming from their empire’s vassal

state. Rolmund was a powerful nation, and because of that, these nobles had grown arrogant and looked down on foreigners. Meaning it was up to me to teach them that they were just a big fish in a small pond.

Still smiling, I added, “Though I can understand why you might think as you do.”

Confused, the nobles gave me an odd look.

“While Her Highness and I were fighting ferociously at the front lines, you petty nobles sat on your asses and lived off the bounty of your people. It would be too much to expect anything from you.”

“Wha!?”

“Which is why as I said earlier, I will forgive you so long as you are willing to retract your remarks and apologize. I would recommend apologizing while I’m still smiling instead of yelling.”

The nobles seethed, and the largest among them, a bulky young man, put a hand to the rapier at his waist. Thanks to my heightened kinetic vision, I could hold my own pretty well in a fight even without transforming. I cast the strengthening magic I’d prepared beforehand on my palms and grabbed the man’s right hand.

“If you draw your weapons without even a formal declaration for a duel, you will be no better than common thugs. And I will dispose of you as such. Surely you don’t wish for such an ignoble end.”

“What the—”

The man was taller than me, but his face gradually turned pale as he realized how much pressure I was putting on his hand. I was also holding it in place, so he couldn’t escape.

“Y-You whelp... Uraaaaagh!”

His anger turned to hesitation, then fear. With my current grip strength, I could easily crush his fingers into dust. Just as he realized that, I let his hand go. He was so terrified that all the blood had drained from his face. I hardened my smile and gave the nobles one last warning. *Let’s see if third time’s the charm.*

“This is your last warning. Retract your statements and apologize.”

The nobles exchanged worried glances, and their leader stepped forward. He was a confident, well-dressed middle-aged man. Judging by his attitude, he likely held a higher status than the others. He was also quite well-built.

“We refuse. We will not bow our heads to some foreign mongrel.”

He’s got guts. Guess there’s no need to hold back.

“Considering how empty they are, I would hope you at least have the sense to bow them when the time comes.”

Following proper Rolmund custom, I took off the decorative chain on my sword belt. By removing the decorations on my belt, I was signaling my intent to fight. Such an action also served as a challenge for a duel. While the other nobles were cowering, their leader also removed the chain on his belt. He’d accepted the duel. The moment one party dropped their chain on the ground, the duel would begin.

However, the noble made no move to drop his chain. Meaning, he would accept my challenge if I issued it in earnest but would not issue one of his own. In truth, there was no real merit to dueling. Nobles who were overfond of dueling tended to be short-tempered, meaning they rarely rose high in the ranks. Mostly because they died before they could. I was a Meraldian diplomat, so dueling here would also negatively affect future negotiations. So of course, this man was likely thinking that I wouldn’t go through with it.

Unfortunately for him, I had no interest in making friends within Rolmund. I grinned wolfishly and dashed my chain against the ground. The other nobles gasped. My smile grew even more devious as I watched their faces pale.

“Y-You fool... are you insane!?”

“Who knows? But now you can’t run. Enjoy your last moments alive.”

I was mostly doing this to make my intentions clear, but I had to admit I also wanted an excuse to go wild.

The duel was set for tomorrow evening. It would be held in the parade grounds the imperial guards used for drills. Within the private quarters Eleora

had been assigned, Lacy restlessly paced back and forth.

“Mister Veight, are you sure this is a good idea? If you transform, everyone will know you’re a werewolf. Ah, I suppose I could cast an illusion on your appearance to... No, that won’t work.”

I ignored Lacy and turned to Kite.

“You’re required to have a second in a duel, so you’ll be my second.”

Eleora raised an eyebrow.

“I should be your second. You started this duel to protect my honor. If I remain an onlooker, I will appear weak.”

I shook my head in response.

“I know how you’ve avoided rising to provocations until now in order to prevent things from blowing out of proportion. Which is why you can’t get involved now either.”

If Eleora personally got involved in a fight with nobles on Doneiks’ side, it would worsen relations between his family and hers, the Originia family. Since the Originia family was an offshoot of the matriarchal line, it was in a much weaker position than the Doneiks’ family. They couldn’t afford a confrontation right now. Furthermore, if Eleora got involved it would bring trouble to her father’s family as well, the Kastonievs.

“As long as I’m the only one involved, it will just look like the whims of an odd foreign noble. At worst it will sour diplomatic relations between Meraldia and Rolmund, but it’s not like I ever cared about those in the first place.”

After all, my plan was to put Eleora on the throne and have her take care of this nation. However, Eleora sighed softly, unwilling to give in. In order to prevent her from feeling guilty, I grinned wickedly and said, “Don’t misunderstand, Princess Eleora. I’m not dueling for your honor. This is simply something I deemed necessary as a member of the Meraldian Commonwealth Council, and as a Vice-Commander of the demon army. Nothing more, nothing less.”

That seemed to convince Eleora. However, she wasn’t done talking yet.

“Very well. But, Black Werewolf King, do you know who your opponent is?”

“I think he called himself Viscount something-sky, but honestly I don’t remember.”

Upon hearing that, Eleora’s expression grew grim.

“Viscount Schmenivsky. He used to be a landed count, but after seven serf revolts he was stripped of his land and demoted. He’s infamous.”

What the hell did he do to make his serfs revolt seven times?

“That man is savage and cruel. He’s cut down slaves simply to test the sharpness of his new swords. He’s completely irredeemable scum.”

I hadn’t encountered anyone quite that awful in Meraldia yet. Eleora frowned, as if the mere mention of his name appalled her, and added, “It’s said that he once got into an argument with his guest about a certain poem. They were debating the line ‘A blood-red sunset,’ and to prove that such a descriptor was accurate, he slit a slave’s throat and compared the slave’s blood to the sunset. Within the court he’s known as the Count of Slaughter.”

Is he a psycho or something? I turned around and saw Lacy was trembling, so I decided to reassure her a little.

“Don’t worry. Meraldia doesn’t have disgusting nobles like that. And if it turns out we do, I’ll personally strip them of all authority. Like the Senate that came before us, it’s the Council’s duty to ensure people do not abuse their authority.”

“Th-That’s not what I’m worried about! What if he cuts your head off, Mister Veight!?”

It would be pretty hard to actually decapitate someone with a dueling rapier. I turned to Eleora and gave her my frank opinion.

“If nobles like that can just do whatever they want, then this country has no future.”

“I would love nothing more than to slaughter the Count of Slaughter. But considering my position, I can’t easily do that.”

“Which is why I’m offering to do it for you. Besides, I’ve been needing a good warmup.”

I said that as a joke, but for some reason that only caused Eleora to look even more troubled. *Please just smile.*

* * * *

—The Count of Slaughter's Banquet—

"Hahahahaha!"

Though Viscount Schmenivsky was laughing, the young nobles around him looked incensed.

"This is an outrage! An absolute farce!"

"How dare that country bumpkin make light of us proud nobles!"

All the nobles gathered around the viscount were supporters of Doneiks. Their position would become quite tenuous if Prince Ashley took the throne, and as they possessed no land, they had little influence in court. At best they were useful in minor political maneuvering, but they were easily replaceable. Thus, they were extremely motivated to bring the Doneiks faction up to par with the crown prince's faction. One of the nobles turned to Schmenivsky, who seemed to be in a good mood still, and yelled, "Lord Viscount, please teach that upstart Veight fellow a lesson!"

Schmenivsky perused his collection of prized swords and said with a smile, "There's no need to be so gentle. I'll just kill him."

"Ooooh..."

The young nobles looked momentarily taken aback, then started showering the viscount with praise.

"You really are North Rolmund's hero!"

"The strongest noble who slaughtered thousands of serfs in the seven rebellions you put down!"

"'Those who oppose my rule shall feed the soil with their blood and become the crops they grow.' It seems that quote of mine is still causing quite a stir within the royal palace."

Schmenivsky had managed his territory so poorly that his serfs had risen up in

rebellion seven times now. Every time they'd rebelled, he'd punished them so harshly that they'd been driven to rebellion again. But as Schmenivsky believed that it was the serfs who were in the wrong, he felt no remorse about his harsh reprisals.

"Thoroughly rooting out any voices of discontent is the sacred duty of Rolmund nobility. That soft Meraldian barbarian has no chance against the viscount's steel."

"Now, now. No need to flatter me... Though I have no intention of losing to some Meraldian upstart."

Schmenivsky drew one of his sabers and cut cleanly through a candlestick. The cut was so clean that the stick remained standing even after his blade had passed.

"Wow, that was splendid..."

"Even though he slashed from a sitting position, he was able to cut with such precision."

Schmenivsky slowly got to his feet while his onlookers gazed at him in awe.

"Now then, the hour is upon us. Let's put this trifling matter to rest."

Schmenivsky snatched his cape from the outstretched hands of one of his followers and grinned.

"Prepare a celebratory banquet for me, gentlemen."

* * * *

The next evening, I headed to the imperial parade grounds. At my side was Kite. His job was to inspect the weapons and equipment my opponent would be bringing into the duel. A few interested werewolves had also come to watch the duel. Specifically, Fahn and her handpicked subordinates.

"Veight, if you need help, just holler. We'll come running."

"You can count on us, boss."

"Veight, we can kill that bastard before the duel even starts if you want!"

Please honor the rules of dueling, guys. Viscount Whatever-sky had also

brought his second and supporters with him. On top of that, he'd also brought around 20 guards. He was probably hoping to overwhelm me with numbers if things turned south, but Fahn could take out a squad of 20 by herself.

The man officiating the duel belonged to a neutral faction, the crown prince's. It was his job to record the duel and report what happened to the emperor.

Viscount Whatever-sky's second brought out a massive suitcase.

"These are the weapons which will be used in today's duel. Please inspect them."

Since I was the one who'd issued the challenge, Viscount Whatever-sky possessed the right to decide the location of the duel, as well as what weapons would be used. Inside the suitcase was a pile of swords. *Thank God it's not a crossbow duel or something. My aim is horrible.* I turned back to Kite.

"I'll leave checking them to you."

"Sure."

Kite picked up each sword one by one and examined it closely. He was making sure nothing strange had been done to the weapons. Though few others could tell, I sensed the faint trace of mana that denoted he was using epoch magic. He was being quite thorough.

Once he'd finished his inspection, Kite bowed to the viscount's second and returned to his designated spot. I then stepped up to the suitcase myself. Through the magic broach at my neck, I could hear Kite giving me advice.

"The saber with the red agate in its pommel has been enchanted with agony magic. The rest are all normal."

Enchanted with agony magic, huh? Even a slight brush against something enchanted with agony magic was enough to cause someone to suffer severe pain for a few seconds. I'd tinkered around with agony magic when I'd been training with Master, and the pain was comparable to a dentist drilling into your tooth without any anesthesia. However, the way the pain was imparted onto people changed based on the person, so agony magic wasn't the most reliable in battle. Often, it wouldn't activate at all. Werewolves were quite resilient to pain, so it was possible the saber wouldn't affect me at all. I hoped, anyway.

Regardless, I had first pick when it came to weapons. *Should I take the saber, or not?*I wasn't the most skilled with a sword, so a tricky weapon like a saber might be too much for me. Especially since the blade was quite thin. Viscount Whatever-sky had gone through all the trouble of setting up this little trick, so I might as well let him have his sword. I flashed the viscount a knowing smile and said, "I care not which weapon I use. You may choose first."

The Count of Slaughter smiled confidently, certain of his victory.

"Such a magnanimous man. As you wish, then."

As I'd predicted, Viscount Whatever-sky went straight for the saber with the red agate. I actually rather liked villains who were this simple-minded. Once he was done, I picked the shortest sword available. It was more of a parrying dagger than a sword. The blade was short and stout, and its center of gravity was close to the hilt. Most importantly, though, it had a very good crossguard. It was, however, wholly unsuited to offense. Thrusts were about the only effective attack it was capable of, but its blade was a good twenty centimeters shorter than the viscount's saber. The Count of Slaughter's smile grew wider.

"Oh my. Do you perhaps lack confidence in your sword arm? I never imagined you would pick such a beginner weapon."

What happened to all that fake courtesy? It was honestly refreshing fighting such an evil guy. I was really starting to get attached to him. *A shame I'll have to kill him in one hit.*I smiled back at the viscount and walked to my designated starting point.

"This is all I need for the likes of you."

"You arrogant brat..."

Guess the fake courtesy's gone for good. His face was beet red, and his lips were trembling in rage. *Come on man, if you're going to act like a cocky villain, you've gotta keep the act going until the end. Looks like I'll have to show you what a real villain's like.*

The time to strike down Viscount Whatever-sky was almost here, but I was still a little worried about the enchantment on his saber. *Maybe I should use pain neutralizing magic, just in case?* Pretending to give a Sonnenlicht prayer, I

surreptitiously cast magic on myself. Upon seeing what I was doing, the Count of Slaughter sneered.

"Isn't it a bit late to be praying? Fear not, I shall send you to your beloved god soon enough. You can pray to him in person."

This is just getting clichéd now. I couldn't help but give him a pitiful smile. The nobles overseeing the duel watched us complete our final preparations, then said, "Following the traditional laws of Rolmund, the duel between Honorary Count Veight Gerun Friedensrichter and Viscount Schmenivsky will now begin."

"Both sides, fight fairly so as to not dishonor your family name."

As per tradition, the Count of Slaughter and I bowed to each other, then took our stances.

His stance was solid and spoke of years spent on the battlefield. It seemed he really did love shedding blood. With the way he'd put his center of gravity, he could move in any direction at any time. I also fell into the stance Airia had taught me. It was a very basic stance, meant for defense. The viscount obviously believed he had a full measure of my strength, as he closed the gap between us without bothering to feel me out.

"Hiyaah!"

His thrust was sharp. For a human, that was. I was easily able to follow his movements with my enhanced kinetic vision. It seemed like he was aiming for my heart, but he was actually planning to raise the tip of his saber at the last moment and go for my throat or face. It wasn't a standard dueling maneuver.

As a human, I probably wouldn't have been able to handle swordsmanship like this, but right now it looked like he was moving in slow motion. *Alright, this'll be a cinch.* Focusing, I stepped diagonally forward with my left foot. With this, I had avoided the saber's trajectory. The viscount wouldn't hit me. Meanwhile, I used magic on my right foot to make it momentarily heavier, so that it served as an anchor holding me to the ground. Finally, I activated strengthening magic on myself, and—power filled my right leg, waist, back, and shoulders.

In front of me, the Count of Slaughter was still grinning like an overconfident

idiot. I couldn't tell if I'd moved too fast for him to notice, or if he had his head so far up his ass that he wasn't even looking at me. Either way, I wasn't going to hold back.

I adjusted my grip on my parrying dagger and let loose a wild swing. The dagger's blade caught the saber and pushed it back while its crossguard slammed into the viscount's face. The back of the viscount's saber crushed his nose as it was pushed back and dug deep into his face. The force of the impact caused the blade to snap. Naturally, the agony magic contained within the blade activated. A fraction of a second later— "BWAAAAAARGH!"



That's an interesting scream. I watched as Viscount Whatever-sky flew through the sky in slow-motion. He did a single somersault as he tumbled backward. After flying a good three meters, he crashed into the ground face-first. A second later, his saber's broken blade landed on the dirt next to him.

"UGRUAAAAAAAAH!"

He was still screaming in agony, but not because I'd decked him. It was his own saber that was causing him all this pain. *That's what you get for using a sword like that, dumbass.* Viscount Whatever-sky thrashed around for a bit, started foaming at the mouth, then arched his back and fell unconscious. I'd been hoping to hit him with a few cool one-liners after beating him to a pulp, but I couldn't do that if he was out cold.

After a few seconds of standing around awkwardly, I turned back to the overseers. They were completely stunned. For a solid minute, all they could do was glance back and forth between me and Viscount Whatever-sky. To me, the fight felt like it had lasted almost a minute, but to the onlookers it, had flashed past in an instant. *Wait, maybe according to Rolmund's dueling rules, I haven't actually won yet.*

"Do I need to kill him?"

Upon hearing that, the overseers quickly returned to their senses.

"The winner is Lord Veight Gerun Friedensrichter!"

"Lord Schmenivsky, get ahold of yourself!"

"Th-That looks awful..."

"His front teeth have been knocked out!"

"Someone call a doctor— no, a healer! Hurry!"

It might have been kinder just to kill him, huh? I watched Viscount Whatever-sky get carried out by a stretcher, then looked down at the dagger in my hand. The impact of my swing had caused the crossguard to warp.

"Holding back really is hard."

I tossed the dagger to the viscount's second, then went home to get dinner. I

had to say, the scarlet sunset looked a lot more vibrant than the viscount's blood.

"Thank you for defending my honor, Lord Veight."

"We're sworn allies. I only did was what natural. Besides, that wasn't the reason I fought him anyway."

Really, they'd just pissed me off. They were like jocks who bullied weak kids back in high school. I was sitting in Eleora's private manor, eating Rolmund's famous meat stew. It was pretty similar to beef stroganoff.

"So why did you leave the viscount alive?"

Animal husbandry hadn't advanced very far in this world, so meat was quite expensive. Which was exactly why I needed to eat as much as I could while the princess was paying. I savored the meat for a few more seconds before turning my attention to what Eleora had just said. *Oh yeah, I* did *leave Viscount Whatever-sky alive, didn't I?* Eleora waited until a servant finished pouring her a glass of wine, then added, "Rolmundians are a spiteful people. Our nobles especially. We even have a saying that goes 'The grudges of last winter shall haunt the next.' He'll be back for revenge."

I was more or less expecting that. But that didn't bother me in the slightest. I grinned wolfishly.

"Don't worry. There's a reason I left that bastard alive."

"There is?"

Confused, Eleora exchanged glances with Borsche, who was sitting next to her.

"Only necromancers have any use for the dead, but..."

"You called?"

The moment Parker butt in, I signaled to Kite. He grabbed Parker by the collar and started dragging him to a different room.

"Sorry, Parker, but we're busy right now."

"Wait! I simply must test out the new spell I've been developing with Master!

With it, I'll be able to plunge the entire capital into chaos."

I don't like the sound of that. I turned back to Eleora and said, "Alive, he'll be useful to us. No matter how incompetent a person, no matter whether they're friend or foe, everyone can be used."

"You're scheming something again, aren't you?"

"Nothing major. Now then, I need to step out for a bit."

I finished off the last of the meat, wiped my face with a napkin, and got to my feet.

"You just finished a duel and you're going back out already!? Do you realize what time it is!?"

I gave Eleora a reassuring smile.

"Werewolves hardly even break a sweat in fights against humans. The real work begins now. You can just rest here; I'll take care of everything. Oh, but... Ah, I got it. Can I have one of those potted plants?"

"You mean these? I don't mind, but..."

I changed into the long, flowing clothes of a Meraldian southerner and said, "I'm going to pay our good viscount a visit. Lacy, come with me."

That evening, I visited Viscount Whatever-sky's mansion. The official reason for my visit was that I was going to pay my respects to my dueling opponent. The polite and respectful Honorary Count Veight would never be so rude as to forget about his opponent. And I had a persona to keep up.

Upon my arrival, I found the viscount groaning in bed, wrapped in bandages. While the healers had managed to staunch his wounds, his jawbone was still warped, and he was missing several teeth. The way his jawbone was warped was putting pressure on his nerves, so he'd be in pain for a while. It seemed the healer who'd overseen treating the viscount had not been very skilled. In fact, even I could have done a better job with wounds this simple.

From the looks of it, all of Rolmund's best mages focused solely on the research and invention of new magical tools. With the way the viscount's jaw had been set, it would never fully recover unless someone punched him that

hard again. As I was trying to remember what the viscount's name actually was, I turned to Lacy—who was pretending to be my servant—and said, "Bring out the gift."

"Ah, okay."

Lacy took out the potted plant I'd brought as a get-well present and handed it to one of the Count of Slaughter's servants. It was the same potted plant I'd taken from Eleora's room.

"I've brought you a potted icebloom. The pot is made from Mashrov porcelain. I hope it suits your tastes."

Both the plant and the pot were extremely valuable, but it would be rude to mention that. I smiled as gently as I could at the viscount's servant and added, "I wish to congratulate my worthy opponent on surviving our duel. A potted plant symbolizes longevity, so I thought it would be a better gift than flowers."

"Oh... Thank you for your generosity."

There was no cultural taboo in this world about giving people potted plants as gifts, so this was a perfectly normal exchange. Of course, in Japan, sending a potted plant would be implying I wanted him to sleep forever, which I did. In the language of flowers here, though, a potted icebloom meant "may you be at peace." Once the exchange was over, Lacy and the viscount's servant backed out of the room, and I turned to the viscount. He glared at me through his bandages. Though the look in his eyes was venomous, his lips curled up into a smile.

"Y-Your kindness humbles me, Lord Veight... Though I regret we had to duel, my position left me no choice."

His lack of front teeth made his words come out funny, but I was able to understand him well enough. From his scent, I could tell that half of what he'd said was true.

According to Eleora, the majority of the emperor's younger brother's faction came from Northern Rolmund. The northern esquires who came to the capital had no land or soldiers, so their only real value was as pawns in political maneuvering. However, since they possessed no assets, they didn't hold much

leverage in the political sphere either. Though they were under the emperor's brother's wing, their position was quite precarious.

The reason they'd been so belligerent was because they were underlings who had no idea what the overall situation was. For them, the royal palace was their entire world. Of course, that was the same reason they were doomed to never become landed, but even so, it took a decent amount of effort to rope these idiotic nobles into your faction.

Viscount Whatever-sky grimaced and said with an exaggerated sigh, "In order to unite the nobles under the emperor's brother's command, I had no choice but to stand my ground."

Now he was lying. *If you want to fool me, you'd better be at least as composed as Yuhit.* From all his excuses, it was obvious he was just trying to deceive me into letting my guard down. It seemed there was no hope for us seeing eye to eye. After confirming that there was no one else nearby, I leaned in close to the Count of Slaughter and whispered, "I understand your position quite well, so allow me to impart on you a single nugget of wisdom."

"Wh-What?"

Still smiling, I transformed into a werewolf and bared my fangs at him. Naturally, the viscount screamed. However, there was no one who heard him. I'd cast sound dampening magic around the room the moment I'd transformed. At the same time, bloody letters appeared on the wall behind me. Blood also started pooling out from under the bed.

So long as my sound dampening magic was in effect, I couldn't talk either, so I'd asked Lacy to cast illusion magic for me. Turning a room into the scene of a horror movie was a simple task for someone at her level. The prototype she'd shown me before we'd left had been really impressive too. It had been full of nice little touches like claw marks and gore splatters.

The letters in this illusion spelled out the following message: "Werewolves devour all in their path." Ideally, I'd wanted a longer message, but I'd noticed Lacy was likely to typo if there were too many letters involved, so I'd kept it simple. As long as it was threatening, anything worked.

The Count of Slaughter tried to jump out of bed, but I used my superhuman

strength to pin him down. I opened my maw wide and pretended to take a bite out of him. He opened his eyes wide and another soundless scream escaped his lips. Then, he fainted. That would make it the second time today.

I canceled my transformation and returned to human form. Since I'd worn the loose, flowing garb of Southern Meraldia, my clothes hadn't been ripped during transformation. The letters on the wall and the blood under the bed started to vanish. Lacy's illusions truly were perfect.

Once all traces of the illusion were gone, I called the viscount's maid back in.

"The good viscount has gone to bed. It would appear the duel exhausted him a great deal. I will come again some other time."

"Th-Thank you for coming to visit. I'll see you to the entrance."

"Thank you."

I gave the maid a mysterious smile. Hopefully I looked like an exotic foreign noble to her. As I reached the bottom landing, I heard a commotion from upstairs. Thanks to my enhanced hearing, I could easily make out the conversation.

"He's a monster! A barbarian! Call the soldiers! His Highness—Inform His Highness of this!"

"L-Lord Viscount!? Please, snap out of it!"

"Unhand me, you fool! The wall! Look at the wall! Don't you see the blood!? We're under attack by werewolves!"

"The wall? There's nothing there, Lord Viscount!"

"Oh no, someone call a doctor! Call the male servants as well! We need to tie down the viscount until help comes!"

The servants were all flabbergasted. With this, Viscount Whatever-sky would start spreading rumors that the foreign noble assisting Eleora was actually a werewolf in disguise.

