

It was early in the afternoon when Yoiryu arrived at the inn, the kitsune's nine blue-tipped tails brushing against the door frame as he passed through it. The innkeeper gave him a wary look, to which he returned his best smile. The other man seemed unamused and narrowed his eyes at him, only turning away after seeing the coin purse hanging from his belt.

“What a warm welcome,” Yoiryu mused. He couldn't really blame the guy for being wary of him, not after his last visit here had ended as it did—even if he had paid for all the damages afterwards.

“Welcome, sir,” a woman said to him—a young weasel who worked at the inn. “What will you be having today?”

“A mug of ale, if you please. And get one for my friend over there, too,” he said, pointing to a corner table, where a man sat alone. He was covered from head to toe in a heavy cloak, its hood pulled low over his face. Still, what little could be seen of him was enough to mark him out as a snow leopard.

The woman nodded and went to fetch their drinks, leaving him to make his way over to the hooded fellow. “Couldn't you have chosen a better place for our meeting?” the man grumbled as Yoiryu joined him at his table.

“What's the matter? Don't like the atmosphere?”

“I don't, but you know that's not the problem. It's too public; anyone might see us here.”

“Come now, you worry too much. You and I both know this is the last place any of our enemies would want to be seen in,” Yoiryu said, thanking the barmaid as she came to leave their drinks. He slipped a silver coin into her hand and saw her cast a sly glance back at the innkeeper before pocketing it and leaving to service another table. “Now tell me, what did you find out?”

The snow leopard took a sip of his mug before pushing it aside with a grimace. “Your enemies have been talking to each other. Nothing too overt, of course; a chance meeting at the jeweler's or at the opera, a quick hello and a shake of the hands, and then each goes their separate ways. Nothing that would arouse suspicion, except such 'chance' events have grown twice as common since your queen's new law was passed.”

The law in question was one that forbid the Mage's Guild from withholding rank from its members over matters of bloodline. For decades now, the higher ranks of the Guild had been passed on

incestuously to members of the same few families, with the exceptions to the rule few enough to be counted on one hand. No longer could a peasant's son hope to become archmage, provided they had the necessary skill and dedication. Until the law was passed one of low birth could expect to be excluded from the Guild unless they practically prostrated themselves before a High Mage or two—a fact Yoiryu knew all too well.

“It's not really Shima's law, you know. People have been talking about passing similar laws since before she was queen. There were rumors the old king was going to pass something like it before his untimely death.”

“Yes, but the fact that it was she who passed it makes it her law in the eyes of those opposed to it, not least because they see it as the continuation of a pattern that began with her. First the king marries the daughter of a merchant, raising a woman who isn't even of the lesser nobility to queen for the first time in the kingdom's history. Then he dies, leaving her as queen regnant. Then, when the court mage dies, instead of following tradition and picking one of the High Mages as his replacement, she picks a common-born mage of no notable rank in the Guild. Now she effectively proclaims the end of the noble houses' monopoly over the Guild. She's been a constant challenge to the nobility's hold on power, and they hate her for it. If it weren't for those other things, the law might not have been taken so poorly. As it is, she's just added more fuel to the fire. Not only have her enemies been meeting more often now, they've also been joined by certain high-ranking members of the Guild.”

“Wait, really? Like who?”

“Here,” the big cat said. “A list of the people your queen's enemies have been reaching out to, or who've reached out to them. Can't say for sure how many have joined, but I'd keep an eye on them if I were you.” The snow leopard looked as though he was about to say something else, then shook his head and took another sip of ale.

“You have something else for me?”

“Nothing concrete. Just a hunch of mine. Call it the intuition of a man who's spent half his life keeping an eye on the political classes.”

“So what is it?”

“I think your enemies are planning on doing something big soon. Can't say what or when. Keep an eye on your back, and the other on that queen of yours. Would be a shame to see her die so young.” The

snow leopard got up and slipped out of the inn, leaving Yoiryu with the list of names and a ball in the pit of his stomach.

