

The Tanaka Family Reincarnates

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Illustrator: kaworu



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Together again at last.

MEOW!

I wanted to
see you again so badly.
I knew it was impossible,
yet I wanted it more
than anything.

**YOU'VE
GOTTEN
SO BIG!**

Cat: Kongming

One of the Tanakas' cats who died long before the family reincarnated. For some reason, she's a massive nekomata now. She reincarnated in this new world to be with her family—and Emma—once more.

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Chapter 1: The Happy Family Gathering

The Tanaka family was full of cat fanatics.

Their bumbling father, Kazushi, was sixty-five.

Their mother and cook extraordinaire, Yoriko, was also sixty-five.

Their airheaded eldest son, Wataru, was thirty-eight.

Their miserly daughter, Minato, was thirty-five.

Their frankly disappointing youngest son, Heita, was thirty-three.

Their parents had retired to one of the most rural parts of Japan within the last year, and were living on their pensions.

The three siblings were all independent and living on their own. Though they were all getting up there in age, none of them had managed to marry. The eldest was working in the construction industry, the middle child was a standard office worker, and the youngest worked at a convenience store.

Every few months, their parents would leave the countryside to gather the family so everyone could partake in their mother's home cooking. This particular gathering was at Minato's condo, as it was the largest of all the siblings' homes.

Their menu on that day was a delicious hot pot. The feast began without a hitch, as not a single family member arrived late. Normally, Wataru worked long hours or even on his days off—work-life balance be damned—while Heita often wound up being late simply because he had no real sense of time. However, for once, the two of them made it on schedule today.

The pot boiled enticingly as they all gathered round, but the moment they cracked open their beer cans for a toast— The earth below them began to quake so hard, they feared it might split in half.

“Whoa, is that an earthquake?!”

“It's huge!”

“Someone turn off the stove!”

“We’ve gotta get out of here!”

“Look out!”

It was the long-dreaded Nankai megathrust earthquake. On that day, the middle sibling’s first-floor condo was crushed flat and the whole family was wiped out.

...Or so it seemed.

Chapter 2: Memories of Past Lives

“—ady... —dy...! My lady!”

My personal maid, Martha, was exceedingly distressed. I thought I had been eating with my family, but suddenly I found myself on the floor with Martha holding me up.

I attempted to sit myself up so I wouldn't worry her any further, but I felt a shock like a washbasin had clonked me on the head and the dizziness got the best of me.

Wait. Huh?

That's an oddly specific sensation to compare it to. Why would a washbasin have fallen from midair anyway?

Oh, right! It was that...megadeath thing... That's what it was called, right? But wait, what's a megadeath? Like some kind of metal group, right? And it was, like, really old?

What's happening to me? And...who am I?

My head felt like it was spinning. I was so confused.

“My lady? Have you come to? Do you know who I am? Are you okay, my lady?”

“Lady”? Does she mean me? And that's...Martha, right? Right, yeah, I know Martha. She's been with our family for ages. So wait, what am I all mixed up about? The “my lady” part? The “who the heck am I” part?

“My lady? Lady Emma?”



Emma...Emma? Oh, right! That's my name. Emma Stewart. How could I have forgotten my own name? It must've been that stupid washbasin knocking me out of my senses.

Wait. Washbasin? What washbasin?

Oh right, the washbasin from the megadeath thing.

Wait. Megadeath? What is a megadeath? I can't remember...

What's happening? What's going on? Where did all these memories come from?

My head felt like it was being flooded with new information. Things I never knew before, but I knew now. What was happening?

There were people I'd never seen before, but I knew them.

There were these incomprehensible vehicles, but I somehow knew what they were.

There were places I was sure I'd never seen before, but I knew all about them. How?

There was someone there who was me, but also not me. No...they were both me.

I...couldn't handle it.

"I'm sorry, Martha... I think...I need a nap..."

"What? Wait! M-My lady!"

And I was out. I lost consciousness like my body needed to do a hard reboot to sort out everything that was going on in my head. I always said that if something was wrong, you should just sleep it off. You should feel nice and refreshed once you wake up again. "Should" being the key word.

After that, I was laid up for a whopping three days, slipping in and out of consciousness. Once I awoke and had sorted out what had happened to me, I realized that I was both Minato Tanaka and the countess Emma Stewart. My maid, Martha, filled me in on what had happened three days prior.

"You *cannot* go doing something like this again! Sneaking strange mushrooms

you found in the yard into your family's dinner is just too much! Luckily, nobody was hurt, but can you imagine what people would *say* if a count's entire family were to perish from food poisoning?!"

"I-I'm sorry...?" I stammered.

Apparently, the cause of my ailment had been the mushrooms I'd happened upon in the courtyard, and Martha was giving me an earful about it. I couldn't help but wonder how the heck she found out I was the one who slipped them in. The dishes had all been nicely charcoal-grilled and everything... I could have sworn I hadn't left any evidence, but she said it was just "in my nature."