Unfortunately for him, he had no proof. And publicly, all I'd done was pay my respects to an injured dueling opponent. Furthermore, the crown prince's court mages had already vetted my identity and publicly announced that I was

human. To top it all off, the Count of Slaughter had just lost to me in a humiliating duel. Aside from Eleora and her loyal troops, only the viscount knew the truth. And after our little encounter, he was likely desperate to convince everyone of the truth. *Good luck getting anyone to believe you, Whatever-sky.*

I knew I was the one that made him like this, but it was kind of sad that all he could think about was trying to get revenge for losing the duel. Together with Lacy, I left the viscount's manor. A pleasant, cool breeze wafted through the air. It signaled that Rolmund's short summer would soon be over.

Outside, Fahn and Jerrick—who'd been left there to keep watch—were snickering to each other. They'd heard everything that had gone on in the manor. I looked at everyone in turn, then stretched my back.

"Good work, Lacy. So, do you guys wanna get something to eat on our way back?"

"Now that's what I wanted to hear, boss. Let's get some meat. Grilled meat dripping with fat's the best food there is."

"I want a fish pie! And fried potatoes!"

Lacy looked from one werewolf to the next, stunned.

"What? But you just ate dinner!"

"That's not nearly enough for us. Right, boss?"

Jerrick gave me a wink and I nodded.

"Exactly. We're gonna have a busy day tomorrow, so we need to be ready for it."

"Yeaaaaaaah!"

Only Lacy looked unhappy about the prospect of eating more.

"Ugh. I feel like I've gotten fatter since joining the demon army."

"Nothing wrong with that. Better to be overfed than underfed."

"Noooooo!"

* * * *

—Veight's Letter to Airia: 3—

Dear Airia,

We've finally arrived at Rolmund's capital. Everything is proceeding as planned. As for the capital itself, it's every bit as massively historic as the rumors would have you believe. The capital has been Rolmund's cultural center since the days of the republic, so it's older than all of Meraldia. In fact, all of West Rolmund is quite old. You can feel the weight of the centuries weighing down on the buildings. I wish I could show you these streets. I'm sure you would appreciate them. It saddens me that I can only describe them to you in words.

Due to how cold it is here, much of the food and drink in Rolmund is designed to warm you up. Most of their dishes are soups and stews. And every dish uses plenty of alcohol and fat. The more liquid there is in a dish, the longer it stays warm, it seems. While the food is quite good, I fear I'll grow fat if I keep eating nothing but greasy meals. I have, however, obtained the recipes of a few choice dishes from Eleora's chef, as I would very much like you to taste them upon my return.

Oh, and I ended up fighting a duel.

Sincerely, Veight.

* * * *

The day after our duel, Viscount Whatever-sky forced his way into the palace and tried to tell everyone that I was a werewolf. Prince Ashley called me into the palace after his hearing was over and he was escorted out. When I reached the audience chamber, he gave me a sad smile and shook his head.

"My, what a mess. I understand that the viscount supports my uncle over me, but even so, it's quite improper to doubt the judgment of imperial investigators."

Naturally, no one had believed the Count of Slaughter's claims, but that wasn't the issue. He'd insulted the emperor's court mages.

Rolmund's mages weren't especially skilled. Because they'd focused their efforts into developing magical technology, their individual abilities left much to

be desired. *I guess that's the price of modernization.* The only exception to this trend was the emperor's court mages. They alone were masters of their respective magical persuasions. On top of that, they had a lot of pride.

"Lord Veight is a werewolf!"

"That's impossible. We investigated him thoroughly and determined that he is indeed human."

"You're wrong, I saw it with my own eyes! He is a werewolf!"

"If you truly believe your powers of observation are superior to our magic, then feel free to join our ranks as a court magician."

According to Prince Ashley, that was more or less how the exchange had gone. *Sorry, but no one's gonna listen to you, Viscount Whatever-sky.* Everyone would just assume he was being a poor loser. Prince Ashley bowed to me in apology.

"I am terribly sorry for the viscount's remarks. You came all this way to show your support for the Rolmund Empire, and he treated you not with gratitude, but contempt. His actions have smeared mud on the reputation of Rolmund's nobles."

I smiled gently back at the prince.

"Well, I am an outsider. It's only natural some people would be suspicious of me. The viscount seemed unhappy to see me when I went to visit him after our duel as well."

"You went to visit the viscount? And despite that he still disparaged you? Unforgivable."

For a second, Prince Ashley's face contorted into one of disgust.

"It seems there truly is a need to apologize. On behalf of the emperor, I apologize for my countryman's rudeness."

"You mustn't apologize, Your Highness. I am but a humble servant who has sworn fealty to the empire in return for your protection. It would not do for someone in your position to apologize to me."

I kept a straight face during the entire exchange, but inside I was celebrating.

After a few seconds of deliberation, Prince Ashley said, “In that case, allow me to at least grant you a boon as a show of good faith. Henceforth, if any man insults your person, I will use my authority to have them punished.”

Perfect. Now if anyone tried to call me a demon, I could have Prince Ashley deal with them.

I talked with Prince Ashley for a while longer after that, and it seemed he was just as the rumors described. Wise and gentle.

“Eleora’s plight pains me as well. Though I have had few opportunities to speak with her, she is still my dear cousin.”

Oho, he’s not lying.

“Furthermore, it was thanks to Eleora’s efforts that our empire’s greatest wish was granted. We will finally be able to expand our territories into Meraldia.”

“You can count on me to bring you Meraldia, Your Highness. All I ask is that you show our people mercy once we become part of the empire.”

Since I was technically part of the Eleora faction, I couldn’t officially ask Prince Ashley for any concrete conditions. Not that I needed to, since if my plan worked, he wouldn’t be the one sitting on the throne to begin with. However, if I didn’t ask for anything at all, it would seem suspicious. I was meant to be a Meraldian diplomat, after all. So I’d kept my requests vague. Furthermore, vague requests like these were hard to refuse outright, so they were good openers in negotiations. As I’d expected, Prince Ashley nodded without hesitation.

“Of course. The sunlight that illuminates Rolmund’s lands shall cast its benevolent rays onto Meraldia as well. Perhaps not in the same form, but that’s nothing to worry about.”

Is it just me, or is he implying he’ll only treat us well if we offer to become a vassal state?

“Speaking of sunlight, this palace has a wonderful greenhouse. It might be a little hot this early in fall, but would you like to see it?”

According to the reports I'd read, Prince Ashley was a big lover of flowers. That, combined with his handsome figure, had earned him the nickname the Prince of Flowers. It was a pretty fancy nickname, but it also pissed me off. *Isn't there any magic out there that'll make all handsome guys spontaneously combust?* As I was thinking that, we reached the greenhouse.

"Impressive..."

The imperial palace's greenhouse was larger and more colorful than I'd thought possible. The glass was nearly transparent as well; it must have cost a fortune to build. Even if I used Ryunheit's entire budget, I couldn't afford to build something like this.

That being said, the botanical gardens I'd seen back on Earth had been about this large. What really struck me was the variety of plants in here. Moreover, each plant had a little placard next to it stating its name and native region. It reminded me of a museum.

In this world, there were probably only a handful of places that had such a detailed classification of this many plants.

"This feels more like an imperial museum than a palace garden."

The prince nodded in agreement.

"Indeed. I'm impressed you noticed. The purpose of this greenhouse is to collect all manner of plants and discover which are useful to us humans. As it is a greenhouse, we even have flowers from the warmer Meraldian regions. They were collected centuries ago and have been cultivated here ever since."

So Rolmund's been interested in Meraldia for centuries, huh? As we walked through the greenhouse and discussed the various plants we passed, I noticed something interesting. Though the plants of this world looked very different from the ones back on Earth, many of them had identical uses.

For example, the beautiful flowers of the greenbottle plant secreted a poisonous nectar. But once extracted, the poison didn't keep for long. Next to the greenbottle was a purple willow, whose bark was difficult to process, but created a long-lasting deadly poison once it was. That was the same poison the assassins in Zaria had used. Further in was the wolf lily, whose bulbs were

addictive. And coiled around the purple willow tree was a crest vine, which caused severe vomiting when ingested.

Every plant seemed to be poisonous in one way or another. There wasn't a single plant that was just pretty to look at. All of them were either used in poisons or medicines. That was probably why I'd felt uneasy when I'd first stepped foot in here. This wasn't a place to appreciate the beauty of nature, or a simple botanical garden. It was a chemical weapons plant.

Prince Ashley stopped in front of a flower bed and plucked two fruits from one of the plants. They vaguely resemble strawberries, but I shrunk back the moment I saw them. They were witchberries, a plant that grew all over Meraldia. While they looked like delicious tiny strawberries, they were actually deadly. Eating one would cause dyspnea, and if you weren't treated right away, you'd die. Smiling, the prince handed me a witchberry.

"Here you go, Lord Veight."

"Prince Ashley?"

I had no idea what he was trying to do here. Considering his love for plants, he was likely this greenhouse's manager. Meaning there was no way he didn't know what the witchberry's properties were.

I sniffed, trying to gauge his intentions from his scent. But all I picked up was a faint sense of expectation. There wasn't any smell of deceit on him. However, it was entirely possible he was a psychopath who felt nothing when he deceived people, so I couldn't let my guard down.

Regardless though, I couldn't afford to refuse a fruit offered to me by the crown prince. Fortunately, I'd been keeping detoxification magic prepared at all times since coming here. I was especially good at handling alkaloids, so there was little worry of me being poisoned to death. Deciding not to think too deeply about the prince's intentions, I took the witchberry from him and plopped it into my mouth.

Mmm, this is pretty sweet. It had just a little tartness to it too, so it didn't leave a bad aftertaste. *Fruits exist to be eaten and their seeds spread by the animals that eat them, so how come this plant evolved to bear poisonous fruit? I really don't get nature sometimes.* As I was absently thinking that, I realized

Prince Ashley was staring at me. He looked completely stunned.



“What seems to be the matter, Your Highness?”

“Well... I didn’t think you would actually eat it.”

Going by the smell of his sweat, he was telling the truth. Still unsure of what the prince had been trying to do, I turned back to the witchberry plant. *Oh, the leaves aren’t serrated. And they’re drooping at the ends. Meaning this is actually a different species. Ah, I finally got it. It all makes sense now.*

Pretending as though I’d known all along, I said, “This plant looks quite like Meraldia’s witchberry, but the leaves are a different shape. I imagine you have no reason to poison me, Your Highness, so I assumed you were offering me a harmless berry.”

Understanding dawned on Prince Ashley.

“How very perceptive of you. You are correct, this is not a witchberry plant. This is a Rolmund snowberry. While it can be used as food, it also works as a natural remedy once dried and preserved. The fruit looks identical to that of the witchberry’s, so you need to be careful.”

Prince Ashley tossed the remaining snowberry into his own mouth.

“I must say, though, I am impressed you were able to notice such a slight difference right away. I had hoped to surprise you by eating my own after you refused, but my plan failed. It seems I’m not suited to be a tactician.”

“Oh no, you definitely managed to surprise me. You should have heard how fast my heart was beating.”

He really did manage to surprise me, and I wish he’d stop with those kinds of pranks.

Afterward, the two of us continued joking and eating snowberries like a pair of giddy schoolboys. Sometime during our conversation, the prince said, “Did you know, while Eleora was on her campaign in the south, she sent a report mentioning that one of her men got food poisoning from eating the berries in Meraldia. Since witchberries and snowberries look nearly identical, he mistakenly thought they were edible.”

I guess if you’re coming from Rolmund, that would make sense. Even on Earth

there were a lot of different species of strawberry.

“Did the soldier who accidentally ate witchberries survive?”

Prince Ashley smiled.

“He did. Luckily, the mage corps’ healers were able to neutralize the poison. Unfortunately, he died in the fighting afterward.”

That was my fault, wasn’t it...? But to think Prince Ashley would try to test me like this. I didn’t know he had this mischievous side to him.

“Your Highness, do you enjoy watching me get flustered?”

“It’s the opposite, Lord Veight. You’re so unflappable that it scares me sometimes. Even if you were able to reason that the berry was safe, wouldn’t you normally hesitate somewhat still?”

I smiled ruefully.

“There are plenty of people back in Meraldia capable of taking my place. Even if I were to die here, the Commonwealth would be no worse for the wear.”

“Surely you jest.”

“Not at all.”

I’m just a lowly vice-commander. Prince Ashley’s expression softened a little and he said, “You truly are an interesting man.”

“I hear that a lot. My peers think me a strange man who acts independently far too often for his own good.”

“That was not what I meant. At first glance, you appear to be a simple scholar, but at the same time you have the wits of a master strategist and the martial might of a swordmaster.”

I knew it was just flattery, but it felt good to be praised by a prince.

“Incidentally, you noticed this was no mere greenhouse the moment we entered, did you not Lord Veight?”

“I did indeed. You clearly are more interested in gathering a wide variety of plants than making this greenhouse pleasing to the eyes. Furthermore, every plant you’re growing here has some medicinal purpose.”

Prince Ashley smiled mischievously.

“Don’t you mean... they’re all poisonous?”

Even I didn’t have the balls to call the prince’s greenhouse a poison farm to his face. *Time to diplomatically avoid the question.*

“Depending on the dosage, a poison can become medicine. And if you over-administer a medicine, it becomes poison. Poison and medicine are one and the same.”

That wasn’t my quote, but it was the truth. After that, Prince Ashley opened up quite a bit to me. His prank had been in pretty poor taste, but he’d only done it because he’d believed I wouldn’t get mad over such petty things. As a result, he trusted me now, so I wasn’t really that hung up over the snowberry thing. Besides, it’d been a tasty berry.

The first thing Prince Ashley did was bombard me with questions.

“According to the reports I’ve read, Meraldia’s flour is whiter than ours. I find that tidbit quite fascinating. Would you happen to know why, Lord Veight?”

I thought back to what I’d learned back in Japan.

“People tend to prefer whiter grains. Because Meraldia is blessed with large swathes of arable land, there’s a lot of food and people can afford to be pickier about which crops they buy. This in turn incentivizes farmers to plant more white-grain crops. Though in truth, it’s the darker wheat which has more nutritional value and is more resistant to insects and disease.”

I’d read that there were some parts of East Africa where people only ate white corn, and as a result, they were deficient in vitamin A. The yellow corn was considered inferior and only used as feed for livestock. Rice was the same way in Asia.

“Originally, we grew black and red rice in southern Meraldia. Occasionally there would be a mutated white rice crop though, and because people preferred that to the colored rice, farmers started actively cultivating it and now there’s only white rice in Meraldia. In general, people tend to prefer the taste of white grains.”

Fascinated, Ashley pulled a scrap of paper and a pen out of his pocket.

“I see... so there’s no need to go out of my way to obtain a sample of Meraldian wheat. After all, what Rolmund needs right now is a stable crop, not a delicious one.”

“Are you worried about Rolmund’s agricultural situation?”

“Yes, it’s quite a serious problem.”

Sighing, Prince Ashley looked up at the sun through a glass window.

“This empire sustains itself on the labor of serfs. If we make any errors in our governance and incite serfs to revolt, crop yield drops that year and the empire starves.”

“So you’re searching for crops that provide higher yields.”

“Precisely. Ensuring his subjects do not starve is the emperor’s duty.”

This guy’s pure, through and through, huh. I kind of want to punch his too-handsome face, though. As I was mentally cursing the handsome prince, I suddenly remembered something.

“I have heard from Princess Eleora that you have a profound knowledge of plants, Your Highness. Though few, I have brought seeds native to my homeland with me to Rolmund.”

“Truly!?”

Whoa, is it really that big a deal? Prince Ashley’s eyes were sparkling. If this was an act, I’d want to recommend him to Veira’s theatre troupe. He started shooting furtive glances at my pocket every few seconds.

“So, where are these seeds?”

“I’ve left them with one of my attendants. He’s wonderful at managing things. I can have them delivered to you later, but for now, let me tell you which ones I’ve brought.”

I handed Prince Ashley a small catalog, and he started poring over it immediately. He was clearly more interested in domestic affairs than international ones. Before we’d left, I’d asked Mao to pick out a few crops that

could grow even in cold temperatures for me. I'd also double-checked with Eleora that these crops didn't already exist in Rolmund. It was possible the crops wouldn't take, or that some other incident would destroy the first harvest, but that wasn't my responsibility. Ashley carefully folded and pocketed the catalog, then shook my hand.

"On behalf of Rolmund's citizens, I thank you, Lord Veight."

You don't need to lean in that close, man. If he got too close, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to hold back from punching his perfect face. Regardless, Ashley was a surprisingly open prince. We continued walking through the greenhouse, discussing various plants and animals.

In my old life, I'd dreamed of becoming a biologist. But that dream had died a dream. Still, while I didn't have a college degree in biology, I was still pretty familiar with living things. I told the prince stories I thought he might find interesting, like my battle with the giant octopus, or how I'd solved the assassination case in Veira by tracing the poison the assassins had used. However, I avoided telling any stories that might disclose military information. For example, I didn't mention that I knew the terabirds Rolmund's cavalry used couldn't stand heat, or that the wyverns dragonkin rode were carnivorous and thus couldn't be fielded in large numbers.

In return, Prince Ashley told me a few stories of his own.

"In truth, the emperor could die any minute now. His condition is quite critical."

So that's why I'm not allowed to meet him. As we walked, Prince Ashley would occasionally stop to pluck a leaf or fruit from a nearby plant.

"His disease causes healing magic to worsen his condition, so the only thing that can treat him is medicinal herbs. However, the only herbs that have any effect are poisonous ones that would normally kill a healthy person."

"I see, so this is why you've created this garden of herbs."

It was too early to be sure, but it seemed Prince Ashley genuinely cared about his father. *Alright, it's about time I got going.* I'd learned something about what kind of person Prince Ashley was, and had also earned his trust. While we were

destined to stand on opposite sides eventually, I didn't have to fight with him just yet. I needed to negotiate with the other major players in this game of thrones and make myself known as the leader of the moderates within Eleora's faction. Though of course, I'd be crushing all other contenders when the time came.

* * * *

—A Swordsman's Resolve—

As he had every day since his duel, Viscount Schmenivsky had gone to the imperial palace to seek an audience with the emperor.

"You have to understand, that man is a werewolf! A demon who's come to destroy our noble empire!"

I sighed and pretended not to hear him. My master had assigned me to both protect and keep an eye on the viscount. I had spent a long time serving my current master, because I owed a great debt to house Doneiks. Which was why I was currently standing here listening to the Count of Slaughter prattle.

Occasionally though, I did wonder. Were the viscount's claims truly nonsense? During the duel, I had served as the viscount's second. Lord Veight's movements had been extremely polished, and unbelievably quick. They'd been the movements of a fighting master.

But what had truly terrified me was what I'd seen when I went to inspect the grounds after the duel. I'd found traces of footprints being carved into the hard-packed ground. Whether in sword-fighting or in boxing, one needed to kick off the ground to put any force into their lunge.

Just how much force had Lord Veight kicked off the ground with to leave such deep footprints? My fist could fit neatly into one of them. Lord Veight's strength was immeasurably immense. Had he struck the viscount directly with all his might, the viscount would have died. The fact that he hadn't meant that this visitor from Meraldia had found the duel so easy he'd even been able to hold back.

This foreign gentleman warranted utmost caution. Naturally, I'd reported as much to my master as well. I was expecting a return message from the Doneiks

manor soon.

Just as I thought that, I heard a faint knock at my door. I ignored the viscount, who was still going on about Lord Veight being a werewolf, and walked into the hallway. Waiting outside was the Doneiks family's personal doctor, and two assistants/guards.

"Lord Doneiks is worried about Master Schmenivsky's health and has ordered us to provide him with medicine."

So the same as usual then. Though I wanted no part of this, I still accompanied the two men. I felt as though I had to at least fulfill my obligations to the viscount. The doctor bowed politely to the viscount.

"Master Schmenivsky, my lord has requested that these 'painkillers' be delivered to you."

The viscount paled.

"Wh-What do you mean?"

The doctor took a small vial out of his bag and poured a few clear drops of some liquid into it.

"Go on, drink this. It will put you to sleep for a while, but when you awaken, your pain will be gone."

However, the viscount shook his head.

"W-Wait... Why are you doing this to me... It's not supposed to..."

The doctor's two assistants grabbed the viscount and pinned him in place. Both were skilled warriors who I'd trained myself. Meanwhile, the doctor grabbed the viscount's jaw and, with practiced movements, wrenched his mouth open.

"Baagh! Aaagh!"

Even as the viscount was screaming, the doctor poured the vial's contents down his throat. The viscount struggled desperately to free himself, but it was too late. I kept my hand on my sword, just in case, and waited for the inevitable.

Finally, the assistants let go of the viscount. The doctor inspected his eyes, then put a hand to his throat.

“Good night.”

All of us put our hands to our breasts and prayed for the viscount’s soul. Then, the two assistants lifted the viscount’s corpse and carried it out of the room and toward a waiting carriage.

“Will it be ‘recuperating’ again this time?”

“Yes. We will escort him to one of Lord Doneiks’ mountain villas, where he will spend some time ‘recuperating.’”

In this country, nobles continued to live on even after their deaths. In order to avoid sowing confusion among the populace, their death would only be made public after enough time had passed and the proper preparations had been made. Now that the assassination was over, I could discuss my future plans with the doctor.

“The imperial court magicians have determined that the honorary count is human. Lord Doneiks, too, is part of the imperial family. It would not do to have one of his followers questioning the emperor’s judgment.”

I sighed in response to the doctor’s words.

“So that was why you decided to put him to rest.”

“Correct. Lord Doneiks is tired of cleaning up after the viscount’s blunders. Enough is enough.”

“I suppose so.”

Had the viscount just been a little humbler and wiser, he might still have been a landed count. In the end, he was simply reaping what he’d sown. The doctor pulled a letter out of his pocket.

“These are your new orders. Please read through them immediately.”

“As you wish.”

Chances were, I would be stuck doing someone’s dirty work again. My master was a prudent man. He assigned dangerous jobs only to those who had his

absolute trust. Which was precisely why I made sure to always live up to his expectations.

“Hmm.”

“Is something the matter?”

The doctor had known me for quite some time, and he was able to sense something was wrong from my tone alone. I smiled ruefully.

“The young lord has joined a group within the palace. My job is to guard him.”

For security reasons which young lord wasn’t specified in the letter. However, I had known my master long enough to know who he was referring to. Whenever Lord Doneiks used the words “my beloved son” he was referring to none other than his second child, Lord Woroy. His eldest son, Evan, was referred to instead as “my child.”

While I was up to the task requested of me, I was still a little anxious. I needed to ensure I did a perfect job of protecting Lord Woroy. The doctor repacked his bag and smiled at me.

“Fear not. There is not a man alive who doesn’t cower when he hears the name of the Sword Saint, Barnack.”

“Please drop that ludicrous title. I’m just an old man from a fallen family of knights.”

It was only thanks to Lord Doneiks that I could maintain my current lifestyle despite having lost my land. And it was in order to repay that debt that I would complete any mission assigned to me. Even if it meant crossing swords with a legendary werewolf.

* * * *

I had hoped to return to East Rolmund as soon as possible and start winning over Eleora’s uncle, Lord Kastoniev, but for the moment I was still stuck in the capital. The reason for that was simple.

“Lord Veight, please tell me more about your duel.”

“Is it true your name has spread across all of Meraldia?”

Ever since my duel with Viscount Whatever-sky, I'd become famous. Honestly, it felt like I was being treated like an animal in a zoo. Then again, there probably weren't too many visitors who challenged a viscount to a duel on their first day here. Plus, I beat him in a single blow, which added to the novelty. On top of that, I was the first visitor in a long time who'd come from a foreign country. And lastly, rumors were starting to spread that Prince Ashley trusted me even though I was part of Eleora's faction. Though of course, that wasn't quite true.

The emperor was in poor health, and it was thought that Prince Ashley would ascend the throne in the next few weeks. As it was, the prince was already performing most of the emperor's duties in his stead. Naturally, there were plenty of people who wanted to get on his good side now. Not that befriending me would help anyone in befriending Prince Ashley. After all, I'd come here to make Eleora empress.

* * * *

—Airia's Reply: 2—

Dear Veight,

Did you say you dueled someone? Are you unhurt? Well, I suppose that's a foolish question. Knowing you, you would never be defeated or even injured in a fight. Though I understand that in my head, I cannot help but worry. Please don't do anything reckless. You may think you're being cautious, but try to understand that what you consider normal, everyone else sees as reckless.

I'm certain you had your reasons for this duel of course. Nothing you do is without reason. Incidentally, you said before you left that "I may just be a simple vice-commander, but occasionally I feel like doing something flashy." I hope this doesn't mean you're planning something even more reckless than... No, never mind. I believe you'll return home safely, Veight.