“E-excuse me, sir?” a voice snapped him out of his contemplation. He turned and saw a young rat standing timidly beside him. “Sorry to bother you, but... you're the court mage's apprentice, right? That means you know the queen, right?”

“That's right. The name's Yoiryu. What do you need?” he asked amicably, taking another draught of ale.

“Well, you see, Sir Yoiryu, me and my dad came over from our farm this morning, and we heard about this new law Her Majesty's passed. My brother, you see, he's got some talent at magic, wanted badly to join the Mage's Guild, only when he applied, they told him he couldn't join; because he's a farmer, you see. With the new law, my brother... I mean... do you think he'd be able to join the guild now?”

Yoiryu stood and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. “Tell your brother he's free to join the guild if he so pleases; and if anyone tries to refuse him on account of being a farmer, just come to me and I'll make sure Her Majesty queen gets them all sorted out.”

“Thank you, Sir Yoiryu, sir! I'll go tell my brother your words exactly! Gods bless you, sir!” the boy cried as he ran out of the inn.

“A farmer becoming a mage? Bah! Would be funny if it weren't so sad. Oh, what is our fine Kholis coming to!” one of the inn's customers wailed—a lone deer sitting alone at a table, a mug of beer in his hand and at least an ounce of it on the table. His head slumped forward, weighed down by antlers which would normally have been held displayed proudly atop an upright head.

“You have a problem with the boy becoming a mage?” Yoiryu asked him.

“Of course I do, and so would anyone in his right mind” the drunk deer slurred. “I tell you, if the boy joins the Guild—assuming the kid actually has any talent for magic, which I wager doesn't—but if he joins the guild, we'll be lucky if he doesn't burn the city down by the end of the month. The only thing these country brutes know are good for is growing our food, and we can barely even trust them with that. Just imagine what will happen if one of them learns to throw fireballs and lightning bolts.” He shuddered and downed another draught of beer. A few of the inn's patrons muttered agreement, though most just shook their heads and ignored him.

Yoiryu began making his way towards the man, but reconsidered as he caught the innkeeper's stern look. Instead he addressed the man, saying, "I think you've had quite enough to drink today," then cast a spell to make his beer evaporate.

"Bah, screw you." The deer raised the mug to his lips again and was perplexed to find it empty. He called to the barmaid, who came to pick his mug up, shooting Yoiryu a look as she did so. He shrugged and smiled, to which she rolled her eyes before going to fill the mug again.

Yoiryu sighed. As much fun as it was to mess with folks who had it coming to them, especially if they failed to catch on to it, he had more important things to be doing than picking fights with drunkards. The informant had been right—something big was coming. More than once he had felt the certainty of it, like a man afloat in shark-infested waters knowing it was a question of when, not if, one of them would come in for bite. Shima and his master felt it too, and had recently increased security at the palace, but how much help would the Royal Guard be if the Mage's Guild took part in whatever was coming?

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"I believe the queen wanted to see me," Yoiryu said to the pair of men guarding the throne room, greeting them with a nod.

"Go ahead," one said, opening the door for him.

Queen Shima sat on her throne at the far end of the room, with his master, Ageron the court mage, standing behind her. He thought he detected an awkward atmosphere, as if he had just interrupted a private conversation; and was it his imagination, or was Ageron standing closer to the queen than was proper? Even after these past few months at the palace, many of the little unspoken rules and proprieties of court behavior still eluded him.

He strolled up to the throne and knelt before the queen. A sheep of no great stature, Shima still managed to look commanding in her royal outfit. She'd been queen for only 3 years and held the throne for less than one, but she took to her role so naturally it looked like she'd been born into it.

"Much better form," she muttered in approval. "You've trained him well, Ageron."

"He is a quick learner, as long as one can induce him to care about what he's being taught," his master

said, the old hare scratching at his graying chin.

“Stand, child. Tell us, what have you learned?”

Yoiryu straightened himself and handed over the list of names he'd been given. “Your enemies have been meeting more often. They've even been reaching out to members of the Guild. Our informant thinks they're planning on pulling something big soon.”

The queen nodded, unrolling the piece of paper and going over its contents, Ageron craning his neck behind her to try and get a look at it. “I see. Unfortunately, this doesn't tell me anything I didn't already suspect, and doesn't confirm anything I can use in my favor. If I had proof of something illegal, I could at least move to have them apprehended. What I have here is almost worthless.” She Ageron the list and sighed. “My enemies walk the streets freely, no doubt plotting something against me. Meanwhile I'm stuck here, trying to placate the few noble houses who haven't yet turned against me. Just today I've had to meet with the representatives of four separate houses. Can you guess what it is they wanted from me?”

“Are they trying to suggest a marriage again?” Yoiryu asked.

“How ever did you guess? I'm almost tempted to accept their proposals just to get them to stop pestering me about it,” she sighed. “In all truth, it's getting harder and harder to turn them down, considering these recent developments. Still, if I were to take a husband now, whoever I married would only try to undermine all my hard-won power and overturn my laws.”

“Why not marry for love, like the king did?” Yoiryu suggested. “Surely there must be someone you like.” Why did Ageron look, as though he had said something upsetting?

“Unlike my late husband, I can't afford the luxury of marrying whoever happens to catch my fancy. No, my marriage will have to be entirely political, and it will have to happen soon. The nobles make good points; I need allies, and the throne needs an heir. In marrying one of them would, I'd be killing two birds with one stone. But enough of that. Have you anything else to report?”

“A kid came up to me today while I was sitting at the inn,” Yoiryu began, recounting his meeting with the young rat.

“Good,” the queen said. “It looks like we'll learn soon enough just how seriously the Mage's Guild

takes the new law. Speaking of which, what about you? Any news on whether you'll be allowed to rise to the next rank?"

"As to that, it doesn't seem like it'll happen anytime soon. The senior mages say I have the power for it, but not the skill, and they complain that my spending so much time here at the palace puts my loyalty to the Guild in doubt."

"And do you find their objections reasonable, Ageron?"

"Regarding his skill, I must agree, to my discredit. I should have taught him more by now, but I haven't been able to find the time between all my duties. I would suggest he go find another teacher, but I doubt any would have him unless he agreed to be their lackey."

"It's fine, really," Yoiryu said. "Right now, helping Her Majesty is much more important than my rank. There will be time enough for that after this is all done."

"And I applaud that sentiment, but it does make it hard to argue the case for you being loyal to the Guild, especially while much of the Guild's hierarchy perceives Her Majesty as an enemy."

"I see," the queen said. "I wish I could do more for you, but unfortunately, my hands are tied. You two have been a great help to me in these difficult times and you deserve more than I can give you. Some day things will change, though, and when they do, I hope I can at least one of you wearing the robes of a High Mage."

"Yes, well... maybe some day," Ageron mused.

"You don't think it possible? Well, never you mind that. You'll prove yourself wrong in no time, or your student will, I'm sure. But listen to me droning on; it's about time we end this meeting. You are dismissed. Good night, the both of you."

"Good night, your highness," Yoiryu and his master said, bowing before leaving the throne room.

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Yoiryu sat in his room in the palace, reading by candlelight. The kitsune had never been one for book learning. He was very much a hands-on sort of learner, and he'd found understanding only really came to him after doing something over and over again until some flash of enlightenment made it all click together. Books were tedious to read and all those words didn't really mean anything for him. However, with Ageron constantly busy with his duties as Court Mage, he'd had to resort to borrowing books from the Guild library to carry on his learning. Grabbing this one in particular had probably been a mistake, however.