Ryunheit is busy preparing for its annual harvest festival. Our farmers are looking forward to the end of the harvest season. We had quite a good crop this year. It was even better than previous years thanks to the assistance of the demon army's agricultural specialists. I can't wait to see how much better next year's crop will be. Regardless of how it turns out, I'll be happy so long as I can spend it together with you.

Incidentally, I know that diplomacy is a costly affair. This might be presumptuous of me, but I convinced the council to send you some supplementary funds. Feel free to use them to buy your attendants new winter clothes, or for any other expenses you might have. Do send another letter if you get the opportunity.

Sincerely, Airia.

PS: While I'm sure you won't stop at just one duel, please try not to fight too much.

* * * *

Every morning before breakfast, I met with a messenger from a different noble house. Most of them were inviting me to their respective master's manor for lunch. Deciding which invitations to accept and which to reject took up far too much time each day. The worst part was that after lunch, I had invitations to tea and then dinner, all from different nobles. While the food was all delicious, the constant meetings were starting to exhaust me. But they weren't the biggest nuisance.

"Lord Veight. It is a stain on Rolmund's honor for one of our own to have been defeated so one-sidedly in a duel. Please, accept my challenge so that I can restore Rolmund's honor."

There was a subset of nobles who would challenge me to duels day in and day out. Viscount Whatever-sky had been a crazy enough dude that he'd earned the nickname the Count of Slaughter. But at the same time, he'd been the head of a prestigious family, so the fact that I'd beaten him in a single blow had hurt the pride of some of the more patriotic and ambitious nobles. According to the rumors I'd heard, the viscount himself was currently recuperating in Lord Doneiks' mountain villa.

"Hmph."

I grabbed my dueling opponent's arm as he stepped forward. He was some lord, but I'd already forgotten his name. A swordsman was at their weakest when they took a step, as they were forced to balance on just one leg. As long as I took advantage of that moment, even a novice like me could win. Of course, it took a werewolf's kinetic vision to be able to accurately follow someone's

movements with that level of precision. And it took magically enhanced reflexes to react in time. Thankfully, I possessed both. I yanked my opponent's arm forward while sweeping his legs out from under him with a low kick. This was a technique old man Vodd had taught me.

"Uwaaaah!?"

Without any way to brace himself, the noble was sent flying as my pull propelled him forward. We were dueling in Eleora's courtyard, and there was a fountain directly behind me. My opponent splashed right into it, sending up a spray of water. After a few seconds, he rose to his feet, sputtering. I calmly drew my sword and leveled it at his nose. Soaking wet, the noble dropped to one knee and hung his head.

"I admit defeat..."

The noble ladies and their attendants in the audience cheered. I gave them a polite bow, then proffered a hand to my opponent.

"Are you hurt?"

"Miraculously, I appear to have sustained no injuries... except for my pride, that is."

"I have prepared a fresh change of clothes for you. After you have dried off, would you like to join me for tea?"

I smiled at the noble as I pulled him to his feet. Though the capital was filled with schemes and plots, and assassinations were an everyday occurrence, it was only the highest-ranked nobles who actually participated in these machinations. Most of the middle and lower-ranked nobles had nothing to do with national policy or diplomacy. They were primarily concerned with increasing their own rank. When they weren't chasing their ambitions, they were either indulging themselves, or spending time managing their lands and people. Since they had a lot of free time on their hands, many made duel watching a hobby. Even more people came to watch my duels than normal, too, because I was a foreigner.

"Lord Veight, please duel me next!"

"Sorry, but he's already promised to duel me."

“Lord Clodief, wasn’t your last defeat just two days ago? I should take priority.”

Oh, I give up... At least let me eat food first, though. I was an amateur when it came to swordsmanship, so I mostly fought bare-handed. But thanks to my magic and my werewolf-enhanced perception, I could take anyone on in a one-on-one duel without needing to transform. Honestly, though, it felt like cheating. As if I was just bullying those weaker than me. It made me a little guilty.

That was the reason why I’d been holding back against everyone I fought, but for some reason that had only attracted more challengers. *I guess they all got bolder knowing they won’t die if they lose.*

“Uhyaaaaaah!”

“Next challenger.”

“Let’s have a good fight, Lord Veight!”

There were a few challengers who genuinely tried to kill me, and I dealt with those the same way I had the Count of Slaughter. Most nobles, however, just wanted to test their strength, or duel me just so they could claim they’d fought a foreign noble. Their constant requests were filling up my schedule though, so I wish they’d stop. I was probably the first person in Rolmund’s history to hold multiple duels in one day, and I’d been doing that every day for a while now. Rolmund’s dueling style was stiff and awkward, so it was easy for me to predict my opponent’s moves. Really, I was so used to battlefield fighting that these duels were like basic practice drills to me.

As I had dozens of times before, I drew my dueling saber and parried my opponent’s slash. I then pushed his blade upward, leaving his torso wide open. With my free hand, I hit him with a palm thrust, sending him sprawling. I leveled the point of my sword at him and he shouted, “Y-Yield!”

Another one down. I helped my opponent up and looked around. The spectators were drinking tea and chatting idly as they watched. This was turning into quite the spectacle. In another corner of the garden, Vodd was teaching the defeated duelists how to fight better.

“So in your last duel, you started off well. You had a good approach, but you let him get inside your guard too easily.”

“What does that mean, O wise one?”

“The fact that he grabbed your wrist meant you were sloppy with the follow-through and let momentum carry your thrust. If you’re not always prepared to pull back, then anyone can just do... this!”

“Uwaaaaaaaah!”

Looks like he got thrown again.

Kite extricated himself from a group of noble ladies surrounding him and made his way toward me.

“Those young ladies there all invited you over for tea, Veight... I turned them all down for you.”

“Thanks a lot. You made sure to turn them down politely, right?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I said no in a way that won’t bring shame to the name of Honorary Count Veight.”

“Thanks, you’re a real help.”

Dealing with nobles was a lot easier because I could get Kite to turn down the more persistent invitations.

“So how many duels do I have left today?”

“Ser Lekomya is the last opponent you have left for... Hm?”

Kite suddenly looked up. Come to think of it, something did feel strange. The atmosphere had been relaxed a second ago, but now it felt strained. A lone man walked over to me.

Rolmund had a strict social hierarchy, so I could tell what his rank was just from the way he was dressed. He was just a mere knight, but I recognized him. He’d been Viscount Whatever-sky’s second during my duel with him.

I guess he’s holding a grudge over that duel. Meaning he probably wants a fight. I got to my feet and waited for him to cross the courtyard. The man who’d been the Count of Slaughter’s second stopped in front of me and bowed.

“I am Ser Barnack, the knight who served as Viscount Schmenivsky’s second in his duel the other day.”

Though he acted casual, he showed no openings at all. He was obviously a skilled fighter.

“I’m glad to see you again, Ser Barnack. Allow me to formally introduce myself. I am Honorary Count Veight.”

I offered him a chair, and he sat down.

“Have you heard of what happened to the Viscount?”

I nodded.

“He went to Lord Doniek’s mountain villa to recuperate, correct? I would like to visit him, but that would likely be difficult.”

Barnack smiled slightly.

“Indeed. Incidentally, I came here today to request a duel with you. Officially I am here for personal reasons, but the truth is I was ordered to duel you by Lord Doneiks.”

“He wishes for a duel between representatives of our respective factions?”

In Rolmund high society, you could appoint a representative for your duel. However, there was little meaning in a duel won by using a representative, so few nobles elected to avail themselves of that option. Barnack must have noticed the confusion in my expression, as he then said, “Lord Doneiks is in the line of succession. His position prohibits him from dueling directly. This is the only method available to him.”

Makes sense.

“In that case, what is the pretext for this duel, Ser Barnack?”

“To restore Viscount Schmenivsky’s honor, naturally. It would not be so strange for there to be someone willing to fight on his behalf.”

I could tell from his tone and the smell of his sweat that he really was just fulfilling his duty. No personal feelings were involved. I got to my feet.

“Very well. When would you like to hold this duel?”

“That is for you to decide, as I am the one who issued the challenge.”

“Then let us hold it now.”

He didn’t look too keen on dueling himself, so I figured I might as well get it over with.

Barnack and I chose our swords. As usual, I chose a simple military dagger. It was the closest I could get to fighting bare-handed. That being said, the dagger was a pretty potent weapon. It was used to deliver finishing blows in battle. On the other hand, Barnack chose not a dueling saber, but a soldier’s blade. It was very different from the fancy weapons nobles preferred. The tip was sturdy enough to pierce chainmail, and the blade hefty enough to cleave bone. Barnack smiled in appreciation as he studied the blade.

“You possess some fine weapons, Lord Veight.”

“They are all weapons chosen personally by Her Highness Eleora.”

Eleora was the kind of person who fussed a lot over what tools she used, and she took good care of the ones she picked. One of her favorite sayings was “An ill-maintained weapon is more dangerous than any enemy.” I was inclined to agree with her outlook.

Barnack and I took our stances. I held my dagger in my left hand, with an underhand grip. My right arm and right leg were slightly forward. Seeing my stance, Barnack muttered, “Are you planning on pulling me in with your right hand and dealing the finishing blow with that dagger in your left?”

He saw right through me. In a real fight, I’d use tackles and kicks as well, but those were bad manners in a sword duel. Since I could only use my hands, my tactics were limited. I kept my stance as it was, and grinned.

“Who knows?”

Barnack stared at me for a few seconds, then silently adjusted his stance. Instead of a thrusting stance, he’d taken a slashing one. The moment the arbiter announced the start of the duel, Barnack shot forward. There wasn’t even the slightest bit of delay. My enhanced vision was still able to follow him, but had I still been human, he would have disappeared completely from sight. I quickly moved to dodge his diagonal slash, but then he suddenly changed the angle of

his stroke.

“Ngh!?”

I barely managed to avoid the slash aimed at my neck, but my shirt collar got cut in the process. *My turn now.* Or so I thought, but before I could counterattack, Barnack flipped his wrist and swung again. His speed was inhuman. His next attack aimed low, at my flank.

“Haaah!”

Barnack’s expression reminded me of the war god statues back in Japan. Avoiding the first blow to my neck had caused me to lose my balance, so my footing was uneven. *Shit, I can’t dodge this.* I used one of the spells I’d prepared this morning and made my right hand harder than steel.

“Not today!”

There was a loud metallic clang as I struck down the blade. It broke in half, and the tip sunk into the lawn below. I expected that to be the end of the duel, but Barnack continued his charge. The remaining half of the blade was short enough to slip under my guard. *Not good.*

“Mister Veight!?”

“Veight!”

Lacy and Fahn both shouted my name.

Barnack and I glared at each other over our shoulders. After a brief second, Barnack chuckled.

“It seems it’s my loss, Lord Veight.”

The tip of my dagger was resting millimeters from the nape of his neck. When he’d come at me with his broken sword, I’d done a quick revolution and brought my left hand up to his neck. It was basically like doing a turning backhand chop, except I was holding a dagger. Realizing the match had been decided, Barnack had held back his attack.

Had he not stopped, I would have been forced to drive the dagger into his neck. I’d actually feared turning my back to him for the split second it had taken to do that revolution. Barnack was as skilled with the sword as Baltze, and

Baltze was the strongest swordsman I knew. The only reason I'd been able to defeat Barnack without transforming was that I'd used magic. And if we fought again, there was no guarantee even that would save.

Barnack smiled and handed me the broken remains of his sword.

"You've bested me, Lord Veight. You clearly have far more battlefield experience than I do."

If by bested, you mean used hardening magic to cheat. While I doubted anyone else had noticed, I was certain Barnack had realized I'd used magic there. But instead of calling me out, he just bowed his head.

"I am truly blessed to have had the opportunity to cross swords with someone as skilled as you. That was a wonderful match."

"The pleasure was all mine. Never have I fought someone so dexterous with a blade. Just who are you?"

While we were talking, the audience burst into cheers.

"Did you see that? The Astral Fencer outdueled the Sword Saint!"

"Indeed, that was an epic match."

"I never realized a duel between two masters looked so sublime." *Wait, hold on, I don't recognize those terms.* "Sword Saint" was probably referring to Barnack over here. That fact alone was quite a surprise. The sword saint was quite a famous title. But that explained the series of feints that culminated in a multi-stage attack. Even when I broke his sword, he'd kept going. I could certainly see why he was called the sword saint. But that aside, what the heck was this astral fencer nonsense?

"Hey, Kite..."

"Are you truly so surprised that you've been given a nickname, after all the duels you've participated in?"

Kite sighed as cleaned up the dueling field. *I mean I guess that makes sense, but...* A deep voice interrupted my musings.

"Ser Barnack is the Doneiks family's swordsmanship instructor and a master of the Sashimael style. And yet, you defeated him easily. Who in Sonnenlicht's

name are you?”

*Who are you?*A well-built young noble walked into the courtyard. He was heading straight for me, and he was trailed by a large group of hangers-on.

“Veight, I’m pretty sure that’s Lord Doneiks’ second son, Prince Woroy. He’s fourth in line for the throne.”

So that’s the second son of Rolmund’s most ambitious family. What does he want with me? The other nobles who’d been watching the duel started backing away. It appeared the Doneiks faction was more estranged from the others than the remaining two. Or at the very least, everyone was scared of this Prince Woroy.

Honestly, he was so buff it was hard to believe he was a prince. His muscles rivaled those of the Garney brothers’. Though his gait was unrefined, it was undoubtedly the gait of a warrior. I got to my feet and bowed.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Veight Gerun Friedensrichter. Would you happen to be Prince Woroy?”

“That’s right. Oh whoops, that’s not very polite of me. Let me introduce myself properly.” The prince chuckled softly. “I am the second son of the Doneiks family, Woroy Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund. Well met, Lord Veight.”

He gave me a charming smile. Prince Woroy sat down in an open seat and shouted to one of the nearby servants, “I wish to talk with Lord Veight awhile! Bring me some food, I don’t care what it is!”

Eleora’s servants, who’d been watching the duels, hurriedly bowed and brought out sandwiches and tea. While the other nobles and servants were cowering, Prince Woroy smiled at me and said, “What do you say to a game of Shougo?”

“Shougo” was Rolmund’s version of chess. Its pieces were split into “warriors” who had long ranges of movement like rooks and bishops, and “strategists” who had more limited movement ranges like kings but could move in more directions. If a strategist-type piece captured an opponent’s piece, the player could then put it back into play on their side, like in shogi.

While I knew the rules of shougo, I hadn’t ever played it before. Hiding my

trepidation, I shook my head.

“I sincerely doubt you came here to play a game with me. Let us move straight into the main topic if you please, Your Highness.”

“Oh, not a fan of pleasantries? Perfect.”

Prince Woroy nodded happily and said, “My dad... oops, I mean Lord Doneiks employs many fighters, but Ser Barnack is far superior to them all. Just who are you?”

“A mere vice-commander.”

“Vice... commander?”

“Correct. I am Her Highness Eleora’s Vice-Commander.”

I accidentally gave my standard reply and had to quickly smooth it over. *Did he buy it?* Prince Woroy’s smile widened, and he leaned back leisurely in his chair.

“You have guts, saying that to the son of Lord Doneiks.”

Oh good, he thinks I’m just stating my loyalty. Despite me plainly stating that I was part of Eleora’s camp, Prince Woroy’s smile didn’t fade.

“You really are an interesting fellow! Tell me a story, Veight!”

A story? What story? While his sudden request caught me off-balance, I was used to dealing with guys like these thanks to my experiences with the Garney brothers.

“In place of a story, allow me to apologize to you for causing such a disturbance the other day. I did not mean to duel one of your father’s retainers, but in order to protect Lady Eleora’s honor, he left me no choice.”

Prince Woroy looked confused for a second, then waved his hand dismissively.

“Oh, him. Never mind him. In fact, I should be the one apologizing to you. Someone in his position shouldn’t have done what he did. Anyway, surely you have a few interesting stories to tell. Anything will do, so tell me one.”

What is with this guy? What kind of story would a jock like him enjoy anyway?

I took a closer look at the prince. Everything from his sword to his boots were designed for practicality over fashion. His clothes were built to last, not to look good. Had he lived in modern-day Earth he probably would have worn exclusively camo gear. I smiled and said, “Would you like to know the secret to dueling then?”

“Now that sounds interesting.”

I glanced over to where Vodd was still tutoring nobles.

“It’s simple. The sword style they teach for dueling is extremely rigid. There are so few patterns that reading your opponent is a trivial matter. Compared to the ferocity of a real battle, duels are nothing.”

“A real battle, you say? You speak as though you’ve experienced many of those.”

Prince Woroy sounded almost jealous. He was probably the kind of guy who enjoyed warfare. He sighed, then looked around to make sure no one else was within earshot.

“A prince from the male line like me isn’t allowed onto the battlefield. If only I’d been born to a female branch of the line, like Eleora.”

“What are you saying, Your Highness? That would put you further from the throne.”

I grinned at the prince. He gave me a bitter smile and scratched his head.

“I guess. It would be a lie to say I’m completely uninterested in the throne. But I have no complaints with how my uncle has ruled, nor how Ashley is handling things. Naturally, I’d like to serve my country.”

I was surprised he was divulging his ambitions so casually to me, a person—or rather werewolf—that he’d just met. *I guess if he’s willing to talk, I should probably ask.*

“Do you have any interest in fighting for the throne, Your Highness?”

“Nah, not really. Besides, even if Ashley doesn’t become the next emperor, my dad will. And if not him, my older brother.”

“It’s not impossible for something to happen to them, though.”

I probed him lightly, and Prince Woroy instantly frowned.

“Don’t even go there. I don’t want to think about anything happening to dad, or my brother. If that’s all you want to talk about, then I’m leaving.”

That’s fine by me. It’s not like I invited you here in the first place. However, I could tell from his sweat that Prince Woroy genuinely didn’t want to have this conversation. At the very least, he wasn’t so much of a monster that he’d kill his own family for the throne. I instantly apologized.

“My apologies, Your Highness. It seems I misunderstood you.”

Prince Woroy folded his arms and sighed, “Misunderstood me, huh? Well, I guess I did just spill my ambitions to you five seconds after we met. I’m sorry too.”

He was a bit overbearing, but still very much a strait-laced guy. Once the misunderstanding was cleared up, he started talking about his dreams. He truly was an overbearing guy.

“Ashley would make a good emperor. He has the right personality for it, and the smarts to improve our food production. Eleora’s not a bad choice either. She has the technical know-how to advance our country’s technology by a lot.”

Prince Ashley certainly did know a lot about plants. On the other hand, Eleora was good with magic and engineering. Both were scholars of their respective fields. Prince Woroy seemed like a short-tempered, simple-minded man at first glance, but he had a good head on his shoulders too. *So this is what royalty’s like.* However, he didn’t forget to add his own two cents.

“But you know, if it was me, I’d want to make Rolmund into a much bigger empire. First, I’d strengthen the military. Sure, a lot of higher-ranked nobles have large private armies, but the empire itself is lacking in troops. We need a unified, national force under the direct control of the emperor. If we have that, we won’t have to fear monster attacks, invasions, or rebellions. Which means we’ll have a more stable situation at home to focus on domestic affairs. Naturally, I’d protect our allies in Meraldia as well. It’s a pretty good plan, don’t you think?”

What do you mean, what do I think? You’re clearly a military guy, but I knew

that already. What I didn't understand was why he was telling me all of this. Fortunately, it didn't take me long until the reason became clear.

Prince Woroy was extremely interested in the land and people of Meraldia. And I'd come here as Meraldia's representative. He was thinking that if he won me over, he'd win Meraldia over, along with its fertile fields. After thinking for a few seconds, I said, "At present, I am Lady Eleora's vassal. While I can discuss trivial matters like duels at my own discretion, I will need her permission to discuss this matter any further."

"So you're saying a life-threatening duel is trivial, huh? I guess hardened warriors really are different! I like you, Veight!"

Prince Woroy looked quite determined to make me his. *I'm kind of scared of this guy now.*

He got to his feet and looked up at Eleora's manor.

"Come to think of it, it is proper manners to greet the master of the house first. Alright, I'll go say hello and ask her to give you to me."

I don't think that's going to work. While I was still thinking of a reply, Prince Woroy walked off. *What a weird prince...*

* * * *

—Prince Woroy's tactics—

It has been a long time since I last saw my cousin Eleora. Granted, our respective positions mean we can't casually bandy words whenever we feel like it. Fortunately, I have the famous Sword Saint Barnack to guard me for this meeting.

Eleora walks into the waiting room, flanked by guards of her own. She has a few members from the 209th mage corps, as well as some... Meraldian women? They look young and fit, with unreadable expressions. Judging by the way they're standing, they're probably close-range fighters. Oh, her favorite assistant, Warrant Officer Natalia's here too. And as usual, she's glaring at me. The girls' piercing glares are a bit off-putting, but at least they're all beauties. Beautiful women are a country's most important treasure.

I peel my gaze away from the shougo board in front of me and look out the window. The noble who came from Meraldia's mingling with the noble ladies down in the garden. Even hardened war veterans find it hard to fend off a group of women. Still, why does he look so unhappy even though he's surrounded by beauties? Don't tell me he prefers men? I turn back to the game board and start thinking of how to counter Eleora's latest move.

"Looks like things are going well for you, Eleora."

"They are indeed, dear cousin."

She's as unsociable as always. It's a shame, since she was so cute when she was a kid... but I guess it's mostly my old man's fault she turned out the way she did. I capture Eleora's spearman with my archer. With this, my knight has a path forward. At a glance, it seems like I have the advantage.

"But you hold the tactical advantage, Prince Woroy."

"Yeah, for now. But you're probably scheming something, aren't you?"

However, a closer look at Eleora's board reveals that she's kept all her strategists safe. And they're all in a position to pressure me. Smiling faintly, Eleora moves her spy forward. Among the strategist pieces, it's the one with the most mobility.

"What gives you that idea? I'm simply doing my job."

"Tch, I won't let you get me that easily."

Now that my knight's been captured, Eleora can use it against me. But I'd been prepared for that possibility, and I take it out with the spearmen I left there for that specific outcome. Still, this means I lost a piece and had to waste a move to maintain my board state. There's nothing more terrifying than being betrayed by a close comrade. Thanks for the life lesson, Eleora.

Our game goes back and forth for a while, and we chat to fill the silence.

"Meraldia sounds like a nice place."

"I'm sure you'd like it. But the Meraldians' values and way of life are different from ours."

"There's plenty of ways to take care of that. You can easily control people

through force, or through religion.”

I send my own spy forward, but Eleora easily deflects my offensive. She then sends out her bishop, which is the strategist with the most close-range threat. That limits my options severely.

“I was opposed to the southern subjugation campaign from the very start. But if I recall correctly, you approved.”

Funnily enough, only me and my older brother had supported the emperor’s plan to conquer the south. My dad, Eleora, and even Ashley had been against it.

“Eventually our barren lands won’t be able to grow enough to feed our people. Also, for someone who opposed the plan, you sure did a good job. But I guess you always do.”

“No one can escape the role they’re assigned at birth. A spy will never become an emperor... At least, that’s what I used to think.”

“But not anymore?”

“Who knows? I certainly don’t.”

Evading the question, Eleora captures my glacier lynx with her spy, making it hers. The glacier lynx is an odd piece. Its movements and intended strategy are supposed to symbolize the harshness of winter. And it’s modeled after a mythical monster.

“I always thought it was weird thematically that you can turn the ‘symbol of winter’ against your opponents somehow.”

“My guess is the creator of the game was trying to say that clever scouting and intelligence gathering can let you turn your enemy’s tactics against them regardless of how abstract they are. Now then, Prince Woroy, it’s your move. If you don’t do something fast, you’ll be checkmated.”

“Oh, I know.”

Shit... I’m totally on the back foot here... Hold on a second, I’ll be mated in seven moves no matter what I do, won’t I? Eleora looks out the window and smiles. Her expression gets a lot more relaxed when she’s not looking at me. Outside, Lord Veight’s sitting on a bench and conferring with his advisors.

“You seem quite interested in the glacier lynx, Eleora. Even though it’s just a piece on the board.”

“It’s not *just* a piece.”

“Oh, it is. Even the emperor is nothing more than a piece with a set role.”

I pull my emperor back a square and smile. Eleora’s right. People can’t escape the roles they’re assigned at birth.

“I can see why it’s caught your eye though. It’s quite a fascinating piece.”

“You can, can you?”

“’Course. He’s the first person who’s managed to keep his cool even after learning who I am. He doesn’t fear the imperial family at all. In fact, it feels like he’s above such mundane concepts as royalty. He’s an interesting guy.”