He flipped back to the table of contents, skimming over the chapter titles. "Mana and its elemental manifestations; Mind and mana; Mana and matter; Mana crystals; Mana pools; The flow of mana; The use of mana; Mana in the natural world; Practical metaphysics of mana." That last one in particular made his name spin just from reading its name. It would be alright if the book at least had some practices in it, but all of what he'd seen was pure theory, much of it bordering on the philosophical without any utility he could see.

For the hundredth time he put the book aside and picked up another one, only a quarter as thick as the first. It was a simple book of spells, the sort fit for a beginner to use. How to make a ball of light to illuminate the dark, how to cast a fireball, how to levitate objects, how to turn something invisible... well, transparent, actually, like a glass figure. Making something truly invisible was much more advanced.

Since none of the other mages were willing to teach him, this was the only way he had to learn new spells. Not the ones in the book, of course—those he had learned long ago. What he did was take a spell and make small modifications to it to see what would happen. After enough experimentation he could start to grasp the principles behind it and use it as a base to come up with new spells. In this way he figured out how to make a ball of varying colors, how to cast lightning as well as fire, and how to make a levitating object move in specific patterns, to name just a few of his discoveries.

Recently he'd been busy trying to figure out how to transform something into something else. He already knew how to change their outward appearances—how to make a brick look like a loaf of bread, for instance—but he couldn't actually turn a brick into bread. Supposedly such transformations were some of the most difficult spells to pull off, but he had never been one to be dissuaded by such claims. He had begun to focus on the glass of water on his table, trying to turn it into something more pleasant—a glass of wine, perhaps—when suddenly there was a knock at the door.

"Mage Yoiryu? Are you in there?"

Yoiryu recognized the voice as belonging to the High Mage Oellon. "What is he doing at the palace?"

he wondered, then froze as he remembered that Oellon's had been one of the names on the informant's list. He got up and opened the door, greeting the other mage cordially. "High Mage, welcome. Come in; make yourself at home."

Oellon, a red fox of great stature and powerful build, stepped inside before the invitation was out of his mouth, taking a look around with undisguised contempt.

"So... may I ask what business brings you to my quarters?"

Oellon said nothing, only kept looking around. Oellon approached his desk and picked up the pair of books on his table, looking at their covers. "A most peculiar combination. A book of spells fit for young men barely learning the craft, and one of advanced magical theory of interest to few but the most dedicated scholars of magic. A man trying to figure out your magical proficiency based on these two books would conclude you were either a brilliantly perceptive mage, capable of finding something of worth even in this beginner's book, or else a clueless young man who grabbed two books at random from the Guild library because he didn't know what he was looking for and these just so happened to be the two he grabbed." He looked expectantly at Yoiryu, but the kitsune said nothing.

"Tell me, child, did you join the Guild to learn magic, or did you do it because you wanted to play at politics?"

"To learn magic," Yoiryu replied.

"Then quite wasting your time with the old hare and 'queen' and come join those of us who actually remain at the Guild. You've a lot of potential, possibly more than anyone else in the kingdom today, yet here you squander it all in the service of a woman who would put an end to the Guild as we know it. Tell me, what magic were you practicing before I knocked on your door?"

"I wasn't..."

"Don't lie to me, child. I felt you holding mana just before I came in here. It was the only way I could find your room, seeing as the louts they have as guards here didn't prove of any help."

"... I was trying to work out how to transmogrify objects. I wanted to turn that water into wine."



“Transmogrification? That's highly advanced magic. And just how were you trying to 'work out' how to do it? I haven't read this book in many decades, but I don't recall it teaching anything of the sort,” he said, motioning with the book of spells

“I thought the spell might be kind of similar to the one used to change the appearance of things, so I've been trying to experiment with that one to see if I can get any insight on how transmogrification works.”

“Yes, I suppose you might figure it out that way, assuming you have twenty years to spare,” Oellon scoffed. “Alternatively, you could get yourself a Guild teacher and learn how to do it in a fraction of the time.”

“And who would want to teach me? When I first joined the Guild, none but Ageron would agree to it.” There had been a few others who had expressed interest, but they had been discouraged by the higher-ranking members.

“Mistakes were made; that's all in the past,” Oellon said, waving the issue away. “I've spoken with some of the other High Mages. I believe we might be able to work out an arrangement for you. You have much potential, but if we're to help you reach it, you must affirm your loyalty to the Guild. We will not teach any member who is not fully committed to us.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I'm content to stay here with Ageron for now. Hopefully once relations between the Guild and the crown improve, I'll be able to dedicate myself to my studies.”

“I don't think you understand. If you don't leave your position here and come to us immediately, I can't promise that you will remain in the Guild for much longer.”

“I... I understand. I still choose to stay here. Now, if this is all you came here for, I ask that you leave me alone so I can continue my studies.”

“Very well. You'll soon see what comes of giving your loyalty to that sheep you call a queen,” Oellon said, storming out of the room and slamming the door behind him.

Yoiryu held his breath until the High Mage's footsteps faded out of hearing. He felt there was something ominous in his last utterance—something beyond the mere threat of being expelled from the Guild.

There seemed to be something strange about the High Mage's visit, but it wasn't until he'd asked the guards about it that he was able to substantiate his feeling. None of the guards could say they remembered seeing him at all, not even those those who had been at the palace gates that day.

Yoiryu hurried to tell the queen about this. On his way to the throne room, he came across his master and explained everything to him.

Ageron immediately took him to the queen, where he once again recounted his story. Shima grew visibly alarmed at hearing of it and hastened to call up the captains of her Royal Guard, chastising them for this oversight and ordering them to increase security around the palace. “Not that it will do much good if the High Mage decides to come waltzing in here again,” she admitted after dismissing her captains, “but maybe this will make him think twice before trying something like that again. Tell me, Ageron, do you have any idea how he might have gotten in without being seen?”

“The easiest way would involve disguising himself as someone else—someone who wouldn't arouse any suspicion or interest. There's a few other possibilities, but those are much harder pull off without discovery. Invisibility, for instance, takes a lot of concentration to maintain and doesn't allow one to move more than a few inches at a time. He might also have teleported inside the palace, but that requires setting up a focus altar and there's no way something like that could escape notice.”

“I see. And is there anything you can do to help guard against something like this happening again?”

“I suppose I could set up a barrier of sorts around the gates so that if anyone approaches them wearing such a spell, their true appearance will be revealed when they pass through.”

“Then go do that immediately and report back to me when you're done.”

“Come, Yoiryu,” Ageron said as he turned to leave, his student following close behind. Yoiryu had never seen his master so troubled as he did then. Though he grew more relaxed once they'd set up the barrier, it was still clear that the High Mage's appearance had him upset. “If you see anyone from the Guild in the palace grounds, or if you feel any strange magical activity, come tell me immediately,” he told Yoiryu once they were done. “And above all, watch your back. I feel this will all come to a head soon. Be prepared.” Then he went off to meet with Shima, leaving Yoiryu alone to brood over his master's words.

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Two days had passed since the High Mage's visit. This morning the queen had called for Yoiryu and handed him a letter, asking him to carry it to Leoris, one of the holdings of one of the few noble families she could count as an ally. He had accepted and departed as soon as he had grabbed some food and water for the road and bid farewell to his master. Ageron looked more solemn than usual when Yoiryu had last seen him. Curiously, he seemed happy to hear that his student was leaving. Why that might be, he didn't know.

The kitsune had been traveling west towards Leoris for most of the day now. His feet ached, but though he'd seen an inn a short while ago, he thought it best to keep going and camp out tonight to get the message delivered sooner. Hopefully he would be able to find a friendly group of travelers he could share a camp with.