Eleora skillfully maneuvers her officer pieces to corner my emperor. Most of the strategist pieces are slow, but they’re good at maneuvering. They’re a slippery lot. Meanwhile, all my warriors are stuck at the far corners of the board, unable to defend my emperor. In fact, they were actively getting in the way of my emperor’s retreat. After considering all my options, I decide to surrender.

“It’s my loss. You’ve gotten better, Eleora. You’re one hell of a strategist now.”

“I’m glad you think so, but the game board is a poor substitute for reality. Nothing unexpected occurs on a game board. What you see is all there is. But reality has far too many unknown factors.”

“True that.”

Eleora’s changed a lot since her trip to the south. It looks like she had a pretty hard time in Meraldia.

“You should come visit the Doneiks manor sometimes. No one would try to assassinate you if you came at a prince’s invitation.”

“I know, but I’m not comfortable there. I lack your boldness, Prince Woroy.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I really do respect that side of your personality.”

Does that mean she doesn’t respect the other sides of me? That’s rich considering she used to follow me around all the time as a little girl.

“My dad’s ordered me to stay in the capital for a bit. What’re you going to do?”

“I return to East Rolmund tomorrow. Preparations need to be made for the coming winter. Besides...”

“Besides, what?”

Eleora’s cheeks flush slightly, and she hesitates for a second.

“My uncle on my father’s side, Lord Kastoniev, is asking for me.”

“Bahahahahaha!”

“Don’t laugh!”

I say my goodbyes and walk into the hallway. I check to make sure no one else is nearby, then turn to Barnack.

“What do you think of that man who came from Meraldia?”

“I am but a humble swordsman. I don’t possess the acumen needed to judge people.”

“Who cares. I want to know how *you* feel about him.”

Barnack picked his words carefully.

“He has very good eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

“In a real battle, there are no rules. Meaning it is of the utmost importance to predict your opponent’s actions based on their preliminary movements. But reading those movements takes incredible eyesight. People with eyes like Lord Veight are one in a million.”

“It’s that rare?”

I can’t help but smile.

“But aren’t you also someone blessed with divine eyesight?”

“I wonder how long that eyesight will last... Though it’s the legs that are the first to go as you age. After that comes eyesight. Finally, even your hands atrophy. At that point, you can no longer fight with a sword,” Barnack sighs. “I’ve noticed my speed has dropped ever so slightly recently. My decline as a swordsman has begun.”

“You sure say some heavy stuff. Personally, I’d like it if you stay the empire’s strongest swordsman for a while longer. Since you are my teacher and all.”

“I am unworthy of such praise, young lord. But thank you all the same.”

There aren’t many people who are both extremely skilled and trustworthy. Barnack’s about the only person who I can always trust to have my back while also assassinating people for me. He looks at me and says, “There is one other thing. Lord Veight has an inhuman level of fortitude. Even in a duel to the death, he appears as calm as if he were lounging by the hearth. No normal human has that kind of nerve.”

“Oh yeah, that guy’s got guts. It’s like he doesn’t care about his life at all. What kind of path did he walk to become like that?”

“That I do not know. His life until now must have been tumultuous, to say the least.”

“Even more tumultuous than yours, huh? And you were willing to kill the crown prince’s favorite and risk getting exiled just because of loyalty.”

I can’t even imagine what kind of life it took to get to that level. He’s definitely an interesting guy, but if Eleora isn’t willing to give him up, then he’s a threat. A threat to the whole Doneiks family. Still, assassinating a Meraldian diplomat would not be good for Rolmund on the whole.

There’s a saying my old man’s really fond of. “A shallow schemer will fall into his own traps.” If I want to deal with Lord Veight, I’m gonna need a proper strategy. Plus, if we can win him over instead of eliminating him, we’ll have a powerful trump card on our side. We’ll be able to parcel out Meraldia’s land to other people. All the landless nobles and even some of the landed nobles who’re tired of managing the northernmost reaches of the empire will jump at the chance to serve under us, since we’ll have land to spare. On top of that, Veight himself is a pretty capable guy. He seems quiet, but he’s strong and he’s

got courage. Eventually, I'm gonna make him mine.

* * * *

I was currently facing my biggest crisis since coming to Rolmund.

"Honorary Count Veight Gerun Friedensrichter, may I sit next to you?"

"My name is Inunso. I am Baron Mikhaila's second daughter. May I simply call you Master Veight?"

"I've heard that you're a master not only of the sword, but of all things involving warfare, Master Veight. Would you mind sharing some stories with me?"

I was surrounded by a dozen noble ladies. Honestly, I couldn't fathom why they were all so interested in a country bumpkin like me.

"Master Veight, how did you end up meeting Princess Eleora?"

"Come now, Lady Kviche. That's far too personal a question."

"I suppose so, fufufu."

The ladies brought their heads together and giggled to each other. Even though they were nobles, they were acting like teenage schoolgirls. Sure, there was a little more refinement to their speech, but otherwise, they were no different. After reincarnating, most of my time was spent with someone who'd lived for over a hundred years, so these ladies' youthfulness threw me off. It made dealing with them kind of awkward too. I wanted to chase them away, but my trustworthy bouncer Kite was currently being held up by another crowd of noble girls.

Looks like he's got six on his end. Good luck stopping them, my reliable vice-commander. I've got my hands full here, so I can't help you.

"My apologies, but all these duels have tired me out."

"My, we simply cannot have that. Allow me to call over my family's physician."

I don't need one. If I really was tired, I could just use magic to erase my exhaustion. *Man, what a pain.* As I was lamenting my fate, a single young noble

made their way over to me. One of the ladies went up to greet him, and he grabbed her by the arm and whispered something into her ear. Because of how loud the people around me were, I couldn't make out what he said. Her face flushed, and she signaled to the other ladies hovering around me.

"My apologies, Master Veight, but I must take my leave. Hopefully I can see you another day."

"We're sorry for disturbing you while you're tired. We'll leave you to enjoy yourself."

Enjoy myself? With what? Half the ladies practically ran away while the other half reluctantly walked off. The only person left in the garden was the grinning nobleman. What kind of magic had he used to get rid of everyone?

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Ser Lekomya Hinokentus Wikran, a knight."

That name rang a bell. *Oh yeah. He's the other guy I was supposed to duel today.* I'd completely forgotten thanks to Prince Woroy's visit.

"My apologies for making you wait, Ser Lekomya. I'll prepare the dueling grounds immediately."

"No, that won't be necessary. I've completed my objective for today."

What objective?

"All I wanted was an opportunity to speak alone with you."

I gave him a skeptical look and offered him a chair. He sat down and I instantly asked him the question foremost in my mind.

"How did you manage to chase away all those noble ladies?"

"It was simple. I told them you were a raging homosexual."

Oi, hold on. I'm not letting this stand. As I was thinking of how best to socially eviscerate Lekomya, he casually waved his hand and said with a smile, "Fear not, homosexuality is a common practice among nobles. I happen to be one myself."

Looks like I can't annihilate him socially. So, murder it is.

“Ah, but my interest in you is purely platonic, Lord Veight. If anything, your vice-commander over there is much more to my tastes.”

Kite, watch out. There’s a sexual predator after you. Lekomya’s smile grew wider.

“Please, I was joking.”

Wait, how much of that was a joke? You better tell me, or I won’t listen to a thing you’ve got to say. However, Lekomya kept talking without waiting for a reply.

“Her Highness Eleora wishes to strengthen her faction, correct?”

Her faction, huh? Within Rolmund, the only people who supported Eleora were the university’s researchers, the military’s engineers, and her family in East Rolmund. I felt bad saying this, but none of them would be very helpful in a political battle. Even the nobles of East Rolmund were all new nobles who’d only obtained their positions after the civil war ended.

East Rolmund had been the last place to fall to the imperial army, and so the nobles who ruled there had the shortest family trees. They were considered upstarts by those in the palace and disparaged by dukes from more prestigious areas. On the other hand, landless nobles envied them, so they were hated everywhere.

Lekomya folded his arms and sighed. “So long as I can get my hands on some land, I don’t care where it comes from. West, North, or even East Rolmund is fine with me.”

I decided to ask him a probing question.

“Or perhaps, South Rolmund?”

Lekomya’s easy smile returned.

“Yep, even that’d do. Would you be willing to grant me land, Lord Veight?”

“That isn’t something I can decide on my authority alone.”

I casually deflected Lekomya’s request. He was quite an interesting fellow. Sensing he’d hit a dead end with this line of inquiry, he changed tactics.

“Most people think I, like most landless nobles, belong to His Highness Prince Ashley’s faction.”

“But in truth?”

“We do support His Highness, but there are many nobles hoping to receive land from him. Simply serving him won’t distinguish me enough to be granted land once he’s emperor.”

Rolmund held vast swathes of territory, but most of the land was unfit for agriculture. Even if you tried to develop it by sending serfs there, whatever villages you set up there would just starve in a few years. And all the arable land had already been doled out to existing nobles. Meaning, the only way landless nobles could get anything was if an existing landed noble was stripped of their position, or their entire family wiped out. *That doesn’t mean you can start looking toward Meraldia, though...*

Lekomya added, “His Highness hopes to improve this nation’s agricultural technology and open up more land for farming. But his methods mostly consist of trial and error. There’s no telling how many years it will take before he succeeds.” He sighed. “I could try Lord Doneiks, but most of his supporters are from North Rolmund. An outsider like me won’t be welcome there.”

“So you’ve decided to see how appealing your third potential choice is?”

“Haha, exactly. The Doneiks faction has people like Viscount Schmenivsky throwing their weight around, so it’s not a very comfortable place to be anyway.”

Oh yeah, the Count of Slaughter. Lekomya’s smile returned again.

“There are many within the Doneiks faction who believe haughty, cruel men like him are the ideal noble, and men among men. I could never get along with such a crowd.”

Human life wasn’t worth much in this world, but that was especially true here in Rolmund. Fortunately, it seemed Lekomya possessed some basic human decency. The biggest danger of drawing him into our camp was that he could potentially be a spy for Ashley’s faction. Prince Ashley didn’t strike me as a particularly dangerous person though, so there was likely no need to be that

cautious. After weighing my options, I decided to recruit him. Lekomya'd probably prefer it if I was the one who invited him rather than him begging for inclusion.

"Would you like to swear fealty to Her Highness Princess Eleora instead, Ser Lekomya? If you serve her well, you may end up a Meraldian lord."

"Are you sure you can trust someone you've just met?"

"Her Highness will be the one deciding your trustworthiness."

In truth, I'd be the one to do that, but there was no need to tell him. Lekomya beamed and bowed his head.

"I would love to. As proof of my loyalty, allow me to share some information with you."

"That would be much appreciated. Her Highness is known for amply rewarding those who aid her. You've come to the right place."

Eleora wasn't too good at winning people over, but those she did trusted her completely. She never abandoned a comrade, and she made sure to reward them for their efforts. Good qualities for someone who was going to be empress.

* * * *

—Lekomya's Plan—

I have a dream. It's not a very ambitious dream. I just want my own plot of land. That's all.

Right now I get a stipend from the palace, but it's not enough to support my aging parents or my younger brothers. I need to pay the maintenance fees on my manor and the wages of my servants too. In case of war, I need to maintain a constant supply of horses and armor as well. Plus, I need to hire a stable boy and spear bearer. I'd like a refined, beautiful wife as well, but you need status and wealth to attract suitors. If I'm being greedy, I'd like a few works of art too, so I can look like a proper, well-to-do noble. And of course, I need to give regular donations to the church, or the sun will smite me. I need more money.

If I could just get even a small village, I'd be able to put a couple dozen serfs

and tenant farmers to work. Then all their earnings would belong to me. Of course, I couldn't use their tax revenue solely for my own purposes. I'd need to spend some of it on improving the village's industry.

But neither Prince Ashley nor His Majesty Emperor Bahazoff take any notice of me. There are dozens of other nobles who have priority over me when it comes to land grants. Even though I'd be able to get twice as much value out of the land as those incompetent fools. All I have to do is cultivate sugar beets like Lord Kastoniev, and I'll be able to make a killing. There's no point in growing *just* wheat. The emperor's been going on about how we need more wheat in case there's a famine, but wheat just doesn't sell.

I'll grow expensive crops, make a killing, and then use that money to buy better farming tools and livestock. That way, even the serfs on my land will be happy. I could even get them to make pottery and stuff in their free time to sell for extra cash. And I could use that extra cash to get them more booze. Or make them new houses.

Good land management is all about making your serfs more efficient by giving them a better living environment. I have a ton of plans to manage land efficiently. So someone, anyone, please just give me a plot of land. I'll even make a deal with the devil if that's what it takes. I'll till the fields of hell if I have to.

There are rumors that Meraldia's sworn fealty to Rolmund. On paper, they're still independent, but it sounds like the reality is that all their lords are Princess Eleora's lackeys. I have no idea if that's true or not, but at least that strange foreign noble, Veight, seems to be following her. That man possesses a lot of foresight and is quite wise. On top of that, he looks rich. No way am I letting him go. Right now, all I can offer him is my loyalty and the meager information I've gathered. Oh, and my life, I guess. I'm giving you everything I have, so please just bless me with some land and maybe a little glory. Actually, no. I don't even need that. Just give me a chance. One chance. I'll make something out of that one chance, just you watch.

* * * *

I stared out the window as I penned another letter to Airia. The afternoon sun

cast a soft, warm, light into the room. Far south of the scenery below me, way past what I could see, lay Meraldia. I was starting to get a little homesick. *I hope everyone's doing okay.*

"What's wrong, Veight? Missing our old village in the forest? Or are you missing Ryunheit?"

Fahn chuckled to herself, and I smiled wanly.

"Both, I think. I want to get this over with fast. Hopefully we can go back by spring."

Rolmund's short summer had ended, and fall was approaching.

"Eleora's been getting a lot of new allies recently. But now there are so many people around her that it's hard to guard her."

"Yeah, but I'm the one who's had to make a fool of myself to get that moody princess all these allies..."

My style of diplomacy through dueling had endeared me to a lot of nobles in the capital, and that had translated to people coming to Eleora to join her faction. Of course, most of them were only coming to her out of self-interest.

Nobles had a duty to support their family and retainers. In turn, those retainers worked hard to make their chosen noble emperor. The glue that held the relationship between nobles and their servants together was rewards. Before, Eleora hadn't been in a position to reward anyone, and so had possessed few followers. But now she had the silver bullet known as me. Everyone wanted Meraldia's land, so a few vague promises from me were enough to have people salivating at the mouth. *Anyway, I better get back to this letter.*

* * * *

—Veight's Letter to Airia: 4—

Dear Airia,

As you so keenly predicted, I have engaged in a number of other duels. But not too many, and nothing that would endanger my life, so please don't worry. It's thanks to those duels that my name's spread through Rolmund's imperial

court.

The other day, I met with the emperor's nephew, Prince Woroy. He's quite the interesting individual. Even though he's wildly ambitious, he's fun to talk to. I guess people born to high stations see the world a different way. I've learned a lot by talking to the people here. Both Prince Ashley and Prince Woroy were different than I was expecting.

I'm beginning to think that Eleora might just have been overly wary of the two of them. Of course, she's got good reason to be wary, but I can't go into details here. Also, I have yet to meet Lord Doneiks, so I shouldn't jump to conclusions about everyone vying for the throne.

Right now, all Rolmund's nobles have their eyes on Meraldia. They want our warmer, more fertile land. However, their overwhelming desire has made recruiting allies easier. Our progress has been slow, but steady. So I hope you'll forgive me for continuing to duel. Please? Of course, from now on I plan to cut back on my dueling. It's time I started negotiating directly with higher-ranked nobles. There's a lot that needs to be done in order to expand Eleora's influence.

Oh yes, thank you so much for the money you sent me. In Rolmund, I've been granted the title of Honorary Count, and it's been costing a lot to keep up appearances. Honorary Counts don't get a stipend from the court, and honestly, I think the title just exists to extort money from foreign dignitaries. I'll do my best to get back all the money I've spent here. I'm looking forward to being there with you for Ryunheit's next harvest festival. Right now, I'm working hard to make sure we can have a peaceful one next year. Look forward to my next report.

Sincerely, Veight.

* * * *

Just as I finished writing my letter, there was a knock on my door and Eleora entered.

"So this is where you were, Lord Veight?"

"Oh, is it time for dinner?"

“I wouldn’t come all the way to your room just to call you for dinner. In case you’ve forgotten, this *is* my manor. Anyway, I’ve come to tell you that I’m postponing my return to Fort Novesk.”

Now that was unexpected. Eleora had been the one who wanted to return the most. Fahn and I exchanged glances.

“What happened, Eleora?” Fahn asked.

Eleora turned to her with a sigh.

“My uncle... Lord Kastoniev is coming here. He was getting worried since I wasn’t coming back, so he elected to come see me instead.”

Your uncle sure is a worrywart. This was a good opportunity to ask something that had been on my mind for a while, though.

“Personally, I think Lord Kastoniev is a trustworthy ally, but do you have reason to believe otherwise?”

Eleora sat down and looked off into the distance.

“I want to believe him, but I can’t bring myself to. Do you remember how I told you before that my wet nurse tried to assassinate me?”

Yeah, didn’t you say you saw her again after ten years and she instantly went after your life? Eleora covered her face with her hands and said in a pained voice, “I was never able to find out just who ordered the assassination, but my wet nurse had been in Lord Kastoniev’s employ.”

Yeah, that’s definitely a good reason to be suspicious.

“Lord Kastoniev had been the one who’d assigned her as my wet nurse, and when I was old enough, he’d recalled her back to his castle.”

If you’d had such a good reason to suspect him, you should have told us earlier. I opened my mouth to say as much, but then stopped when I saw Eleora’s anguished expression.

Rolmund nobles often relied on wet nurses to raise their children, so to the kids, their wet nurses were more like mothers than their actual mothers. In fact, the bond between child and wet nurse often ran so deep that nobles would often take care of their wet nurses in their old age.

Meanwhile, Eleora had had her life targeted by her wet nurse. No wonder she was so distrusting. However, it wouldn't make sense for an assassination attempt to be easily traceable. If someone close to Lord Kastoniev tried to assassinate Eleora, it made sense that he'd be the first one suspected.

"Personally, I doubt Lord Kastoniev would use one of his own servants if he wanted to assassinate you."

Eleora lowered her hands from her face and looked up at me.

"Then who do you think gave the order? At the time, Lord Doneiks would have been the only person with good reason to want me dead, but I hadn't even met him then."

"You weren't able to trace the trail back?"

"I was fourteen at the time, what did you expect? Now, I could mobilize the military police, but then I was just a student."

But even as a student, she'd been able to foil the assassination attempt. Eleora really was amazing. She gently patted the Blast Grimoire she kept on her at all times and added, "If you put your faith in people, it just causes more hurt when you're inevitably betrayed. I have men and vassals under my care. I can't afford to be lax if I want to keep them safe."

I see, now I understand your position. But that doesn't mean I agree.

"I get that, but if you don't trust anyone, you won't be able to increase your number of allies. There are times where you have to go with your gut and trust someone."

Eleora scowled at me.

"You can only do that because you're a werewolf. You can tell when people are lying or when they want to hurt you. Plus, no one can take you in a one on one fight. I don't have any of those advantages."

It was true that I was blessed to be both a werewolf and a mage, but... *Fine, guess it's up to me to fix your twisted nature.* It was time for the reliable vice-commander Veight to shine, time for Eleora to start on her quest to take the throne. But first, I needed her to clear the tutorial. As a clear bonus, I'll gift her

with a trustworthy ally.

“Even so, Eleora, you need at least allies you can trust. You need as many loyal allies around you as possible if you want to succeed.”

I started formulating a plan in my head.

“If Lord Kastoniev’s coming here, that’s even better. I’ll talk to him and sniff out his true intentions.”

Eleora’s eyebrows twitched, and I smelled the sharp tang of nervous sweat coming off her. I smiled gently in an attempt to ease her worries.

“Don’t worry, Eleora. Remember how I handled Lekomya? You can trust in my skills.”

Ever since Lekomya had switched sides, he’d brought new information from the palace to Eleora every day. Eleora relaxed visibly.

“I had no connections with the landless nobles before, so I’m truly grateful for Ser Lekomya’s help. From what I hear, he’s managed to increase the number of supporters I have inside the palace.”

Lekomya’s head was probably filled with nothing but thoughts about how he’d soon be a lord in the warm, fertile land of Meraldia. He was only helping Eleora because if she became emperor, she’d be able to grant him land anywhere.

“We may be the weakest faction in the empire right now, but we hold the trump card known as Meraldia. Winning this power struggle will be easy. Trust me.”

Eleora still looked a bit hesitant, but in the end she nodded.

“I’m sorry, Lord Veight. I want to know what my uncle thinks of me. Not just as a princess, but as a niece. Please, lend me your strength.”

“You got it.”

As always, I’d offered to help without considering the consequences. *Oh well, everything’ll turn out fine. Probably.*

The next morning, Lord Kastoniev’s carriage arrived. He was getting on in

years, and a long journey like this had clearly tired him out. But even so, his face lit up the moment he saw Eleora.

“Princess Eleora, thank the heavens you’re well!”

“You worry too much, Lord Kastoniev. We met just the other day.”

They really did look just like a doting uncle and his tomboyish niece.

“Princess, how long do you plan on remaining in the capital?”

“Ask that duel-crazed maniac over there. He seems to be treating the capital as his personal playground.”

In front of Lord Kastoniev, she was the one of higher rank, so she could ridicule me all she wanted. Behind me, I could hear Natalia and my werewolves snickering. Lord Kastoniev had his own manor in the capital, but he’d elected to stay with Eleora.

“Are you sure you should be here, Lord Kastoniev? Isn’t your city’s harvest festival happening soon?”

Even though Rolmund kept a strict hierarchy most times, that hierarchy was loosened during the harvest festival. It was an important time for commoners and nobles alike to mingle together and celebrate the year’s bounty. However, Lord Kastoniev frowned and shook his head.

“Since last year, I’ve left matters of governance in my sons’ hands. I’m planning on appointing one of them the official head of the house next year.”

“I see... This time last year was when I was busy planning the southern campaign.”

Reminiscing, Eleora guided Lord Kastoniev through her manor.

“Dinner’s ready, so why don’t you come in and relax?”

After dinner, I went over to the parlor, where Lord Kastoniev was relaxing.

“My apologies for disturbing your rest, but I was hoping for an opportunity to speak with you, Lord Kastoniev.”

Lord Kastoniev was lounging in his pajamas, but he looked like he’d been waiting for me.

“I suspected you would be coming around now. Take a seat.”

Lord Kastoniev had his servants retire to another room, leaving the two of us alone.

“You wish to talk about Princess Eleora, correct?”

He’s a sharp man.

“Yes. Though it’s a bit complicated.”

Now then, where do I start? I examined the deep wrinkles in Lord Kastoniev’s face as I gathered my resolve. Before I could say anything though, Lord Kastoniev spoke.

“Lord Veight, who are you, really?”

What’s that supposed to mean? Doing my best to hide my surprise, I plastered on a poker face.

“I’m not sure how I should answer that question.”

Lord Kastoniev scrutinized my expression for a few seconds, then sighed.

“I’m asking not as the head of the Kastoniev family, but as Eleora’s uncle. I know my niece. She’d never be able to conquer Meraldia.”

Yeah, you guessed right. Lord Kastoniev put a hand to his forehead. His mannerisms reminded me of Eleora.

“She’s like her father. A rational, argumentative girl. She can’t even win over the hearts of her own people. I highly doubt she was able to convince the Meraldians, who have a completely different culture, to take her side.”

You can say that again. Lord Kastoniev examined my reaction, then said in a pleading tone, “It would be one thing if she’d just failed, but ever since she’s returned, Eleora’s been friendlier and less tense than before. She’s so different, it’s almost as if she’s been possessed.”

*Wait, that blunt attitude is her acting*friendly? *Now I’m curious what she was like before.* Lord Kastoniev added, “Lord Veight, I believe you are the key to her transformation. I have already finished raising my children and am mostly retired. The only thing weighing on my mind now is what will become of my

brother's orphaned daughter. Would you be so kind as to put this old man's worries to rest?"

That's not as easy to do as you think... I couldn't sense anything off about Lord Kastoniev though. He wasn't lying, that was for sure. I'd asked Mao to gather information on Lord Kastoniev for me, but all he'd been able to discover was that he was on bad terms with Lord Doneiks. *Alright, let's take a gamble.* I straightened my back and looked Lord Kastoniev in the eyes.

"Know that once you hear the truth, there will be no turning back. Are you sure you want to know?"

"Absolutely. Men of the Kastoniev family fear nothing."

His stern gaze held the weight of years behind it, and it was enough to overwhelm me. Steeling my resolve, I divulged our secret to him.

"It's as you suspected, Eleora failed to conquer Meraldia."

"I knew it..."

Kastoniev looked mildly disappointed, as if Eleora had brought home a bad report card or something. You'd think he would have a bigger reaction, considering I'd just revealed a huge state secret.

"She managed to destroy the Senate that governed northern Meraldia, but had trouble conquering the south. And while she was struggling, the viceroys in the north rebelled against her."

We were the ones who set that chain of events into motion, but that wasn't important, so I didn't mention it.

"In the end, she was forced to surrender to the Southern Commonwealth. And now she's Meraldia's puppet. Our goal is to put her on the throne and have her make Rolmund abandon their expansionist dreams. It's for that reason that we're currently cooperating with Eleora."

"I see."

Lord Kastoniev easily accepted both the fact that his niece had become a puppet and that we were planning on usurping the throne. His reactions were so contrary to what I was expecting that I found myself taking an interest in

him.

“None of this bothers you?”

“Not at all. Your actions were rational, and your explanation makes sense. To be honest, I’m more relieved than I am surprised.”

It seemed Eleora’s uncle didn’t think too highly of her leadership abilities. Even though I was aiming for the destruction of Rolmund as he knew it, Lord Kastoniev just sighed tiredly and leaned back in his sofa.

“It all makes sense now. I suppose this means you’re the one pulling Meraldia’s strings, Lord Veight?”

“No, I’m just a simple vice-commander. I’m in charge of carrying out Meraldia’s plan, but that’s all.”

“Hahaha, if you say so.”

I’m being serious though. Looking relieved, Lord Kastoniev poured himself a glass of wine. Rolmundians loved alcohol, and wine was so light it was more like juice to them.

“Now that I know the truth, I suppose there’s only one thing to be done. For the sake of my beloved niece, I’ll support your plot.”

“Are you sure you should be making that decision so lightly?”

If you get caught, you’ll be executed along with your whole family, you know? Lord Kastoniev smiled wanly.

“I’m an ambitious enough man that I had my own brother marry the imperial princess to improve my own status. Usurping the throne was beyond my capabilities, but now that there’s a real chance of succeeding, I have no reason to hesitate. This is a fitting final gambit to end my life on.”

“You realize that if we fail, it won’t be just you, but your entire family who’ll be executed, right?”

“I am aware.” Lord Kastoniev calmly downed his glass of wine. “But consider this. Now that you’ve divulged your plot to me, what other choice do I have? If I tried to report this to the emperor, I would be executed simply by association. More importantly, I wouldn’t even be able to leave this manor alive.”

You're not wrong. I had no intention of letting him go had he decided not to join our camp.

"Most importantly though, I refuse to become the kind of despicable scum who'd sell out his own niece. The Kastoniev family earned its prestige through valor in battle. Since then, we've built up a reputation as honest and trustworthy nobles. If I sell out my own niece out of cowardice, then I would be setting a poor example for my sons."

He really was Eleora's uncle; he was just like her. I didn't smell any lies coming from him, so I decided to trust him. There was still one thing I needed to ask though.

"It's reassuring to hear that. Thank you so much for your cooperation. By the way, Lord Kastoniev, now that you've decided to help, would you be willing to solve one of Eleora's worries?"

"And that would be?"

I told Lord Kastoniev about how Eleora's wet nurse betrayed her. From what I could tell, that was the event that had scarred Eleora and was preventing her from opening her heart to potential allies. It made sense, of course. Someone Eleora had trusted more than her own mother had tried to kill her for her own self-interest. Kastoniev's brow knitted in anguish.

"As I thought, that incident is still weighing on her mind... I've wanted to solve this misunderstanding for years, but I've always avoided broaching the topic."

He prefaced his explanation with, "I doubt you'll believe me, but..." then told me the entire story. After the failed attempt on Eleora's life, Lord Kastoniev had launched his own investigation into who the mastermind was. Apparently, Eleora's wet nurse had actually been a Doneiks family spy who'd been sent to Lord Kastoniev's manor to monitor his family.

"At the time, I'd been at the head of East Rolmund's newly minted nobles, so Lord Doneiks was likely wary of me. While not as reckless as you, I was quite reckless in my youth."

As Eleora's wet nurse had been a capable servant, Lord Kastoniev had valued her highly. It was for that reason he'd sent her to the Originia household,

unaware of her true loyalties.

"I have no idea what Lord Doneiks was thinking, but his status means he's not someone I can formally launch an investigation on with circumstantial evidence. However, none of this changes the fact that my foolishness deeply hurt Eleora."

Since then, interactions between uncle and niece had grown awkward and strained.

"I would apologize, but she would never believe me now. Having discovered that the wet nurse sent by her uncle was actually an assassin, she likely doesn't know who to trust."

What an unfortunate tale. Thank God I was born a werewolf. Werewolves protected their pack with their lives, regardless of blood ties. But for some reason, Lord Kastoniev suddenly smiled.

"This is quite a surprise though. Ever since her campaign in the south, Eleora has mellowed out considerably. In a way, perhaps it was a good thing that she suffered such a bitter defeat at your hands."

Yeah, I really want to see how she was like before if this is "mellow." Either way, it seemed Lord Kastoniev was willing to become our ally. His story made me curious about Lord Doneiks though. *Looks like I should investigate him next. But first, let's get this uncle-niece relationship patched up.*

* * * *

—Eleora and Her Uncle—

It's been a long time since I was last nervous to open a door. But I need to discuss that horrific incident with my uncle. I don't particularly dislike my uncle. In fact, my uncle and my late father were supposedly close. And when my father died, my uncle raised me like his own daughter. Or so I'd thought. If my uncle truly loved me, why did *his* servant, my wet nurse, try to kill me? I have no idea why my uncle might want me dead. There's no reason for him to target my life. Though even if there was a reason, I still can't understand why he'd do it.

Either way, that incident shook me to the core. I became afraid of trusting others. I even began to fear that my mother or my younger sister might want me dead. Every stranger I met was a potential enemy who might be conspiring

with others. How could I trust anyone?

But in the end, my mistrusting nature led to me making a critical blunder in my invasion of the south. I lost nearly half my men, and I was captured. The reason for that was simple. During my invasion of Meraldia, I'd failed to make any allies. My methods had clearly been wrong. But what would the right method have been? I know the answer to that now. Like the Black Werewolf King, I should have been focused on building alliances.

However, I'm not capable of doing the things he is. I can't sniff out lies with my nose, and a single sword stab is all it takes to kill me. Besides, I'm too logical. I can't adapt the way I interact with people based on their actions the way he can. And yet, my position demands I do the same things he does. This will be my first step in doing just that. From here on out, I'll be plunging myself into the world of people, trying to discern who I can make an ally, and who will always be my enemy.

I've already heard from the Black Werewolf King that my uncle is likely not an enemy. He's rarely ever wrong. I heard my uncle's explanation from him as well. It makes sense, too. All that remains is somehow processing these complex feelings swirling inside me. Actually, no. As I just said, I'm a logical person. There's no "somehow," I'll wrest these emotions under control using logic. This is the path of life that I've chosen, and I'm going to live this way until the end.

Don't be afraid. "Those who carry Kastoniev blood in them are bold and courageous." That had been Father's favorite saying. I've steeled my resolve, all that's left is to carry it through.

After a few deep breaths, I knock on the door.

"Uncle, do you have a moment?"

"Of course, come in."

My uncle's gentle voice beckons me inside. I go through the door and find him sitting by the fireplace. Next to him is an empty chair. The moment I sit in it, there'll be no turning back. Neither of us will leave until we've talked everything through. Right now, those few steps to the chair feel longer than the distance from here to Meraldia. I want to run away. But the only way I'll have a future is if I clear this hurdle. I take one more deep breath, then step forward.

* * * *

“They’re taking a long time...”

A lot of time had passed since Eleora went to Lord Kastoniev’s room to talk. I’d left since I figured she’d be fine even without me, but now I wondered if that had been a mistake. I was starting to get a little worried. If Eleora couldn’t even overcome this trial, then she’d never make it as empress. Even if she did, her natural mistrust would lead her to execute all potential traitors and start a reign of fear.

However, I didn’t think Eleora was that foolish, or that much of a coward. She could handle this. So long as Eleora and Lord Kastoniev’s conversation went well, he’d fully commit himself to our cause. I could count on him to gather up all East Rolmund’s nobles under our banner.

I’d been surprised to learn that even he had an ambitious heart underneath his gentle exterior. Rolmundians were terrifying. Looking at it from a different perspective though, Lord Kastoniev was determined enough to betray even the emperor for the sake of his family. I could see why Eleora had been wary of him before. If he betrayed us partway through, we’d be finished. Just in case, I was planning on having a few werewolves who were good at stealth keep an eye on him. Though it’d probably end up being an unnecessary precaution.

Now then, all that remained was Lord Doneiks. He was the younger brother of the current emperor and the ruler of North Rolmund. He possessed vast tracts of land, and all of the nobles in close proximity to his territories followed him. According to what I’d heard, he was a broad-minded, sociable man who possessed strong leadership qualities. At the same time, though, he was a clever schemer who’d dirtied his hands with assassination and worse. I called a meeting of my Meraldian crew to discuss Lord Doneiks with them.

“What do you think, boss? Should we just off that Doneiks guy?”

Jerrick, who’d been happily repairing Eleora’s fireplace for fun, turned to me. I shook my head.

“We could probably pull off an assassination easily enough, but if we kill him, it’ll destabilize northern Rolmund. I want to keep political turmoil to a minimum until we can crown Eleora empress.”

“If you say so. Kite, does this look level to you?”

“Drop it another three... No, two and a half mioros to the right.”

Kite cast his epoch magic over the fireplace’s mantle to make sure he was getting the correct measurements. The two of them got along pretty well. Once he was done analyzing the fireplace, he stepped back and Lacy offered him a rag to wipe the soot off his hands. As he wiped down his hands he said thoughtfully, “At the moment, we can assume that Prince Ashley is choosing to remain neutral in the power struggle. Meaning our biggest obstacle is Lord Doneiks. We should investigate him at the very least.”

“Yeah, that I agree with... But how do we go about it?”

I took the cloth Lacy held out to me and started wiping down the nearby windows.

“Wait, hold on. How come I’m helping clean too?”

Parker, who was cleaning the window next to mine, turned to me with a nostalgic smile.

“It looks like your time as a disciple trained you well. Hahaha.”

“Like you’re one to talk. You’re helping out too!”

Crap, the moment one person starts doing chores, everyone ends up working. This was a habit that had been ingrained into all of Gomoviroa’s disciples. Since we were already at it, we decided to polish the floor as well, only taking a break when some of Eleora’s maids brought us tea. They’d been surprised to see us doing the work of servants, but hopefully that had left an impression of how diligent Meraldians were, and not that we were just eccentric.

“There’s a lot of publicly available information on Lord Doneiks.”

He’d served as the emperor’s aide for many years, so he had a long service record, and had made quite a name for himself. Lacy read through the latest letter Lekomya had sent us and muttered, “On the surface, he appears to be an outstanding gentleman. And helped solve long-standing irrigation and flooding issues with the rivers inside his territory.”

The rivers in Rolmund flowed northward, down from the mountain ranges.

And when the snow melted every spring, the rivers flooded their banks, causing major damage. However, Lord Doneiks had devised a clever system of flood barriers that now contained the flooding.

But while he had done many great things, there were also a plethora of negative rumors about him. Monza threw out the dirty water in the cleaning bucket and shrugged her shoulders.

“That Viscount whoever that you dueled was killed by that old man too, right?”

“Yeah. The official statement is that Viscount Schmenivsky’s resting in Lord Doneiks’ mountain villa, but rumors say he was actually assassinated. I guess he was tarnishing his faction’s reputation by claiming I’m a werewolf so Lord Doneiks had him removed.”

Parker gave me a surprised look.

“You actually remembered that viscount’s name?”

“I figured I should try to get it right since he’s dead and all.”

“What point is there in remembering the names of the dead? Especially since you aren’t much of a necromancer. Have you been influenced by Master?”

To be honest, Viscount Schmenivsky had been scum of the lowest order. Death was a just reward for the Count of Slaughter. He’d been arrogant, violent, and cruel. Still, it wasn’t right to disparage the dead. At the very least, I felt like I should get his name right. That was all there was to it. Explaining my mindset would be difficult though, so I just gave Parker some vague explanation. He stared at me curiously for a few seconds, then smiled wanly.

“You truly are an unfathomable man. Personally, I would like to get to know my cute younger brother better, so I’d prefer it if you’d be more open with me.”

“I’m not your brother, just a fellow disciple.”

Some time later, Eleora walked into the room.

“Did you finish talking with Lord Kastoniev?”

“Yes.”

Though her response was curt, her eyes welled up with emotion. I had no idea what they'd talked about in there, but it looked like they'd made up. She turned to the fireplace and said, "Don't you think that design stands out a little too much?"

It was only after she pointed it out that I realized the problem.

"Whoops. We ended up remaking the mantelpiece in the Meraldian style."

I hadn't really been paying attention to the design, but Jerrick had naturally chosen a southern Meraldian style for it. And it clashed pretty badly with the surrounding Rolmund architecture. It was hard to explain, but it was kind of like topping a cake with cheese instead of frosting. It sounded disgusting at first glance, but actually tasted pretty good once you tried it. Jerrick seemed to have realized his mistake too, and he smiled apologetically.

"Ah, my bad. Don't worry, I'll fix it back to its original design."

However, Eleora smiled and shook her head.

"You went out of your way to repair it, so it's fine like this. Besides, it will make for a good reminder of the time I fought in Meraldia. Thank you."

Whoa. Is it just me, or does she look really happy? Everyone else was just as surprised by Eleora's sudden transformation, and they all exchanged confused looks. After a few seconds the shock passed, and Fahn turned to Eleora, a mischievous smirk playing about her lips.

"I never knew you could smile like that."

Puzzled, Eleora touched her cheeks.

"Is it really that strange?"

"Nah, it's not weird. In fact, I think you look better when you're smiling."

Fahn was absolutely right. It seemed that at long last, Eleora's frozen heart had begun to thaw. But that meant I needed to be extra careful. If she was betrayed by someone she trusted again, she'd probably never be able to recover. Likely, she'd never trust anyone ever again. And if someone incapable of trust took the throne, it would just lead to a paranoia-fueled purge. While it was true that something like that wouldn't affect Meraldia, it would still leave a

bad taste in my mouth knowing I'd helped bring an empire to ruin. Besides, if the political turmoil in Rolmund got too severe, it might start affecting its neighboring countries as well, including us.

Eleora handed me a letter, interrupting my thoughts.

"A few minutes ago, a messenger from the Doneiks estate came to deliver invitations to a party. There's one for me, and one for you."

"They want me too?"

What could the emperor's ambitious brother want with me? Eleora smiled faintly.

"The formal reason for why we've been invited is that Lord Doneiks wishes to celebrate my accomplishments in the south and meet with the Meraldian diplomatic delegation. He sent an invitation to Ser Lekomya as well, so I imagine he's planning to invite all the nobles within my faction. I imagine this is no mere party."

"I see, so he wants to crush us in one fell swoop?"

"Not necessarily. Regardless of his intentions, it's clear he's plotting something."

Interesting. Eleora gauged my reaction.

"Nothing ever fazes you, does it?"

"That's not true. In fact, I'm worried enough that I think we should assign guards to Ser Lekomya and the others. But while it's easy to protect one or two people, it's going to be hard to guard your whole faction."

Her expression grew pensive, and she replied, "I highly doubt Lord Doneiks will resort to assassination here, but it doesn't hurt to be safe. Unlike my father's brother, my mother's brother is quite belligerent."

Even better. I had a much easier time dealing with people who tried to posture with threats.

The appointed day arrived, and I brought my entire werewolf platoon with me to the banquet.

“Hamaam, your squad’s in charge of guarding Ser Lekomya. Jerrick, you guys take Sir Shawch. Monza, you’re on Sir Mottemo. Fahn, Vodd, you guys protect me and Eleora’s group. That includes her attendants like Borsche and Natalia.”

Thanks to Lekomya’s ceaseless efforts, we had a few more allies in the palace. However, that also meant we needed to protect more people. Right now, there were a total of 14 people in Eleora’s camp. They were all low-ranking nobles without any land, but they were vital in providing Eleora with up-to-date information from the palace. Furthermore, if we failed to protect them, people would think Eleora wasn’t someone worth following. It was possible Lord Doneiks’ goal was to just undermine trust in Eleora, so we couldn’t afford to be lax.

I had no idea how Lord Doneiks was planning to strike, but worst case, he’d rush us with everything at his disposal. Werewolves couldn’t exhibit their full strength without transforming, but their enhanced senses worked even in human mode. And we were especially sensitive to human reactions.

“Hey, boss. That lady over there doesn’t look like she’s doing too good. Her breathing’s all messed up. We should call a doctor, or a healer.”

“Thanks for the heads up, Jerrick. Kite, call someone over.”

Case in point. Werewolves evolved to hunt humans, so our senses were specialized in reading their emotions and desires. Fortunately, any ability that helped you set up ambushes against a target inevitably also helped you avoid ambushes from that same target. *You better guard everyone with your lives, guys.*

Today’s party was being held at a rural mansion located within one of the forests in Lord Doneiks’ domain. The mansion itself was close to the size of the imperial palace, and its vast grounds were perhaps even larger. And every inch of that space was being utilized in some way for the party. After double and triple-checking to make sure the food wasn’t poisoned, I started wolfing down on as much as I could get my hands on.

“Veight, don’t you think you’re eating a bit too much? None of the other nobles have even touched the food.”

“It’s customary in Rolmund not to eat at a buffet-style party. But that’s

because they're worried about being poisoned, and I've already made sure the food's safe, so it's fine."

"Did you really want to eat that badly?"

Kite watched on in disbelief. But for werewolves, food was a matter of life and death. We needed to eat an enormous amount to keep up with our metabolisms. Fortunately, the food at a party hosted by the emperor's younger brother was as good as you'd expect. By which I meant, amazing. There was something horribly wrong in this country if all this delicious food went to waste every party.

Chewing on a piece of meat, I went up to the second floor of the mansion's atrium. From here, I could see the entirety of the banquet. I went through the rest of the food on my plate as I enjoyed the view. In this world, I wouldn't get too many chances to eat as much roast beef as I wanted. Since all the food was going to be thrown away anyway, I was doing Lord Doneiks a favor, really.

Today's guests were mostly just the main members of the Eleora and Doneiks factions. A few members of Ashley's faction were here as well, though. The nobles in Eleora's faction, in other words our allies, were all clumped together in one corner of the room. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say they'd all been herded into one corner. Members of Doneiks' faction had surrounded them. There were a few members of Doneiks' faction for each one of ours, and they seemed to be giving some kind of speech to our nobles. It was difficult to pick out individual conversations from here, but I could tell they were scheming something big.

They were purposely doing this out in the open to show that they weren't afraid of me. *Guess I should go stop them.* But before I could take a single step, Prince Woroy came up next to me.

"I see you came, Meraldia's war hero."

"You have my deepest thanks for the invitation, Your Highness."

Shit, I can't leave a prince behind without it looking rude. Prince Woroy examined the surroundings with a grin.

"Looks like the party's getting heated up."

“As you say.”

But as loathe as I was to stay here, I was stuck. Prince Woroy looked down at the nobles belonging to Eleora’s faction and muttered, “The Doneiks family has blackmail material on most nobles. We know which nobles are cheating on their spouses, and which ones indulge in inhumane hobbies. We know who amassed their wealth through illicit means and who has mountains of debt. You get the idea.”

The nobles in our faction were valuable allies, but they weren’t necessarily good people. For the most part, they were just normal nobles, so it was expected that they had an unsavory secret or two. Even if they didn’t, the Doneiks family had more than enough power and influence to make them defect. They could offer land or treasure as an incentive to switch sides, or simply threaten them into submission. This was quite a predicament. Were this Meraldia, I could simply use my authority to fight back. But in Rolmund, I was an outsider.

Cold sweat started pouring down my back. Prince Woroy turned to me and said with a serious expression, “If your camp’s folding this easily, then Eleora’s a worthless strategist. You should join me instead. It’ll be best for everyone.”

Prince Woroy wasn’t being haughty, he truly believed that was the case. While I appreciated the thought, I wasn’t going to join him. *Crap, everyone in our faction is starting to look afraid. What kind of dirt did the Doneiks family dig up?* While I knew it’d be rude, I had no choice but to go down there myself now. However, Eleora appeared just in time to save me. Since she was the guest of honor, she’d arrived late as per Rolmundian custom. The moment she stepped into the main hall she immediately realized what was going on. Smiling faintly, she surveyed the Doneiks faction nobles.

“This seems to be quite a lively discussion you have going on. Mind if I join in?”

Though her tone was mild, Eleora was clearly implying that if the Doneiks nobles didn’t back off she’d eviscerate them. Though she was sixth in line for the throne, she was still an imperial princess. Furthermore, she was also thought to be a master tactician who’d conquered all of Meraldia with just her

personal bodyguards. Sure, these nobles had the backing of Lord Doneiks, but even then, they wouldn't risk offending an imperial princess.

The nobles who'd surrounded the members of Eleora's faction slowly backed off. However, not all of them were willing to respect her authority. Like Viscount Schmenivsky, quite a few of them looked down on her. Several of them shot Eleora defiant looks. She examined them coolly and said, "If exchanging words isn't enough to satisfy you, how about something more hands-on? Our esteemed Astral Fencer, Lord Veight, seems quite bored."

Everyone looked up at me. *Wait, what? Are you kidding me, Eleora?* It seemed Eleora wanted to use me as a threat to keep the Doneiks faction nobles in line. After considering all my options, I ignored Rolmundian manners and leaned against the banister railing. Railings were considered objects to be polished by servants, not supporting structures that were meant to actually be touched by nobles. But I was done being proper. I downed my glass of wine in one gulp and plastered on a feral grin. I was already ignoring courtesy by eating and drinking as much as I wanted, so I might as well lean into it all the way.

"A duel would certainly spice up this banquet. I've been looking for an excuse to go wild without holding back. One gets tired of dueling without spilling blood after a while."

I glared down at the nobles who'd tried to challenge Eleora. I'd gotten quite used to putting on the villain act. *Bring it. I'll take you on in anything, from dueling to wrestling to sumo to dodgeball.*

But the nobles who'd been so belligerent moments before meekly turned away upon receiving my glare. The Doneiks faction nobles had been completely cowed. On the other hand, Eleora's allies all breathed audible sighs of relief.

Including Viscount Schmenivsky, I'd broken the ribs and knocked out the teeth of any noble who'd dueled me with the intention to kill. Which was why the nobles who actually hated me were quite afraid of me as well. That helped in driving threats like these home. *But you know, this makes it sound like I'm some crazed, duel-loving fanatic.* Was that really the reputation I wanted to cultivate? *Oh, whatever.*

Prince Woroy interrupted the silence by clapping his hands together. He

smiled ruefully and said, “While some stimulating swordplay would certainly liven up the party, it won’t do to be rude to Meraldia’s greatest general. Our two nations are friends after all. Musicians, play us ‘The Grapevines of Romka.’”

The song Prince Woroy had requested was a jaunty tune that was a favorite among commoners. It was often played during the harvest season when wine was being fermented. The frigid atmosphere I’d created relaxed somewhat, and Prince Woroy turned to me with a rueful smile.

“Please don’t scare them too much. They may be powerless cowards, but our family needs them.”

Smiling, I bowed to the prince.

“My apologies, Your Highness. I have an easily misunderstood temperament.”

“Misunderstood, huh?” Prince Woroy’s smile grew lighter. “In that case, I’d like to see your true colors someday. I’m sure it’d surprise me.”

For someone who looks like a musclehead, he sure is insightful.

“Oh yeah, my older brother is here at the party as well. Let me introduce you to him while I’ve still got the chance. Normally he’s away managing his territories. Wait here.”

Prince Woroy walked off.

I spent the time he was gone glaring at the Doneiks nobles to make doubly sure they didn’t try anything. Finally, Prince Woroy returned with a bespectacled man. While the newcomer had a similar build and features to the prince, he seemed much more serious. Prince Woroy whispered a few words to him, then walked over to me.

“Lord Veight, this is my brother, Ivan.”

“It is an honor to finally meet you, Prince Ivan. I am Veight Gerun Friedensrichter.”

Ivan nodded solemnly.

“And it is a pleasure to meet you as well, Lord Friedensrichter. This party is being held in your honor. Humble though it may be, please enjoy it to your heart’s content.”