It was well past noon and the sky was growing dark. The sun hung low in the sky, forcing Yoiryu to look away from the road. It was for this reason that he didn't notice the large group coming his way until they were practically on top of him. He heard them before he saw them—at least a dozen pairs of boots treading on the path. Yoiryu looked at the group and saw there were a bunch of armed men. One of them pointed towards him, saying something he couldn't make out, then a handful of them rushed at him. He readied a spell to defend himself, but before he had to cast it, someone called out from behind the charging men, saying, “Halt, you fools! Don't forget he's a mage, even if he's still an apprentice.”

Yoiryu was shocked to recognize that voice as the Oellon's. This was the last place he had expected to see a High Mage. The big fox stepped forward and took off his hood, revealing his face to Yoiryu. “High Mage; what is going on here?” Yoiryu demanded.

“The Lord Emoril, true heir to the throne, has taken his rightful place as king of Kholis. The false queen Shima has been incarcerated, as has the traitor Ageron and other of her close allies, to await their trial on the morning. After some questioning, it was found out that you had been sent to Leoris to deliver a message. As one of the false queen's abettors, you are to stand trial with them, and since I have a focus altar set up near Leoris, I was charged with leading a party to bring you back—alive, if possible, though the king didn't seem too insistent on it.

“Now, listen, child. I know you're thinking of fighting us. Let me assure you it would be in everyone's best interests if that didn't happen. If you come with us quietly, I might be able to convince the king to spare you. After all, you're just a young man who made some poor decisions due to your misguided sense of right and wrong. But if we can fix that sense of yours—make you see where your loyalties ought to lie—I'm sure he'd agree there's no point in letting power like yours go to waste. All you need

to do is swear your fealty to us.”

“I'd rather die than swear fealty to a bunch of treasonous curs,” Yoiryu spat. “Now all of you listen to me. You guys don't want to fight me. In magical strength I surpass every mage in the Guild, save perhaps the archmage. Just ask him if you don't believe me,” he said, nodding to Oellon. “As for you, High Mage, this coup of yours will not work. The common people love Her Majesty. They won't just sit by and let a usurper king send her to the gallows. Either she will be restored, or the whole kingdom will fall into civil war because of what you've done. That doesn't have to happen. Help me free the queen and this can all be avoided. I'll even put in a good word for you so you don't end up with a noose around your neck.”

The armed men looked at each other uncertainly, but Oellon was unaffected. “How cute,” he said, “that you think you could convince anyone with that bravado of yours. Now be a good boy and quit playing games. Just let us bring you back to the castle, will you? Men, take him.”

As the armed men began walking towards him, Yoiryu cast a spell to push them all away, then turned and ran as the nearest men were all thrown back. Those behind the High Mage, however, remained afoot as Oellon put up a shield against his spell. “So be it,” the High Mage said. He held out a hand towards Yoiryu and suddenly it felt as though the air around the young mage had turned to jelly, becoming so viscous that he was barely able to breathe or move. He then felt himself being pulled back towards the High Mage. Concentrating, he managed to cut off the flow of mana to the first of Oellon's spells, allowing him to move and breathe again. With a gasp, he threw several fireballs in the fox's direction. A few of his attacks hit the men, but most were either dodged or dispelled before they could hit anything.

He felt the High Mage preparing another spell and readied himself to counter it. He failed, however, as the mana of Oellon's spell danced around his defenses, and soon he was trapped again. He tried once more to break the spell, but this time the High Mage had anticipated it and quickly implemented a counter-attack, rebuffing his attempt to dispel it. To either side, Yoiryu saw some of the armed men approaching, readying their weapons as they drew near. As he was, however, he could do nothing against them. If he tried to cut off Oellon's spells, his mana flows just danced around his attempts. If he tried to launch a counter attack, the High Mage cut it off first. All his raw magical strength meant nothing when he wasn't allowed to do anything with it. The only sort of spells that might work were those which would affect his own body. Suffering from a lack of oxygen as he was, however, he couldn't think straight enough to figure out what to cast. Desperately, his mind reached out to grab ahold of some mana and, as if by instinct, he wove it into a wholly new spell, draping it over his body, and...