His tone was polite, but also formal and stiff. From his scent, I could tell that he was wary of me. *Guess I didn't leave a very good impression on him.* I engaged Prince Ivan in small talk, and after a few minutes of harmless conversation, he excused himself. But before he left, he turned around and said, "My father, Lord Doneiks, was meant to be today's host, but he suddenly fell ill. He's resting in his room, but if you'd like I could take you to greet him."

I wasn't too sure what Rolmund's customs said about a situation like this, but I was pretty sure it was important to greet the host. Chances were Lord Doneiks was plotting something, but I couldn't refuse a direct request from the prince.

"Of course. I was hoping for a chance to pay Lord Doneiks my respects."

I kept my tone pleasant as I answered. As Lord Doneiks was second in line for the throne, he'd be emperor if anything happened to Prince Ashley. Naturally, this meant all Rolmund assumed he was plotting something. I was inclined to think the same.

I followed a servant deep into the mansion. The sounds of music and laughter grew distant, replaced by wind rustling through the autumn leaves. This was a quiet part of the mansion. The servant led me to a door, and I knocked.

"Come in."

The calm voice of an old man called out to me. Upon entering, the first thing I noticed was the number of hidden guards in the room. The room's interior was quiet enough that I could pick up on their breathing. It seemed the ostentatious cupboard set against the wall had more space in it than its North Rolmundian construction suggested.

Most of the remaining wall space was decorated with portraits of what I assumed were past emperors. However, there was a draft coming from behind each painting, suggesting that there was quite a bit of space behind it. The ceiling was slightly lower than it was in the hallway, meaning there was likely a concealed space up there as well. There were a total of eight hidden guards. It appeared Lord Doneiks was quite cautious. *I need to be careful not to say anything dumb.*

I analyzed the room in the span of three seconds, then bowed to the lord.

“My apologies for disturbing your rest. I am a councilor of the Meraldian Federation, Veight Gerun Friedensrichter.”

A sharp-eyed old man sat behind the one desk in the room. Like his sons, he had a tall frame and impressive muscles. From the looks of it, he was keeping up with his training even now. He had the look of a hardened warrior. The lord eyed me for a few seconds, then got to his feet and bowed his head.

“Welcome, young Meraldian hero. I am the current head of the Doneiks household, Zweinei Karitov Doneiks Rolmund.” He narrowed his eyes slightly. “Come closer. The warmth of the fire can’t reach you there.”

Compared to other Rolmundians I knew, he didn’t seem especially amiable. Nor did he seem particularly persuasive or handsome. But for some inexplicable reason, I felt compelled to listen to him. His words possessed a mysterious power. If it wasn’t for the fact that the flow of mana was still, I would have thought he was using mind control magic. Maybe it was just his force of character, but I hated providing such vague explanations for real phenomena.

Wary of the guards around me, I slowly made my way over to the fireplace. Here, I picked up the faint scent of blood. The scent was old, but it was definitely human blood. Furthermore, the ground was around two millimeters lower here than it was in the rest of the room. There was clearly some kind of trap laid in this spot. *So this is where he assassinates people. Ah well.*

I’d already cast detoxification and arrow warding magic on myself, and I had healing magic prepared in case I needed it. So long as I could avoid my enemies’ initial attacks, I’d be able to transform and knock everyone out with Soul Shaker. If I sucked in a breath while transforming, I could get the spell out in under two seconds. I stood at the center of Lord Doneiks’ kill zone and smiled casually.

“This is quite a cozy spot. The fire really warms you up.”

“I have heard that southern Meraldia is quite warm, but autumns in Rolmund tend to be chilly. I hope you are finding this mansion to be warm and inviting, though.”

There’s the indirect invitation again. “This mansion,” huh? They really want me, don’t they? Guess I’ll do the usual vague deflection.

“Thank you very much. Speaking of fireplaces, my men had quite an enjoyable time repairing Princess Eleora’s. In fact, they’ve grown quite attached to her manor.”

I refused Lord Doneiks’ invitation in as roundabout a manner as I could. He smiled to himself and nodded.

“I see the men of Meraldia are loyal. Eleora must be happy to have you.” But then his smile suddenly vanished, and he added, “However, know that Rolmund can be a cold and unforgiving place. Be sure to stay warm at all times.”

Is that supposed to be a threat? Even though our conversation was anything but pleasant, I found myself enjoying talking to Lord Doneiks. Now that I’d spent some more time with him, I realized this was neither magic, nor some vague “force of character.” He was simply a very skilled conversationalist. And he wasn’t anything like me, who just used a few amateur tricks to get by. Every word and mannerism was carefully chosen to draw the listener in and make them sympathize with the speaker. *So this is the caliber of a true imperial politician.*

There were two things I wanted to ask Lord Doneiks. The first was what his stance was in regard to Meraldia. The second was whether he’d been behind the assassination attempt on Eleora or not. *Guess I should start with the less serious one first.*

“By the way, Your Highness, what do you think of Meraldia?”

Lord Doneiks smiled.

“Would it be acceptable if I answered in my current capacity?”

Uh, what’s that supposed to mean? Oh wait. You mean your current capacity as lord of North Rolmund. You’re trying to say you had nothing to do with the imperial palace’s decision to invade? Your ambition’s showing through, old man.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Then all I can say is I will follow any orders given to me by His Majesty. The right to decide Meraldian policy lies solely with him.”

Figures. Lord Doneiks had no intention of informing me of his policy. Perhaps I

should have asked in a more roundabout way. Still, even if he wasn't willing to spell out his plans, he might be willing to answer specific questions.

"Yet, Your Highness, I heard that you opposed the Meraldian campaign. May I ask why?"

Lord Doneiks shook his head.

"What good would it do you to know? The emperor is still alive, as is his successor, Prince Ashley. Is there any point in knowing what I think?"

"Forgive me for my impudence, Your Highness, but this is my duty as a diplomat."

Sighing in resignation, Lord Doneiks finally started talking.

"I opposed the invasion because I believed the rewards were not worth the risk, or the time investment. However, Eleora managed to succeed with just the troops she had on hand."

Yep, yep, she's a really accomplished princess. Lord Doneiks picked up one of the shougo pieces sitting on his desk. It was made of crystal and was clearly expensive.

"An army is at its strongest when it's not in use. Once deployed, casualties start to mount, and your opponents learn what tricks you have up your sleeve. Furthermore, while in use for one campaign, an army cannot be used to do anything else. Which is why a leader must be extremely cautious when choosing whether or not to commit his forces to anything."

True, if you send all your forces to invade, you won't have anything left to stop potential revolts. Eleora had only had her personal guard at her disposal for this mission, so everyone in Rolmund was impressed that she'd pulled it off. Especially since she'd done it on a shoestring budget with only a few dozen casualties. Lord Doneiks put the shougo piece back on the desk.

"My hot-blooded sons wanted to see some action, so they supported His Majesty's plan. And if we look at only the results, it would seem my sons were in the right. I suppose it's true that age clouds your judgment."

Nah, you're the one who was actually right. If you guys hadn't tried to invade,

I wouldn't be here right now. However, it seemed there were some differences of opinion within the Doneiks household. I wanted to probe a little further, but time was limited so I decided to move on to the most important topic. Whether or not he was behind Eleora's assassination attempt.

I sucked in a deep breath and steeled my resolve. I then looked Lord Doneiks in the eyes and asked flatly, "By the way, Your Highness. Would you happen to know anything about Her Highness Eleora's wet nurse?"

Of course I knew he'd try to play dumb, but I had few ways to corner him. The simplest thing to do would be to lie and say that Eleora captured her wet nurse and tortured the truth out of her. It'd be obvious to me whether his denial was a lie, so all that remained would be finding evidence to fit the crime. Like an algebra equation where the solution is known, but the variable isn't. I'd come fully prepared for this fight. *Now let the hunt begin.* However, contrary to my expectations, Lord Doneiks didn't even try to deny the truth.

"Thinking back on it now, I regret choosing such a method, Lord Veight."

You're seriously just gonna admit that? Before I could recover from my surprise, Lord Doneiks came at me with a counterattack.

"But I must admit, it baffles me why you find such a trivial event to be of such importance. Assassination attempts are hardly uncommon in Rolmund."

I mean... I guess that's true. Chances were, it was this gentle-looking old man who'd done away with Viscount Schmenivsky too. If I wasn't careful going forward, he might try to have me killed too. I smiled faintly. I'd upped my repertoire of evil smiles by using some of Eleora's expressions as reference. If the conversation dragged on too long, Lord Doneiks would probably change the subject, so I needed to keep this brief.

"It's precisely because they're such a common occurrence that I need to know more. So, tell me, why do you regret your decision?"

It doesn't matter how; I just need to keep him talking. Lord Doneiks leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"It was never my intention to harm my cute niece. I simply wanted to destroy her trust in people, so that she wouldn't try to build relationships and increase

her influence.”

Ah, I see now. So that’s what you were after. He’d intentionally picked Eleora’s wet nurse in order to make her mistrustful. He hadn’t actually expected the attempt to succeed.

It didn’t seem like he was lying, but Lord Doneiks struck me as the kind of person who wouldn’t feel anything even when he was lying. And if he didn’t feel anything, his sweat wouldn’t smell any different. While rare, there were some people out there who could deceive a werewolf’s nose like this. That made him a tough person to negotiate with, but if I backed down here, I wouldn’t be able to get any info, so I kept pushing.

“But things turned out exactly the way you hoped, so what is there to be dissatisfied about?”

“Indeed, they did. The throne has historically been passed down through the male line, so I had hoped the princess would get married off to some duke to deepen alliances and find her own happiness there.”

I wanted to object, but that was really how Rolmund nobles saw marriage. Now wasn’t the time to interrupt. Lord Doneiks picked the shougo piece back up again and added, “And yet, with her limited popularity and forces, Eleora managed to conquer Meraldia. Had I known she was so capable, I would have...”

“Made sure to finish the job you started?”

Lord Doneiks shook his head.

“The opposite. Instead of alienating her with petty schemes, I would have brought her into my fold. I let a valuable asset escape my grasp.”

This guy doesn’t feel the least bit guilty about what he’s done, huh? Despite his mild-mannered appearance, Lord Doneiks was quite heartless. *I kind of want to get back at him for Eleora now. Let’s see how you like this.*

“It’s not too late to make your peace with Princess Eleora. In fact, I could mediate for you if you so desire.”

Of course, I didn’t think reconciliation was actually possible. And as expected,

Lord Doneiks shook his head sadly.

“Don’t tease a foolish old man so. It’s far too late. However, I did what I thought was best at the time. Despite my regrets, I doubt I would have acted differently.” Lord Doneiks got to his feet. “More importantly, Lord Veight, what is your reason for supporting Eleora?”

“Naturally it’s for the sake of Meraldia.”

He regarded me silently. I wasn’t lying. Back on Earth, there was a famous quote that went something like “diplomats are just patriotic swindlers.” That was certainly what I was, so I had no qualms about playing the villain. I smiled faintly and met Lord Doneiks’ gaze. After a few moments of heavy silence, he nodded.

“I, too, pray for Meraldia’s prosperity.”

Liar. Despite knowing the truth, I bowed respectfully anyway.

“As Meraldia’s representative, I thank you for your kind words.”

“Remember, our gates are always open to you, Lord Veight. I pray our goals align someday.”

I appreciated the offer, but I knew Lord Doneiks would never become my puppet. We were almost out of time for our meeting. Officially, I’d just come here to give him my greetings. Besides, I was worried about what was going on back at the party. It was high time I left.

“Thank you very much for inviting me today. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to return to the party.”

“It makes me glad to see you’re enjoying it.”

“Good day, Your Highness.”

As I walked to the door, I decided to take one last potshot at Lord Doneiks.

“By the way, Your Highness.”

“Yes?”

“As you are the emperor’s younger brother, would it not be wise to keep guards of higher caliber around your person?”

“What do you mean?”



I walked over to the cupboard and rapped it with my knuckles.

“The only one who managed to hide himself at all was this one. The other seven may as well have been standing in plain sight.”

Lord Doneiks fell silent. He knitted his brows together, but then after a few seconds smiled.

“In their defense, every one of my guards is a fierce warrior. However, it seems I would have nothing to fear if I had you to protect me.”

Nice joke. Compared to the old Demon Lord or Master, I was just a weakling.

“Hahaha, I doubt I would be of much use. Meraldia... no, this world is filled with people whose strength would beggar belief.”

I glanced over at the fireplace. *Since I’m already at it, I guess I’ll point that out too. Can’t get any ruder than I already have.*

“Also while your fireplace is indeed quite cozy, I recommend you make the floor around it a less cold and unforgiving place.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

For the briefest of moments, I saw unease flit across Lord Doneiks’ otherwise unreadable face. This was the first time I’d seen him visibly shaken. I’d noticed the floor was hollow the moment I’d stepped on it, so chances were there was a hidden pit underneath. While there was nothing that could be done to hide that fact, Lord Doneiks could have at least made sure it was level with the rest of the ground. *Well, I guess it doesn’t really matter.* In fact, it might be better if Lord Doneiks was this slipshod with everything he did.

Anyway, I’d vented my frustration at how he’d treated Eleora, and it wouldn’t do to keep insulting him to his face like this. I bowed to Lord Doneiks and walked out of the room.

“I’ll be returning to the party then.”

“My apologies for calling you all the way out here. Be sure to enjoy yourself.”

I hadn’t gotten much out of my meeting, but unfortunately, this was the extent of my negotiation ability. If I wanted to get any meaningful information,

I'd need the help of Lord Kastoniev and Lekomya. *Now then, time to go back and stuff my face full of meat.*

* * * *

—Lord Doneiks' Tactics—

After that young foreigner leaves, I say, "At ease."

The cupboard opens, and Barnack steps out. The man known as the Sword Saint smiles ruefully and says, "It seems I've lost my edge, Lord."

"Not at all. That man is simply superhuman."

I know better than anyone how skilled Barnack is. He's no mere sword master. He's also an accomplished assassin skilled enough to slip past even a bloodhound. My other guards pile out of their hiding places, their lips contorted in fear. Their morale has taken a huge blow. This is quite the parting gift you've left me, Lord Veight. Beckoning my guards closer, I say, "That man is Meraldia's fiercest general, the butcher of four hundred. I have no doubt the only reason Eleora was able to conquer Meraldia was because she had his assistance."

There's no doubt that a man of his renown has enormous popularity in his homeland.

"Proud disciples of Barnack, know that without you I would not be able to sleep soundly at night. I imagine the only people in Rolmund capable of fighting on even footing with Lord Veight are you seven and your master."

Sensing my intent, Barnack also addresses his men.

"Each of you are skilled warriors that I handpicked. Furthermore, you've all completed your harsh training. Not only that, you have racked up numerous achievements. Be proud of your skills."

Being praised by both their lord and their instructor seems to have some effect, as they regain a measure of calm. Now's the time to heap on more praise.

"I am truly glad you didn't shirk your duties even when faced with such a terrifying foe. Your work for the day is done, go enjoy the party, my valiant guards."

“Yes, sir!”

They give me a salute and walk out of the room with confident smiles.

After they leave it’s just me and Barnack in the room. I sit back down and relax.

“Even my fiercest warriors cowered like children before Lord Veight. I’m beginning to think the rumors that he single-handedly slaughtered four hundred men aren’t exaggerations.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Barnack, do you remember that one deer hunt we held in the dead of winter? Where we were discovered by assassins with hounds and chased around the forest?”

My loyal retainer’s grim expression loosens into a smile.

“Now that’s nostalgic, sir. The two of us had to slay twelve assassins all by ourselves.”

“I killed two, and you cut down the rest. You fought your way through ten men all on your own.”

“Now I’d likely struggle to kill eight. I’d need your help with the last four.”

“Don’t ask so much of this old man.”

Barnack and I share a chuckle. We’ve both gotten old. After a few seconds, I return to being serious and ask, “Do you think Lord Veight really is a werewolf, like Schmenivsky believed?”

“That’s the only explanation that makes sense. No amount of training can give people that kind of speed and power.”

Barnack answers immediately, but I’m not convinced. Shaking my head, I argue, “If we just considered his strength, I might agree. But if he truly is a werewolf, there’s something that doesn’t make sense.”

“What do you mean, Lord?”

“His political savvy, Sword Saint.”

I pull a thick stack of documents out of my drawer. This is all the information

my spies have gathered on Lord Veight.

“While werewolves can disguise themselves as humans, at their core they’re still demons. They lack human negotiation skills. If he truly is a werewolf, then why is he so adept at diplomacy?”

“Then what do *you* believe he is, Lord?”

I hesitate for a moment, but in the end, I decide to trust my closest confidant with this information.

“I believe he might be a Hero.”

Barnack looks taken aback, understandably so. Heroes were legendary beings who held power on par with that of the great Sonnenlicht himself. Even within the long history of Rolmund, the last time one had appeared was long before the founding of the empire. Though I have doubts about the theory myself, Lord Veight being a Hero would go a long way to explaining his abilities. I give Barnack a smile.

“Of course, it’s only a possibility. But remember what happened in Draulight.”

“Are you referring to the legendary slave swordsman who rallied the slaves to escape?”

The sword style taught in Draulight is the Sashimael style, the same one that Barnack has mastered.

“History has confirmed that he cut down the army of ten thousand the Rolmund senate sent after the escaped slaves. It wouldn’t be so far-fetched to believe a similar Hero has appeared in Meraldia.”

“I suppose not.”

One of the reports I received had mentioned that Lord Veight had defeated another Hero as well. Though I personally doubt it, it seems everyone in Meraldia believes the story.

“Regardless of his true identity, it’s clear he’s attracted the attention of everyone in Rolmund. The castle is awash with stories about the young dueling master from Meraldia.”

“Indeed. He has a charismatic pull which most find hard to resist.”

“Not only did Eleora successfully complete her mission to conquer the south, but she also managed to bring such an exceptional man into her fold. Her fame has skyrocketed, and if it continues to do so, my position will grow tenuous.”

“You mean to say...”

I shake my head before Barnack can finish.

“So long as Lord Veight is around, any assassination attempts will lead only to our ruin. We cannot lay a hand on her directly. I intend to make that clear to everyone in my camp.”

“I think that’s wise. If I must meet him on the battlefield a second time, I have little confidence I will survive the encounter.”

It’s rare to see Barnack of all people balk at anything. Never before has he shied away from danger, in spite of the countless hopeless situations he’s been put into.

“But, Lord. While this may be a somewhat disrespectful question, how in the world did Princess Eleora manage to tame such a ferocious warrior?”

“There are in fact many ways she could have.” I stow the reports on Lord Veight back into my drawer as I answer Barnack’s question, “No matter how strong he might be, Lord Veight alone cannot stop a full-scale invasion from Rolmund. Likewise, he’s incapable of destroying Rolmund by himself.”

There’s a limit to how much a single man can achieve, regardless of his abilities, all the more so when he has so much to protect. If Eleora showed him a glimpse of how much economic and military might Rolmund possessed, I could see him coming to the negotiating table. But I find it hard to believe Eleora is such a skilled negotiator.

“Our biggest problem is whether or not Eleora has managed to put him on a tight leash. So long as he’s working as Eleora’s underling there’s plenty of ways to deal with him, but if he proves too much for her to handle, then...”

“Then what, Lord?”

“Then our empire will be destroyed.”

“Surely not...”

It does sound impossible. However, no nation is invincible. Both the Rolmund Senate and the three kingdoms were eroded with time.

During the lull in our conversation there's a knock at the door and my eldest son, Ivan, enters. He looks distinctly unwell.

"Father."

"What's wrong, Ivan? Did you have another fit?"

"No, I'm thankfully in good health today. However, Eleora and Lord Veight are..."

My eldest son is a worrywart by nature. I took great care to raise him into a cautious man, but I may have perhaps taken my methods too far. In an attempt to calm him down I ask in my gentlest voice, "What's happened?"

"Eleora seems to be a completely different person. Unlike before, she's actively trying to spread her influence and solicit allies. And Lord Veight is tempting people by dangling Meraldian lands as a reward for joining her cause."

"How foolish."

Now that Meraldia has become a vassal state, only the emperor has the authority to grant its lands to others. If my older brother dies, the next emperor will be Ashley. But my nephew has always been far too soft. I have no doubt that if Eleora or Lord Veight recommended someone, he would grant them sections of Meraldian land without reserve. More importantly though, people believe what they want to believe.

"It's possible that the glimmer of hope offered by the possibility of being a landowner has clouded their good sense. And it's precisely this short-sightedness that condemns these lesser nobles to never be landed."

I absently stroke my chin as I think.

"Still, the fact remains that their solicitations are having an effect. I will need to prepare countermeasures soon."

Ivan hurriedly says, "In that case, Father, let me take care of this."

"Wait, Ivan. Whatever you do, don't lay a hand on Eleora or Lord Veight."

“Why not, Father? I don’t mean to assassinate them or anything. Just make them pay for...”

My foolish son. Any attempt to subdue them with might will only backfire. You’ll do nothing more than increase the number of accomplishments Lord Veight has. In fact, if you’re not careful, you might ruin the reputation of the Doneiks faction.

“The dog that barks at the glacier lynx finds itself devoured. We need to be cautious. There will still be time to take care of Eleora’s faction even after Ashley has taken the throne.”

“But then Rolmund’s citizens will...”

“How many times have I told you? Haste leads to ruin. Be patient.”

After a few seconds of silence, my son bows his head.

“As you wish, Father.”

“We’ll talk at length about this incident later. This needs to be handled delicately, both for our family’s sake, and for North Rolmund’s sake.”

It would seem I still have quite a ways to go before I can retire comfortably and play with my grandchildren. I get up and look out the window. Though the autumn evening is quiet, I can feel the chill seeping through the glass. Winter is coming. My next words are as much a warning to myself as they are to my son, “A wave of bitter cold will soon be upon us, Ivan. A cold the likes of which we have never seen before.”

* * * *

I went back to the party and made small talk with Lekomya while I stuffed myself full of food. He wanted to know how I’d met Eleora, so I’d started telling him the abridged version of the story with any incriminating elements cut out.

“So after that, I panicked and ran out of the villa. In fact, I was panicking so much that I jumped out of the window instead of using the door like a normal person.”

Everyone listening burst out in laughter. Lord Peiti, another one of Eleora’s new followers, wiped tears from the corners of his eyes and asked, “But weren’t

you on the second floor? Wouldn't you injure yourself jumping from that height?"

In truth, I'd clambered onto the roof after that, but a normal panicking human wouldn't think to attempt such a feat, so I left that detail out.

"I got lucky and landed on some leaves to break my fall. And I had my mother to thank for blessing me with a thick arse, so I didn't get hurt."

Another round of laughter. I was sure most of them were just laughing because it was expected of them, but I didn't really care if they were faking it so long as it gave them an excuse to bond.

A short distance away, Eleora was conversing with members of the Doneiks faction. Unlike before, where she'd silently just taken the verbal abuse they hurled at her, now she was smiling coolly and retorting with cutting remarks of her own.

"So? What were *you* doing when you were my age? Hmm?"

"Well..."

Eleora was currently arguing with a well-built older gentleman.

"I can understand being proud of your achievements, but you should pay attention to who you're talking to before you start bragging."

Eleora's cold smile was pretty intimidating. *Good job, Eleora. Don't let those guys get to you.* I wasn't a fan of that kind of verbal sparring, so I was spending my time raising our allies' morale.

"Anyway, I was pretty relieved after finally managing to return the Werewolf Killer to Sir Belken."

And that was the story of how I first met Eleora. As I wrapped up my tale, Lord Peitei mentioned, "Werewolf Killers haven't been crafted for over three hundred years now. I'm surprised the one that made it from Rolmund to Meraldia is still in good shape."

Does that mean there's a bunch of them in Rolmund? A cut from one of those could do serious damage, so I needed to be careful. Another one of the nobles said cheerfully, "But to think you managed to break its enchantment by

accident.”

“Those enchantments were woven to be quite sturdy.”

“I suppose even legendary blades are nothing to our esteemed Astral Fencer.”

At least they liked the story. The nobles were laughing for real now, so I decided to laugh with them. I still couldn’t tell what they found funny and what they didn’t.

Lured in by the laughter, a young boy came over to us. He looked to be in his early teens. But seeing as he was wearing formal clothing, he was an adult in the eyes of Rolmund high society. He’d likely just had his coming of age ceremony.

“Umm, excuse me. Would you happen to be Lord Veight?”

“I am indeed. And you are?”

Blushing slightly, the boy named himself.

“My name is Ryuunie. I’m, ummm... I haven’t been granted a title yet.”

He seemed to be floundering, so I bowed and offered him a lifeboat.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Master Ryuunie. What business might you have with me?”

Boy or not, so long as he was wearing the formal attire of a Rolmund noble at a public event, he deserved to be treated as an adult. Ryuunie’s face instantly lit up and he took a few steps closer.

“I want to hear more of that story you were telling before! About how you won that Werewolf Killer in a duel!”

Well... that duel ended in one attack, so it’s not really all that impressive. There wasn’t really any way to embellish that story further. Feeling the weight of his expectant gaze, I told him the plain truth.

“I defeated the knight in a single blow, so there isn’t much more to tell, Master Ryuunie.”

“In one blow!?”

Ryuunie’s face lit up in excitement. He got even closer.

“My uncle’s always talking about how he wants to go on the battlefield, and I do too! How do I become as strong as you, Lord Veight!?”

Reincarnate as a werewolf. Tell your uncle that too.

“Oi, Ryuunie, what’re you doing?”

“Ah, uncle!”

I recognized that voice. I turned around and saw Prince Woroy looking over here with a frown on his face. *Hold on, is that his uncle? Doesn’t that mean he’s...*

“Master Ryuunie, are you perhaps Lord Doneiks...”

“Ah, yes! Lord Doneiks is my grandfather! I’m sorry, I forgot to give my full name. I’m Ryuunie Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund!”

Seriously? Prince Woroy casually interposed himself between me and Ryuunie and shied him away from me.

“Sorry. This kid’s my brother’s only son. He’s the future heir of the Doneiks family so I need to keep an eye on him.”

I see, so he’s Prince Ivan’s son. Meaning in the future, he’d be pretty high up there in the line of succession for the throne. Since Kite wasn’t here to tell me everything, I hadn’t been able to recognize who he was by name. *I screwed up. Should I have tried to flatter him more?*

Prince Woroy affectionately ruffled Ryuunie’s hair, then said loud enough for me to hear, “This is Meraldia’s strongest warrior. And he’s staying with Eleora. Do you understand what that means?”

“Yes. He’s a political enemy.”

You don’t have to put it so bluntly. Also, if I’m a political enemy, why’re you acting like you idolize me? Ryuunie tried to get closer to me, but was blocked by Prince Woroy. Undaunted, he tried to go around his uncle. He was like a little puppy.

“Lord Veight, please tell me more about your battles! What other armies have you commanded?”

“Ah, now that’s something I’m interested in too. Lord Veight, do you mind telling us about a few? Of course, you don’t have to reveal any sensitive information.”

Now even Prince Woroy was asking to hear my stories. *Aren’t you supposed to be stopping him? Oh well.*

I ended up telling Ryuunie and Woroy a few of my war stories. First, I told them about how I conquered Ryunheit by sneaking in as a whistle seller, then occupying the viceroy’s manor with 56 of my elites. I then talked about my battle with Thuvan’s mounted archers. And the battle for Thuvan that happened after.

I couldn’t go into details without divulging military secrets, or talking about demons, so I kept details vague. As a result, most of the stories ended up sounding boring, but I had no other choice. For some reason, even those basic stories seemed to capture the hearts of Woroy and Ryuunie.

“I can’t believe you’re able to be so calm about all these amazing achievements, Lord Veight! You’re so cool!”

“Can’t you go into any more detail, Lord Veight?”

I really can’t.

As we were talking, Prince Ivan showed up.

“Ryuunie, Woroy. What are you two doing?”

“Ah, Brother.”

The moment Woroy saw his brother’s face, he grimaced. Prince Ivan smiled wryly at his younger brother.

“Father’s summoned us. Also, he’s asked for a meal to be brought up to him and Barnack.”

“Alright, I’ll get something from the kitchens. The servants probably have their hands full so I’ll do it myself.”

Prince Ivan furrowed his brows.

“Are you still doing things beneath your station? How long will it take for you

to realize you can’t act like this? Besides, what if Father punishes the servants for making you do such menial tasks?”

“I’ll talk to him, so that won’t be a problem. Sorry, but I need to go, Lord Veight. I’ll see you later.”

Prince Woroy took advantage of the moment to escape from his older brother. Prince Ivan then turned to me and bowed.



“Thank you for entertaining my son. He’s still young and foolish, so please forgive any rudeness on his part.”

“Not at all. I had a lot of fun talking to him.”

I had an opportunity to speak to Prince Ivan again, so I decided to politely chase Ryuunie away.

“Master Ryuunie, I would love to tell you more about my battles next time.”

Sensing that story time was over, Ryuunie hung his head.

“Ah... okay. I’m sorry for bothering you for so long. The stories were really fun!”

Sorry, kid. But I’ve got business with your dad. Prince Ivan and I both watched Ryuunie bow, then run off. Prince Ivan then turned to me.

“Knowing you, you’re likely already aware that I haven’t remarried since my late wife passed away, correct?”

Wait, really? I guess Ryuunie’s like a memento of your dead wife then. Don’t worry, I’m not planning on using him or anything.

“Ryuunie has only just had his coming of age ceremony. Even for Rolmund, holding the ceremony at age twelve is unusually early. But Lord Doneiks wished for him to have it soon. For all his talk about haste leading to ruin, he sure seems to be rushing his grandson.”

For a moment, Prince Ivan looked like nothing more than a father worried about his son. Honestly, I much preferred him like this.

“Incidentally, Lord Veight, I hear you have yet to marry.”

I hadn’t even married in my past life. Marriage was a completely alien concept to me. On Earth, my parents hadn’t had a very good relationship, and here, my dad had died while I was still a baby, so I didn’t even know what a happy couple looked like. That was probably part of why I hadn’t bothered looking for a wife. However, in Rolmund high society, being a bachelor was looked down upon. In fact, it led to people thinking you were gay. I wanted to avoid that, so I decided to tell a little white lie.

“The truth is, I have a fiancée back in Ryunheit.”

“I see. Is she a Meraldian noble?”

“She is.”

For a second, Airia’s face popped into my mind. *Sorry, but this is for the sake of diplomacy.* It wasn’t like she’d ever find out, so I figured I may as well borrow her name.

“She’s Ryunheit’s viceroy, and a member of the Aindorf family.”

“I have heard that name before. They’re one of the families that came to Meraldia from the south, correct?”

“You’re well-informed.”

The last thing I wanted to do was continue this line of conversation, so I hurriedly changed the topic.

“By the way, Your Highness, do you have no intention of remarrying at all?”

He was Lord Doneiks’ eldest son. It was practically his duty to sire more children. Especially since Woroy was still single. Prince Ivan smiled sadly and said, “I actually would love to, but my tastes in women are... eclectic. I’m having a hard time finding someone as suitable for me as my late wife was.”

I looked down and saw Prince Ivan was still wearing his wedding ring. It seemed to me like he’d just loved his old wife so much he couldn’t let go of her. *I feel bad for asking now.*

“Lord Veight. As unfortunate as it is, we stand on opposite sides. Thus, I cannot let my debt to you go unpaid.”

What do you mean, debt?

“I wish to thank you for looking after my son.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I didn’t do anything much.”

Besides, the only “thanks” I could see coming from a member of the Doneiks faction was an assassin. Prince Ivan walked to the balcony and beckoned me over.

“There’s nothing to fear. I just want to show you something.”

He pulled a book from a nearby bookshelf. The paper looked new, but the binding was old and worn. It reminded me of Eleora's Blast Grimoire. *Wait, that isn't a Blast Grimoire, is it?* Though even if it was, Prince Ivan wouldn't be able to kill me with it. I pushed down on my burgeoning fear and walked as casually as I could toward the balcony.

The night breeze was pretty cold, and I wished I had a coat as I stepped onto the balcony. I downed a strong alcoholic cocktail designed to warm you up, then turned to face Prince Ivan.

"Take a look at this, Lord Veight."

The book he held out to me was titled "Northern Agriculture."

"This contains every scrap of information the Doneiks family has been able to collect on farming in cold climates. It's not something we're meant to share with others, but I imagine you will find this more valuable than gold or silver."

He wasn't wrong, but I hadn't expected him to offer something like this. This was a perfect opportunity to get a better idea of Rolmund's agricultural situation. I decided to take Prince Ivan up on his offer. *Let's see just how good Prince Ivan is at managing his lands.*

I skimmed through the book and almost instantly I could tell that Prince Ivan was a master of data gathering. His practices were unbelievably modern for this world. Furthermore, all the information he'd gathered had been meticulously vetted and quantified. For example, yearly yields weren't recorded using vague terms like good harvest, but rather had specific numbers. Last year, Darmarl village's 540 shuka of white wheat fields had yielded 1200 torka of grain. And that was 2.2 times the usual. The year before that, it had produced twice as much as usual.

All the information had been organized neatly into charts as well. In a world without computers, all of this had to have been written down by hand. It must have taken an enormous amount of effort. I wanted to show this to Kite, but he was currently busy making sure I wasn't swarmed by noble ladies. With his magic, he would have been able to memorize the contents of this book with a single glance.

Reeling at the sheer amount of numbers I had to go through, I nevertheless

attempted to draw some meaningful conclusions from this data.

"Yields have been steadily dropping over the years, I see."

"Precisely. As expected, you noticed right away, Lord Veight."

I was just lucky enough to have had a job in my past life that dealt with spreadsheets like this. Had this been my first time seeing such a detailed chart, my brain would have shut down. Over the past hundred years, North Rolmund's yields for their staple grains had fallen 20%. That was a significant drop. Prince Ivan scrutinized my expression for a few seconds. Gauging my reaction, he carefully chose each of his next words.

"North Rolmund's agricultural capacity is declining. Though the decline is slow, it has long-term implications."

"Indeed, this isn't something you would notice over just a ten-year period. I'm impressed you managed to discover the decline at all."

"It slipped past me at first, but on a whim, I decided to check old tax reports from my great-grandfather's time. That made the situation painfully obvious." Prince Ivan's expression grew darker as he spoke. "However, the real problem is that no one is taking my claims seriously."

"Why not? Even an idiot could figure it out after looking at these records."

I knew nothing about farming and even I knew this was a bad sign. But Prince Ivan shook his head.

"Aside from my father, my brother, and Ashley, you're the only one to realize the gravity of this revelation. None of the other North Rolmund lords understand the danger we're in."

Most nobles managed their lands for around 30 or so years, then passed the torch onto their children. After that they spent maybe 10 years advising their successors, making for a total of 40 years spent working in land management. Incidentally, the rate of decline was a tiny 0.2%, so during years with a good harvest, lords were able to reap tax revenues much greater than the previous years still. After all, during the entirety of their reign, they'd only see an 8% drop in total yields. However, no one was able to keep 40 years of harvests in their memory, so most lords would probably not even notice the drop. Even if

they did, they'd probably just chalk it up to the old days being better or something. But here was irrevocable proof that the numbers were indeed dropping. It was obvious that at the rate North Rolmund was going, it would be uninhabitable in another few centuries.

"I've warned the nearby lords of this. But they all think it's not a problem because their generation will be fine," Prince Ivan spat dismissively.

"It's true that you might be able to keep going for a century or two."

This wasn't something that would immediately affect the nation, and I had nothing to do with this country anyway. But Prince Ivan shook his head.

"It certainly is true that our generation may be fine. And perhaps even our children's generation. But what about our grandchildren?"

Prince Ivan's entreaty piqued my interest, and I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket.

"Excuse me."

I placed the handkerchief on the railing in front of Prince Ivan and took out a pen.

"Lord Veight, what are you doing?"

"Let's chart this on a graph. The vertical axis is yields, and the horizontal axis is time. Now if we plot the yields over the past few decades..."

I made a rough line graph using the data points from the book.

"This can't be..."

The situation was even worse than the book estimated. *Holy crap.* The drop in yields was increasing at an exponential rate. Prince Ivan was able to easily analyze what the graph predicted too.

"I see. If we extend this graph, it's easy to see what yields will look like in another hundred years. As I thought, the situation is dire."

Naturally, not all of a plot's yields went to the lord that owned it. Some needed to be saved for next season's planting, and naturally enough needed to be given to the serfs to keep them alive. It was the rest which became the lord's

tax revenue. But the graph predicted that in a few decades, yields wouldn't even be high enough to support the serf population of the area. There was already barely any extra for the lords to collect as taxes. Prince Ivan stared at the handkerchief for a long time before muttering, "If we wait any longer, we won't be able to set up countermeasures in time. We can't leave this problem to my son's or my grandson's generation. My father and I have to do something now. Yet I can't think of any solution that would work in the long term."

I gave the problem some thought. The Doneiks family might be Eleora's political rivals, but the people of North Rolmund hadn't done anything wrong. Furthermore, the more Rolmund's own lands declined, the more the empire would covet Meraldia's fertile soil. That was the last thing I wanted. In the end, I could think of only one reason why this was happening.

"Maybe the land is losing its fertility because you keep planting the same crops over and over?"

But Prince Ivan shook his head sadly.

"If that was the case, it wouldn't be happening to all of our crops evenly. Besides, we have already instituted a system of crop rotation. We even tried a completely different rotation system for a few years to see if that would change things, but the decline continued."

Crop rotation required the right variety of crops to work. You couldn't just slap together any old combination and expect it to replenish the soil. If they'd already had a crop rotation system in place for a long time, it was likely there wasn't any better combination.

"Your crops haven't been affected by disease or pests?"

"I don't believe so. At the very least the crops I've examined have all been healthy."

"Is it a problem with the fertilizer you use?"

"I'm not sure. We've tried different manure options, but in the end, the ones farmers have been using for centuries worked the best."

I'm out of ideas. No wonder Prince Ivan is having such a hard time with this problem. I thought this would be a good opportunity to put the Doneiks family

in my debt, but I couldn't think of any possible solution. This was something that needed an expert opinion.

"I'm truly sorry I couldn't be of any help."

Prince Ivan's expression softened a little.

"Don't be. You're different from the others. Even though this has nothing to do with your own lands, you still tried to help. Thank you. Besides, you gave me some valuable insight on the scale of the long-term consequences."

I did?

"Incidentally, Lord Veight, are you a follower of the Sonnenlicht Order?"

"Yes, of course."

That was a lie. But since the Meraldian Sonnenlicht Order had ordained me as a saint, I doubted anyone would question my story. Prince Ivan sighed.

"In the past, the empire aggressively spread the Sonnenlicht religion, using it as a means of controlling the citizens. But as a result, our people have stopped thinking for themselves."

In Rolmund, religion had been weaponized as a way of cementing the empire's rule. But that method had drawbacks.

"They think everything is the will of God, so they've stopped trying to find solutions to problems?"

"Exactly. Even if there's a string of bad harvests, the people think so long as they remain pious that Sonnenlicht will save them. The serfs especially are..."

"They don't do anything except for what they're told?"

"That's right. Though I suppose I have no right to complain, since it's my ancestors who conditioned them to be like this."

Prince Ivan sighed again. To be honest, it was inevitable that the serfs would grow apathetic. After all, it wasn't their land or their wheat. While I was sympathetic to Prince Ivan's plight, there wasn't really anything I could do. Just then, Kite came over to me, still surrounded by a group of noble ladies.

"I'm terribly sorry, but Lord Veight's personal information needs to be kept

confidential for diplomatic reasons so... No really, I can't tell you. Excuse me."

My trusted vice-commander shook off the ladies and turned to me. *Thank God you're back. I have no idea who anyone is without you.* His arrival gave me a convenient excuse to leave, so I bowed to Prince Ivan and said, "I'll be taking my leave then, Your Highness. Hopefully we have the opportunity to speak again."

"Yes, I would very much like to speak with you at length."

We went through the usual pleasantries, then parted ways. I wanted to talk to him again, but bringing an expert along to get their opinion on the agricultural situation.

As I was walking away, Ryuunie spotted me and ran over. It appeared he'd been watching and waiting for a chance to come back.

"Lord Veight, are you done talking with my dad?"

"I am indeed. Your father is a wonderful man."

I meant that. After talking with him, I'd come to realize that Prince Ivan wasn't someone who was motivated by personal greed. I bowed to Ryuunie with a smile.

"Would you like to hear more stories of the battlefield?"

His eyes lit up instantly.

"You don't mind!? Oh, thank you so much! Uncle, Lord Veight says he'll tell us more about his battles!"

Thanks to Ryuunie's shouting, many of the other guests also came over to see what was going on.

"Oooh, I've always wanted to hear about the Astral Fencer's battlefield days."

"Let's listen, dear. You won't get many opportunities to hear about his exploits."

"You're right. I'm sure they'll make for great stories to tell our children too."

With a crowd this big, I was starting to get a little nervous. Honestly, public speaking scared me more than fighting. In the end, I was forced to entertain a

large crowd of nobles until the party finished. Personally, I would have preferred to spend the rest of the party eating as much meat as I could. But when I saw Ryuunie's excitement, I couldn't bring myself to disappoint him. *I guess if my stories made people happy, it was worth missing out on the food...*

Winter finally came to Schwerin, the imperial capital. Because of how heavy the snowfall in winter was, nobles had to decide where they would spend each winter. If they stayed in their own land, they'd miss out on all the meetings and events in the capital. But if they stayed in the capital, they wouldn't be able to manage their lands. The snowfall made travel impossible, so they had to choose before winter set in.

"I've left managing my lands to my mother and younger sister, so I don't have to worry. The emperor charged me with guarding the border anyway, so I've spent most of my winters in Fort Novesk."

We were all sitting in the room with Jerrick's remodeled fireplace. We werewolves sat by the warm fire while we listened to Eleora. Like before, Eleora had used chestnut logs for the fire to make sure it crackled nicely. She seemed quite taken with the sound.

We'd just finished lunch, and we were discussing our future plans. Or rather, Jerrick and the other werewolves were lounging on sofas while Lacy and the other mages were poring over Rolmund magic texts. They all seemed to be thinking if they handed all the work off to me, I'd figure something out. To be fair, I would, but that didn't mean I had to like it. I turned back to Eleora, and she gave me a troubled smile.

"Lord Kastoniev is planning on spending the winter here in the capital too. He really is an overprotective uncle."

I'm pretty sure anyone would become overprotective if they had such a reckless niece. I smiled, but then returned to looking serious as I remembered something.

"By the way Eleora, how much do you know about agriculture? I used to grow potatoes and stuff in my village, but I'm not an expert by any means."

Eleora shook her head.

“I’ve never dabbled in farming. Since I’ve left my younger sister in charge of my lands, I have basically no experience at all.”

Eleora was a scholar of magical engineering, not agriculture. Just then, Lacy looked up from her book and butt in.

“Is farming really that difficult? I thought all you had to do was put down fertilizer and water plants?”

That just proves you’re an amateur. I mean, I am too.

“It takes time for bacteria to break down the compost and... Err, I mean it takes time for the fertilizer to settle. Especially in cold areas, you have to wait a while before the fertilizer is truly part of the soil. And if you over-fertilize the soil, you’ll end up killing your crops instead.”

“Huh...”

From what I’d heard back on Earth, farmers in Hokkaido needed to use three times as much fertilizer as those in Okinawa, because fertilizer took that much longer to settle in cold areas. I had no doubt Rolmund’s serfs had a hard time cultivating this land. Lacy bashfully hid her face behind her book.

“I apologize for being so ignorant.”

“There’s no need to feel sorry. I’m not really much of a farmer myself.”

Lacy might have been one of the demon army’s best mages, but farming was outside her area of expertise.

Guess my only choice is to study up myself. I took out the handkerchief I’d written on during the party. The graph I’d drawn was still there. I hadn’t been thinking about it at the time, but this was a pretty good record of North Rolmund’s agricultural situation. I guess we’d been so engrossed in our discussion that Prince Ivan had forgotten to mention it. Or perhaps he hadn’t forgotten, but rather had wanted me to take it back. Eleora glanced at the handkerchief and frowned.

“What is that, Lord Veight?”

“A graph of North Rolmund’s agricultural yields over the years. This axis is time, and this axis is yields.”

Her interest piqued, Eleora examined the handkerchief more carefully.

“I see, you plotted the change in yields over time to make it easier to visualize. Meraldian mathematics is quite advanced.”

I shook my head.

“No, it’s only the demon army who uses stuff like this. It’s not a military secret or anything, but most people in Meraldia wouldn’t understand the graph if you showed it to them.”

The previous Demon Lord had taught his dragonkin clan members about graphing, and now every technical engineer in the army used it. I wasn’t very good at math, so personally I needed a visual like this to really understand things. *Thanks so much for everything, Demon Lord.* That being said, you needed at least some understanding of math to be able to read a graph at all, so the practice hadn’t spread to the common folk in Meraldia. Now that I thought about it, the basic education I had back in Japan was probably pretty advanced for a world like this. If only I’d paid more attention to it at the time. While I was reminiscing about my time on Earth, Eleora copied the graph into her own notebook. Once she’d finished, she nodded in satisfaction to herself.

“I see, this is a useful tactic. I should use it in my own thesis. It’ll also make for a simple way to map the Blast Canes’ effectiveness.”

Come to think of it, Prince Ivan had recognized what I was doing too. Rolmundian nobility had a pretty high standard of education it seemed. Or perhaps they were just really fast learners. Basic math was needed for a lot of fields, so it was important to learn.

People like Eleora were probably exceptional, but it seemed a significant number of Rolmundian nobles were given a comprehensive education. If the empire managed to modernize, they’d be a real threat. I needed to make sure Meraldia didn’t fall behind. Eleora cocked her head quizzically as she analyzed the graph.

“According to this diagram, the decline in yields is accelerating.”

“Yeah, it is.”

The downward slope of the graph spiked significantly at around the 30 years

ago mark. I'd been too focused on other things at the time to notice, but now that Eleora had pointed it out, it was hard to ignore. Eleora stroked her chin for a few seconds, then suddenly said, "That was when Lord Doneiks' irrigation project began. His flood control measures have helped a lot of people living on his land."

"But it's possible the flood barriers he created did something to the river basin."

Water supply had a huge impact on farming. Messing with the flow of rivers also had a huge impact on the surrounding ecology. Considering the level of technology in this world, it was entirely possible Lord Doneiks' flood management solution had harmed the nearby ecosystem. The people of this world had no way of knowing that tampering with water systems could affect other things. That being said, I wasn't exactly a master of this world's ecology, so I wasn't informed enough to say anything. Eleora shook her head sadly.

"If we had a specialist who understood rivers, we could consult them, but unfortunately there's no such person in my faction. Do you know anyone?"

"Unfortunately not. The dragonkin engineers might know, but I can hardly go back and get them."

I hadn't thought to bring an earth science specialist with me. Kite knew a little bit, but it wasn't his area of study either. Almost all the rivers in Rolmund flowed northward, since their sources generally came from the Northern Peaks which served as the Rolmund-Meraldia border.

Lord Doneiks had done a few major things to alter the river's flow, so we had no way of knowing which specific project was the cause. Crops were part of the local ecosystem, so they were quite sensitive to changes in the flow and quality of water. Back on Earth, I remembered reading a news article about how two beavers had managed to completely transform a downstream ecosystem by building a dam. The dam had acted as a filter, purifying the water as it passed downstream.

If we included water quality as one of the possible causes, then there were too many potential factors for us to investigate. After thinking about the problem for a few seconds I said, "We need to investigate this more thoroughly.

This is a national crisis.”

“But North Rolmund is under Lord Doneiks’ jurisdiction. Not even the emperor can order an investigation into his territory just like that.”

God, what a pain.

“Fine. I’ll go talk to Lord Doneiks... Actually, I’ll talk to Prince Ivan.”

“Are you sure?”

Eleora gave me a surprised look. I smiled and said, “We might as well ease Prince Ivan’s worries, right?”

Fixing this problem wouldn’t help Eleora become empress, but it would remove one of the reasons why Rolmund might invade Meraldia. If Rolmund’s own agricultural production rose, they’d have less reason to go all the way beyond the mountains to steal someone else’s farmland. For a while, at least.

Eleora’s adjutant, Borsche, arrived in the middle of our discussion with a report. Normally he gave his report right away, but this time he hesitated and checked to see who was present. It seemed whatever he had to say was quite serious. Eleora gave him a small nod.

“It’s fine. State your report.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Borsche saluted and said simply, “The emperor has passed away.”

So it’s finally time.

Flower and Wolf

My name is Ashley. Ashley Voltof Schwerin Rolmund. First in line to be emperor of the Holy Rolmund Empire. In other words, I'm the crown prince.

"His Majesty is resting, Your Highness. My apologies, but..."

The old court physician gave me an apologetic look, and I shook my head.

"It's fine, I understand. I just wish to see my father's face, that's all."