The whole world seemed to shift around Yoiryu. His sight, his smell, his touch and hearing, and even

his sense of his own body—all of it was off. Something about him was changing, but as to what it was, he had no idea. Piecing together the odd bits of sense-impressions—images and sounds he struggled to correlate with anything he had experienced before—he thought he saw all the armed men, and even the High Mage, cowering in fear of him. Only, for some strange reason, they all looked small. Very, very small.

Yoiryu groaned; or rather, he tried to. The sound that actually came out of his mouth was more of a fearsome roar, one that startled even him. As his mind finished adapting to its new senses, he suddenly understood what was going on: he had turned into a dragon. Somehow, in his desperate attempt to do something to save himself, he happened upon a spell to transform himself into a dragon.

Yoiryu took a step, getting used to the sheer power of his new form. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, smoke seeping out of his nostrils. Then he noticed some tiny little things moving around on the ground, looking little bigger than roaches compared to his new size. The men were running scared, desperately trying to get away from him. He laughed, a low, bassy rumble that spooked them even more. “Where do you all think you're going?” he asked in a voice that only vaguely resembled his normal one.

“Going somewhere?” he asked as he swung his powerful tail, catching many of them in their attempt to escape and dragging them all in front of him. He leaned his head down over them, eyeing them curiously as they all just lay frozen in place, shivering as they gazed into his eye.

Then he felt something tickling his snout. He looked up and saw the High Mage stumbling backwards as he tried throwing spell after spell at him. Fire balls, lightning bolts, spears of pure mana. None of them did anything more than tickle him. It seemed Yoiryu's transformation was complete, granting him with a dragon's natural protection against magic. He was effectively immune to anything Oellon might try.

Yoiryu grinned at the old fox, exposing twin rows of sharp teeth glistening with saliva. He casually strolled forward, each booming step bringing him closer to the High Mage, who in turn grew more and more scared. Eventually he gave up trying to attack Yoiryu and turned to flee. No matter how quickly he ran, however, he could barely match Yoiryu's stroll as his powerful draconian legs kept him at a fixed distance behind the High Mage.

In his hurry to escape, Oellon tripped over his own feet and fell tumbling to the ground. Yoiryu caught up to him in just a couple steps. “Need a hand?” he asked as he reached down for the old fox. Oellon scrambled up and kept running before he could grab him, but by then Yoiryu had grown tired of their chase. He jumped front of the High Mage, the impact of Yoiryu's massive body shaking the ground and making him fall. Before he could get up again, Yoiryu's forepaw fell upon him, pinning him helplessly

to the ground. “Are you quite done now?” The lumbering kitsune-turned-dragon asked. The High Mage still squirmed under his grip, but putting a bit more pressure on him got him to stop and pay attention. “Well? What happened to all your sneering condescension? Don't you want to explain how it's still in my best interests to go quietly with you?”

Oellon said nothing, his eyes following the movement of Yoiryu's fangs. “Looks like you're very interested in my teeth. You don't think I'm going to eat you, do you?” he asked as he picked the old fox up, holding him by the shirt between his claws. “Then again, maybe I should. You certainly deserve it for all this coup business. I wonder, what does fox taste like?” He opened his jaw wide, his tongue darting out to wrap itself around Oellon, pulling the trembling mage into his mouth.

The old fox was dragged all over his mouth, becoming intimately familiar with Yoiryu's cheeks, teeth, and tongue. However much he squirmed and tried to push back against Yoiryu's tongue, he was utterly helpless to stop the slick pink muscle from having its way with him. Yoiryu toyed with him a while, then spat him back onto the ground where he lay shivering, trying to wipe all the saliva off of himself.