I was standing in front of a luxurious canopied bed. Hidden underneath the pile of covers was my father, the emperor Bahazoff the Fourth. In his youth, he'd been considered a wise prince, but after ascending the throne he'd come to be called "the stagnant emperor." These days, no one held him in high regard. As far as the citizens were concerned, he was already dead.

But for all his shortcomings, he was still my father. He did his best to fulfill his duties, respected his ancestors, and valued tradition. When my mother had died, he'd hugged me and my sister as we cried. I still remember how happy he'd looked when I'd first offered to help him with his duties. My memories of him were all fond ones. I didn't want him to die. That was my single, fervent wish.

"Doctor, how is my father doing?"

"No treatment I've tried has worked, and his symptoms are worsening."

The court physician knew to be completely frank with me. The group of doctors that worked under his wing were the best in the empire. They knew of every medicinal herb in the world, and their knowledge of diseases and the human body was unparalleled. If even they couldn't cure my father, then no one could.

"He's not in pain, is he?"

The imperial mages who were standing behind the doctors stepped forward.

"Allow me to answer that. We have given His Majesty a magical anesthesia to dull his pain. We are taking turns to refresh the spell so that it's always active."

“Thank you. I suppose that is one small mercy.”

As I said that, I noticed the disgusted look that the court physician gave the mages. *Some things never change.* The people who worked in the palace had different social standings, occupations, and beliefs. It was the imperial family’s job to make sure they all worked together. However, I lacked the ability to do so.

Just a few days ago, my father’s condition had taken a turn for the worse. Until then, his symptoms had come and gone in cycles. But suddenly, his body had weakened drastically, and he’d started being in constant pain. He could barely even speak, and last night the imperial mages had been forced to make him sleep through magic. He had one foot in the grave.

I returned to my office with a heavy heart and found my aides waiting for me.

“Your Highness, Princess Eleora has returned to the capital. She’s brought a Meraldian general with her.”

“That must be Meraldia’s representative.”

I wasn’t sure what to do.

“Both rewarding Eleora for her services and meeting with a foreign diplomat are something the emperor should do, not the crown prince. We should wait until His Majesty recovers before...”

I trailed off. I knew as well as anyone that he wouldn’t recover. The doctors weren’t sure what exactly his disease was, but all chronic diseases took time to cure. And with my father’s condition the way it was, it was clear he was out of time. There was almost no chance he would recover. Meaning his duties fell to me, the crown prince.

“Very well. I will hear their report.”

Even though Father’s long-held dream of conquering Meraldia has finally been granted, he’s not even awake to celebrate it. I heaved a weary sigh as I changed into formal attire.

Meraldia’s representative seemed to me like a common foot soldier who’d worked his way up the ranks. He was a young man named Veight Gerun

Friedensrichter. And apparently, he was on the Commonwealth Council.

He really looks young. Of course I knew I was young myself, but this foreigner fascinated me. According to Eleora, he was a famous general who'd helped her conquer Meraldia. I knew nothing of warfare, so his accomplishments amazed me. As was tradition for nobles of conquered states, I granted Lord Veight the title of Honorary Count in place of my father. The title was both an honor and a statement. It was Rolmund that had the authority to grant Meraldians power and prestige, not the other way around.

"With this, Meraldia has officially become a vassal of our empire."

"Now we simply need to use Lord Veight to spread our influence across the region."

The ministers were discussing their plans for Meraldia's future. It seemed inevitable that Meraldia would be swallowed up. Yet I couldn't help but worry. Had we really succeeded in putting a leash around that fearsome-looking young man?

After the audience, I returned to my ailing father's side. As I looked down at his sleeping face, I told him about how it had gone.

"Father, Eleora managed to conquer all of Meraldia. Your wish has been granted." Naturally, he didn't reply, but I kept going, "Honestly, I still think Uncle was right. We shouldn't have invaded. That's why I helped him prevent any reinforcements from reaching Eleora. But she managed to win over the local population instead."

My cousin was a genius when it came to magical engineering, and she was a skilled strategist as well. But her diplomacy skills were sorely lacking. She was too logical for her own good, and she didn't understand the art of negotiation.

"I never would have imagined Eleora of all people would manage to win over such a fearsome general."

From the looks of it, he'd also helped her build up a strong base of support in Meraldia. When I first saw him, I'd wondered if perhaps Veight was Eleora's paramour, but after watching their interactions I was certain that wasn't the case. He was loyal only to his duty, and nothing seemed to scare him.

“That foreign general, Veight, is no mere diplomat. He’s skilled at diplomacy, sure, but he’s also a master warrior.”

Even if you managed to tame a tiger, cousin, was it really wise to bring it to our doorstep? There must have been a reason she brought him. I needed to be wary.

“I remember, ‘the bottom of the lake holds the answers’ was always one of your favorite sayings. If there’s a fish leaping to the surface, that means something’s happening under the water.”

If fish were coming to the surface, that meant there was either a fierce beast lying at the bottom of the lake, or the water had gone fetid. Of course, there were also times when it meant nothing. It was important to know how to tell the difference. I gently held my father’s hand and smiled at him.

“But either way, your long-held dream has finally been granted. Congratulations, Father.”

Bahazoff the Fourth was still alive, and he was still emperor. This feat would go down in history as his achievement. While I still didn’t agree with conquering the south, for now I was just happy that my father had gotten what he wanted. Still smiling, I looked out the window. The late autumn sunlight illuminating the grounds was tinged with the chill of winter.

The foreign Meraldian noble, Veight, got into trouble the day after coming to the capital. Unbelievable as it was, he’d gotten himself in a duel with a viscount from the Doneiks faction. At first everyone considered him a rude barbarian, but as more and more details came out, their opinion of him improved. It seemed Veight was serving as Eleora’s strategic advisor, so when he’d run into a group of Doneiks nobles disparaging her, he’d been forced to duel them for her honor. And it seemed he’d won his duel spectacularly. He’d knocked out Viscount Schmenivsky in a single blow. A few nobles from my faction had been present to mediate the duel, and they were all telling me about how strong he was.

“He moved like lightning, Your Highness. One second he was just standing there, the next Lord Schmenivsky was flying through the air. He smashed all the viscount’s front teeth. His honor’s been completely shattered.”

“Lord Veight allowed Viscount Schmenivsky the right to choose weapons first, and even then, he managed to win without a scratch. He made it look so easy too, as if he wasn’t even breaking a sweat.”

Viscount Schmenivsky was by no means a weak duelist. He had an excellent military record, and a lot of the landless nobles in the Doneiks faction looked up to him. *Just how strong is Veight, if he managed to beat the viscount in one attack? I wish I’d been there to see it.*

Veight’s superhuman strength already left a huge impression on the palace nobles, but Viscount Schmenivsky’s crazed claims about him added to the rumors. Apparently, the viscount’s defeat had been so humiliating that he’d lost his mind. In fact, he’d asked for an audience with the emperor, which I’d naturally declined. He seemed to think that Veight was a werewolf. Having watched the imperial mages confirm his identity personally, I couldn’t let Viscount Schmevinksy’s claims go uncontested. Calling the imperial mages’ credibility into question was tantamount to insulting the emperor they served.

I had Viscount Schmenivsky censured immediately. Just in case, I also sent a private message to my uncle, Lord Doneiks. Since the viscount was a decently high-ranking member of his faction, I needed my uncle’s permission before disposing of him. The whole ordeal had left me exhausted, but it seemed my trials weren’t over. There were new rumors spreading within the palace.

“Did you hear about Lord Veight’s duel?”

“Yes, he’s quite the loyal retainer.”

“I never imagined a foreign noble would risk his life for *our* princess.”

“The regal Princess Eleora and the charming and gentle Lord Veight. The two are a perfect match, don’t you think?”

“You can tell just by how he acts that Lord Veight isn’t a man who relies on force to solve all problems. He only resorts to it when necessary. The princess has a truly strong ally by her side.”

“We underestimated the princess’ abilities. We need to be more careful, or...”

“You’re right, we need to know just how strong her faction is.”

The ministers inside the palace loved to gossip, so the rumors spread like wildfire. When my aides informed me that Eleora had become the talk of the palace, I decided to go for a walk and sort out my thoughts. *In the empire, Eleora has no popularity, and she lacks a strong core of supporters. But it seems in Meraldia she has both. That's going to cause a power shift inside the empire...*

The other members of the imperial family who had the right to succeed the throne were potential threats as well. I neither wanted a power struggle within the imperial family, nor did I have any desire to kill any potential rivals. However, I still needed to take care of my own safety. Thinking about the various ways in which I needed to protect myself, I walked down one of the palace's nigh-endless corridors. The more I walked, the colder it seemed to get.

The next day, I summoned Veight to the palace. I wanted to hear about the duel directly from him. All nobles had the right to duel, and an honorary count was no exception, so there had been nothing improper about the duel itself. However, I hadn't expected him to use his newfound authority the moment I granted it to him. Truly, he was a man with no openings. From what I'd heard, he'd gone to pay Viscount Schmenivsky a courtesy visit after the duel too. He really had thought of everything.

It feels like every single one of his moves is calculated... If he'd just been a simple, good-natured person, then he wouldn't have challenged the viscount to a duel. And the duel itself had been a skillful political maneuver. He'd just arrived in Rolmund, so the fastest way to make a name for himself had been to give the lower-ranking nobles a show. The impact it had left ensured they'd be talking about him, and since they were mostly uninvolved in national politics, they weren't worried about what his popularity might do to our negotiating position as an empire.

He might prove to be a dangerous individual. As we walked across the palace grounds, I eyed him warily. His muscles looked as hard as steel, and he walked with the bearing of a warrior. But his expression was gentle, and his demeanor kind. It felt as though a warm southern breeze accompanied him wherever he went. *No wonder there are so many rumors about him.* What surprised me most of all was his insight though.

"This feels more like an imperial museum than a palace garden."

That one sentence spoke volumes. With a single glance, he'd realized the imperial family's greenhouse wasn't growing pretty flowers for people to admire. It was a research facility meant for growing medicinal plants and testing crops that might help Rolmund's agricultural situation. I'd known he was skilled at both swordplay and diplomacy, but I hadn't expected him to be a scholar too. *What an interesting man.* While I realized he was a dangerous person, I couldn't help but want to test him. Remembering that we grew out-of-season fruit here, I led him to a plant that looked deceptively like a poisonous one and plucked one of its berries.

"Here you go, Lord Veight."

"Prince Ashley?"

I'm sure someone as knowledgeable about plants as you must know what this is. There was a poisonous plant common to Meraldia known as the witchberry. And in Rolmund, there grew a native plant that looked just like it, the snowberry. However, our snowberries weren't poisonous. The fruit I'd offered had come from the harmless snowberry. Snowberries were both delicious and had medicinal properties. However, someone from Meraldia should have no way of knowing about the snowberry's existence. *Now then, what will you do, Lord Veight? Do you have the courage to refuse a fruit offered to you by the crown prince?* To my surprise, Veight simply smiled and took the berry from my palm. Then, without any hesitation, he plopped it into his mouth.

What!? It took everything I had not to let my surprise show. From what I'd read, witchberry was common enough in Meraldia that everyone living there knew it was poisonous. Even children knew not to eat them. Naturally, Veight must have known that too. And yet, he just smiled calmly at me and said, "What seems to be the matter, Your Highness?"

"Well... I didn't think you would actually eat it."

Veight casually replied, "This plant looks quite similar to Meraldia's witchberry, but the leaves are a different shape. I imagine you have no reason to poison me, Your Highness, so I assumed you were offering me a harmless berry."

Not only were his powers of observation superhuman, but he was also

fearless. He was someone far beyond my ability to test. *This is my loss.*

That wasn't the only thing surprising about the man known as Veight, either. As we walked through the greenhouse, he'd often stop to look at the soil inside some of the pots. He'd also sniff it, as if trying to identify the soil's components by scent.

"It must have been quite difficult for you to procure this soil."

"You can tell?"

Veight caressed the plant's leaves and said, "The smell of the soil is different. It smells like the fields we have back home in southern Meraldia. But you've enriched it with boiled vermiculite, haven't you?"

Amazing. That's absolutely correct. I didn't think boiled vermiculite gave off a scent, but Veight must have managed to identify it by smell alone, since it was hidden underneath the top layer of soil.

"Yes... that is indeed soil brought over from Meraldia. This particular plant doesn't grow well in Rolmundian soil. I am impressed you were able to tell though."

Veight smiled bashfully.

"I may be a member on the Meraldian Commonwealth council now, but originally I was just a common foot soldier. As a child, I helped my mom till the fields."

"I see..."

So Veight was a skilled warrior, diplomat, noble, scholar, and even farmer. He had an astute eye as well and seemed capable of seeing through lies. *I see, so this is why you brought him here, Eleora.* She'd wanted to show Veight the current state of the empire, so he could advise her how best to proceed. No normal diplomat would be capable of that.

Veight really was a dangerous man. It would be best for the empire if we sent him home as soon as possible. If my father were here, he'd advise me to banish him right away. But I desired something different. I wanted to make him mine. If I could recruit Veight as an ally, he'd be of tremendous help in strengthening

the empire. I wanted him as my retainer no matter the cost. But Veight paid me no mind and continued to examine the plants inside the greenhouse.

“Despite the dark color, this soil’s scent is mild... it’s been diluted. You have very skilled gardeners, Your Highness.”

“Thank you. This greenhouse’s gardeners have all served the imperial family for generations, and some of them also serve as imperial doctors. I’ve gathered all the experts I could find in growing foreign medicinal herbs.”

“I see. I’m jealous of the talent you’ve gathered.”

It had been a mistake to invite someone who understood this greenhouse’s value here. I’d expected Veight not to know that these were medicinal plants, or that they weren’t native to the area. While I wanted to make Veight mine, if I really did poach him away from Eleora, she’d resent me. As much as it pained me, it was probably for the best if I gave up on recruiting him. The foreign noble continued talking, seemingly unaware of the turmoil within my heart.

My father’s condition has only continued to worsen.

“Please have the mages cancel their magic!”

The head physician barges into my father’s room and yells at the imperial mage overseeing him.

“His Majesty’s condition is so severe that he can’t be awoken. The maids have to turn him over in his sleep just so he doesn’t get bed sores! If we wake him and he gets weaker, he won’t be able to fight his illness at all!”

“We can’t give him an infusion unless you wake him!”

The two argued back and forth for some time. However, the imperial mage refused to undo my father’s magical sleep.

“Unbelievable! His Majesty is in severe pain, and you want us to wake him up!? Have you no heart!?”

“But he suffers just as much every time you have to recast the sleep spell! This infusion will at least let him rest easily in the transition periods before your spells take effect.”

Both the doctor and the mage had a point, and I wasn’t sure what to do. I

knew that my father was beyond any hope of recovery. But at least right now, he was still alive. I could still hold his hand or watch his sleeping face. As I was debating what to do, the Sonnenlicht bishop present followed up with the one thing I didn't want to hear.

"Your Highness, you should make preparations for your coronation ceremony."

The bishops attached to the castle had all been asking me to hold the ceremony.

"My father is still ill. Preparing to take the throne while he's in this state is the height of disrespect."

The bishop shook his head.

"If we hold it after his death, it will be too late. If you don't prepare now, you'll have to wait until after His Majesty's funeral."

"I understand, but..."

"In that case, we will have to hide his death and hold his funeral in secret. You will not even be allowed to mourn him in public, leaving his spirit to suffer."

The bishop's words added another worry to my list of never-ending worries. I was a devout follower of Sonnenlicht, and I certainly wanted my father's soul to rest in peace. His soul needed to pass behind the sun and reach the heavenly gates of transmigration so that he could reincarnate. But while I understood what the bishop was saying, my father was still alive.

I'd written a letter to my uncle asking for advice, but his response has been what I was expecting. "As a new emperor, you need to do everything in your power not to alienate the Sonnenlicht Order. I say this as your loyal vassal, your loving uncle, and as your father's younger brother. Make the preparations for your coronation ceremony."

Lord Doneiks had also advised that after I'd prepared for the coronation ceremony, I should stop my father's treatment. He claimed that it was too cruel to prolong my father's suffering when it was obvious he wouldn't recover. Honestly, my uncle was probably right. My father was the emperor, and I was the crown prince. Regardless of whether he was on his deathbed, he had a duty

to govern the empire. I had taken over his duties for the present, but eventually I would need to formally establish myself as the emperor. Time was running out. I understood that logically. But my heart refused to accept it. After agonizing over my decision for ages, I decided to confide in Veight of all people.

“It certainly is relaxing drinking tea in a greenhouse, Your Highness.”

I’d invited Veight to the greenhouse, and he was relaxing on one of the many benches. There was a glass table between us, and on it sat the most expensive tea set in the empire. The last time these utensils had been brought out was 30 years ago. Of course, Veight didn’t know that, but this was my way of showing him hospitality. But to my surprise, he smiled wryly and said, “This teacup is so impressive I’m not even sure how to hold it. I’m just a rural foot soldier, so please forgive me if I do anything rude.”

“Are you familiar with tea?”

“Ryunheit’s viceroy, Airia, is a master of the Mikhaila tea ceremony. And she brews tea for me every day, so I do have some knowledge of formal tea leaves and tea sets.”

Veight examined the most expensive teacup in the set.

“This teacup is made of white porcelain, isn’t it? I’ve heard there are no longer craftsmen capable of making teacups this translucent or giving them this azure sheen. Though apparently there are a few fakes made of cheaper materials.”

“Your knowledge runs deeper than you claim.”

“Lady Airia mentioned that the genuine article might still exist in Rolmund is all.”

Veight’s smile grew somewhat melancholic. He only seemed to get like this when speaking of the woman known as Airia. Whoever she was, he seemed to care about her. Still, despite the tinge of loneliness to it, it was a good smile. I smiled back at him, but his expression suddenly turned serious.

“By the way, I noticed this tea set is protected by magic. A quite powerful enchantment, too. Which means it must be real and not a fake.”

“An astute observation.”

Veight had even realized that the tea set had wards on it to prevent it from eroding with time. He really did seem to know everything. More importantly though, I’d managed to get a glimpse into Veight’s personal life. It seemed his private life was as rich and varied as his public life seemed to be. Unable to bottle up my feelings any longer, I decided to open up to him about my worries.

“Lord Veight.”

“Yes?”

His smile returned. I almost blurted out “I want to ask you something about my father...” right then and there, but I managed to stop myself. I was the crown prince; it would be wrong of me on multiple levels to divulge that my father was deathly ill. After all, the truth was still a secret. Instead, I chose a more roundabout approach.

“Lord Veight, are your parents in good health?”

“My mom is living peacefully in the countryside. I’ve been trying to invite her to Ryunheit, but she insists that she wants to remain in her village... She’s quite attached to her fields.”

“And your father?”

“He died when I was but a year old. I don’t remember anything about him.”

Did I touch on a sensitive topic? Now I felt guilty for asking that. To my surprise though, Veight smiled gently at me.

“However, there was someone I thought of as a father. He was my superior, and I respected him more than anyone, but last year he passed away.”

“Oh... I’m terribly sorry to hear that.”

Since Veight was on the council, I assumed he was referring to one of the other viceroys. I asked him, “Did you feel sad when he died?”

“Of course I did. It was one of the most painful moments of my life. His passing was so sudden that I didn’t even have time to say anything. Even now, I wish it had just been a dream.”

Veight's eyes turned misty. This was the first time I'd seen him express sorrow. He looked down at the steam rising from his teacup and said, "But so long as people are mortal, they will one day die. I, too, will die eventually. It's inevitable."

"Indeed, that is the fate of man."

"I'm not sure if those who care about me will still be alive when the reaper finally comes for me, but just imagining their sorrow makes me terrified to die." Veight's free hand curls into a fist. "If possible, I'd like those I leave behind to not mourn my death and to continue moving forward."

"Indeed. I wish for that as well, when it comes to me."

"In that case, you should do the same for those who are leaving you behind, Your Highness."

Those words granted me a moment of clarity. *He's right. Father was always looking forward to the day that I would succeed the throne.*

"If possible, I'd like to pass the throne onto you while I'm still alive, so I can see you in imperial robes."

I'd lost count of how many times he'd said that to me. Veight sighed and gave me a bashful smile.

"That's also why I'm trying to move forward. For the sake of those who passed on before me."

"I see..."

Now that Father had successfully conquered Meraldia, the only worries he had left were whether or not the empire was stable. The current situation, where I was performing the duties of emperor without actually being emperor, would probably just make him needlessly fret. My doubts and fears melted away, leaving in their place a newfound resolve.

"Lord Veight, thank you so much for meeting with me. Time spent with you is always productive."

"You honor me, Your Highness."

The foreign noble smiled faintly and downed his tea in one gulp.

After he left, I went to visit my father again. Though the servants had left incense burning to mask the scent, he gave off the unique odor of those who were deathly ill. People often called it the smell of death, and for good reason.

The shadow of death darkened my father's face as well. There was no doubt he only had days left. I gripped my father's bony, emaciated hand, and told him my decision.

"Father, I've finally made up my mind. I don't know if I can support this empire or not, but I'm going to try and move forward."

Father should have been unconscious. But for just a moment, it felt like he grabbed my hand back.

"Father!?"

But then his fingers slackened, and he was still. He was still breathing, but barely. The court physician laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Your Highness, you should let him rest. His condition has deteriorated to the point where it's taking enormous amounts of mana and medicinal infusions to keep him alive."

If he wasn't attended 24/7, he wouldn't survive even a few more minutes.

"I understand. I leave him in your care."

I left my father's room and addressed the bishops and officials waiting outside.

"Begin preparations for the coronation ceremony. Keep them secret from everyone but the most influential lords."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

As one, they bowed to me. Watching them, I muttered quietly, "Move forward for the sake of those who passed before you... was it?"

"Did you say something, Your Highness?"

"No, just talking to myself."

I smiled, and in my heart bade farewell to my father. From here on out, I'd be moving forward. For his sake as well. *This is how I'll honor your memory, Father.*

At the time, I had no idea. No idea that my decision would end up shaking the empire to its core. Nor that it would set both the empire, and my future, on a completely different track.

Afterword

Hello readers. It's me, Hyougetsu. I'm honored we get to meet again in this volume. In fact, I'm relieved this volume got published at all. The Rolmund arc's going to continue for a while, so I hope you guys can bear with me.

Some of you might be wondering why I decided to move the stage to Rolmund. Really, it's just because I felt like it. But let me give you a bit of insight into why I made the decision. Everyone loves reading stories about hidden plots and political intrigue, and I love writing them too. The problem with these things, though, is you need at least a few horrible events to make things tense. Political struggles inevitably lead to losers getting executed, or people being banished in disgrace.

If there had been that kind of political drama in Meraldia, it would have left deep grudges after the dust settled. Veight and the others wouldn't be able to live in peace because they'd always be worried someone might be coming back to take revenge, so I'd decided to have them go to Rolmund, where they could engage in all this political intrigue without having to worry about the backlash spilling over to their homeland. Also, I just really wanted to write about a country located in a snowy region.

One of the greatest joys of writing an isekai is fleshing out the different societies and cultures that live in your new world. Since I was gonna make a bunch of different countries anyway, I figured it'd be cool to make one whose culture and history was the complete opposite of Meraldia's. For those of you following me on Narou, you'll notice I've introduced yet another nation in the web novel. I really love picking out geographic locations, and then thinking about how the climate and topography would shape a society's culture and history.

Anyway, before I forget, I'd like to thank Nishi(E)da-sensei for his wonderful illustrations. I introduced a lot of characters in this volume and designing all of them couldn't have been easy. But he managed to give them all their individual charm while keeping them true to my descriptions. I really can't thank him enough for his hard work.

I'd also like to thank my editors Lord Fusanon and Saitou-sama. Even though they were so busy with getting the website for Der Werwolf up and running, they still managed to find time to answer my questions about writing.

Also, thank you very much Komatsu Mikako-sama for voicing Airia in the promotional PV we put out on the website. She's also voiced some of the new side stories I wrote especially for the website. I happened to get the chance to see the recording session, and honestly, the staff and voice actors were all amazing. I truly am blessed as an author, so I'd like to take these few pages to once again express my gratitude. Really, thank you so much.

We've gotten quite a few volumes in, but Veight's struggles are far from over. For now, he still has to deal with the turmoil within the Rolmund Empire. Let us meet again in volume six.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 6 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member -

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 5

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen

Edited by Meiru

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 Hyougetsu / Nishi(E)da

Illustrations by Nishi(E)da

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by Earth Star Entertainment

This English edition is published by arrangement with Earth Star Entertainment, Tokyo

English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: August 2019


Der Werwolf
05
Der Werwolf:
The Annals of Veight
— Empire of Ice —
Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da