“Well, lucky for you, it turns out fox doesn't taste very good at all. But that's no problem; there's other ways to take deal with you. Tell me, how do you feel about being crushed underfoot?” Yoiryu raised a forepaw over him, splaying his fingers apart before bringing it down, Oellon just barely managing to roll out from under it before it landed. “Well, however you feel, you'll be feeling pretty flat in just a moment.” He brought his talons down over Oellon again and again, the High Mage just barely getting out of the way before he was flattened under them each time. “My, I just keep missing you,” he mused. “Maybe I'd have a better shot at crushing you if I tried it with something a little bigger.” He turned around and raised his tail in the air, showing off his rear for the High Mage. Oellon could already guess what was coming and started running, only to be tripped up as Yoiryu's tail swept his legs out from under him, and dragged him back under Yoiryu. “Be a good boy and stop playing games now, will you?” Yoiryu said, slapping him down with his tail a couple times. “Here I come.” He lowered himself to the ground, trapping the High Mage under his haunches. Oellon still squirmed underneath him, and after a while he managed to poke his head out.

“Alright, I surrender. You've made your point. But please, just listen to me for a second. You can turn yourself into a dragon. This is a very valuable skill, one that would be of great use to the king and the Guild. You don't need to waste it in the service of that queen of yours. If you would just...”

“That's enough out of you,” Yoiryu interrupted him. Whatever else the High Mage was about to say was silenced to a muffle under tons of dragon flesh as Yoiryu shifted his position, once more pinning him beneath his body. He left him there until he stopped struggling, having either passed out, grown tired, or finally realized all his efforts were of no use. Only then did he stand back up, finding that the High Mage had, in fact, passed out.

Now, what to do with him? He could easily kill him if he chose, but he didn't want to kill anyone if it could be helped at all. Simply leaving him out here risked letting him escape, however, and he wasn't about to allow that. He would have to keep the old fox along until he found someone else capable of keeping the High Mage prisoner. As for the men who'd come along with him, he would have to let them go free. He could only hold so many prisoners at once, after all, and they weren't nearly as much of a threat as a High Mage.

Yoiryu wrapped his talons around him. With the unconscious fox firmly held his fist, he began flapping his wings. The resulting wind made the trees shake and bend like they were caught in a hurricane. Once he felt he was used to them, he jumped up, trying to take flight only to fall back to the ground. After a few attempts he had the hang of it and rose up into the air, setting off to the palace. He still had a queen to free, after all.

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Emoril's hold on power had proven much less secure than any of his followers had anticipated. Once word of the queen's capture had spread, the common people had revolted against the usurper, just as Yoiryu had predicted, so that by the time the kitsune-turned-dragon arrived at the capital, the usurper's allies were too busy with trying to put down the uprising to be able to put up a defense against a giant dragon. Wasting no time, Yoiryu immediately set to freeing the queen, his mentor, and everyone else who had been imprisoned by the usurper, turning the tides of battle against the false king. By midnight, most of those who took part in the coup had been rounded up and put in the dungeon, their numbers filling all of the dungeon cells that were still intact after Yoiryu had broken everyone else out.

With most of her enemies under trial for treason, being all but guaranteed to be found guilty, Shima's hold on power was now firmer than ever. What had started as a disaster had turned into a great victory, and it was all thanks to Yoiryu. She'd wanted to hold a ceremony in his honor, but his new form made that... difficult, to say the least. No room in the palace was big enough to fit a dragon of his size, nor were most people willing to be in the presence of a dragon, no matter how friendly he was.

She and Ageron had tried to convince him to return to his normal form, but he had just ignored them. "I want to make the most out of this while it lasts. I don't remember how I cast this spell, so who knows when I'll be able to become a dragon again," he'd said. "Besides, I'm sure you can find some use to having a loyal dragon around."

She had to admit he was right about that much. Still, it would be nice to have him back to normal. A queen could hardly feel like one in the presence of a dragon.