Martha probably didn't know this, but those mushrooms were *matsutake* mushrooms. Seriously! Matsutake! And not those teeny tiny slices they have in soups or rice dishes either. They were the *real deal*.

I guessed the intensity of their deliciousness must have awoken memories of my past life. But I couldn't tell Martha that. At least, not yet. Not that anyone would believe me.

Wait. Did Martha say the whole family got food poisoning?

"Martha...was I the only one who collapsed after dinner that day?" I asked, thinking my family might be dealing with the effects of the matsutake themselves.

"No. After they ate those mushrooms, the master, mistress, George, and William all started speaking in strange tongues and collapsed."

Maybe the matsutake had affected my family here too. Or maybe they were in shock because people weren't accustomed to eating matsutake in this world or something. Matsutake really *is* that good, after all. Just thinking about it made me drool. That full-bodied scent when biting into it...that perfect crispy mouthfeel...that fully Japanese flavor and scent was enough to bring back memories of a past life... Matsutake truly was sinfully delicious.

Funnily enough, though, the first thing I remembered when I ate it was what had happened right before I died. Or rather, Minato Tanaka's final moments in the other world.

Right after we'd cracked open our beer cans, the earth began to shake like it

was about to split. We couldn't even stand, let alone run. I couldn't tell if it was the wall or the ceiling coming down around me, but I heard a terrible sound as my home crumbled. After that, there had only been unimaginable pain.

"My lady?"

Martha must have noticed my furrowed brow, because she looked deeply worried. It made sense from her perspective. I *had* just started to recover from a long illness. But I just couldn't stop thinking back to those awful final moments in the other world. It was such a horrible way to go.

"Man...I wish I'd at least gotten to drink the beer!" I muttered, not even realizing I'd started speaking in Japanese.

Martha was shocked. "That's exactly what everyone else said! What kind of strange incantation is that?!"

"It's not an incantation, Martha. It's just Japanese," I replied. "Wait...did you say everyone else said it too?!"

It would've made sense; all of us Tanakas loved our alcohol.

Martha looked positively baffled. "And what in the world is 'Japanese,' my lady?"

"It's just a foreign language. Probably from somewhere in the far east or something." It was a rather vague answer, but we had no diplomatic relations with any of the lands in the east of this world, so most of it was uncharted territory. In fact, even the best maps this country had to offer didn't include the full scope of this world. "More importantly, is the rest of the family okay?"

"The rest of them recovered after about an hour and were back to their usual activities the very next day. It seems they'd only had a small bite of their mushrooms, while you'd scarfed down a whole one..."

I could tell she was passive-aggressively telling me I needed to do something about my eating habits, but it was *matsutake*, okay? I'd hardly ever gotten to eat them in my previous life either! They were so good that my instincts had cried for them even after I'd lost my memories!

"I must say, they have all been acting rather strangely, though. I've seen them

looking awfully perplexed since then, even though they should be used to your...*proclivities*."

Oh, c'mon, Martha. What's that supposed to mean? She'd always been pretty cold, but I'd just recovered from my illness. Would it have killed her to be a little nicer?

"Now, I know I've said this before, but I am deathly worried about you, my lady. You will be twelve years old this year, and next year you'll be living in the capital. I'm begging you to stop with this incessant obsession with bugs, mushrooms, insects, and especially bugs!"

Shoot. I knew exactly where this was going. She was heading right into one of her lectures again, and those things could last for ages. What was worse, it sounded like her hatred for bugs had only increased.

When my uncle graduated from the royal university, our family would temporarily relinquish control of our territory to him so we could move to the capital. It would take a whopping fifteen days by carriage to travel from our territory to the capital, so it was no exaggeration to say we were living in quite the rural area.

We specialized in silk products, handling everything from raising the silkworms to weaving the fabric—and our silk was of the highest caliber. Even in the capital, where fashion trends tended to change every day, the silk produced within the Stewart family's Pallas region had been sought after as the finest quality in the country for the past several years, used even by royalty.

I, or rather, Emma Stewart, was born and raised in Pallas, so silkworms and bugs and the like were my bosom buddies. It wasn't my fault that I loved bugs. At least, that was what I always told myself.

"Your love of bugs is beyond the pale! It's not just the silkworms, but the caterpillars, the centipedes, the spiders, the grasshoppers, the spiders...oh, you collect all of them! I'm just begging you, my lady. Can't you be even a little bit more like a normal girl?"

Uh, I always thought I was normal. Like, I apologized for that time I filled my pockets with all those caterpillars and forgot about them. And it wasn't like I *meant* to fill my sketchbook with swarms of centipedes. I was just so proud of

how realistically I'd drawn them...

And hey, why'd she have to go and mention spiders twice? Was there some reason she hated them in particular? If I had to guess... Oh. Right. Yeah, I might have had a sneaking suspicion why, actually.

I remembered there was an entomology hut that was nicknamed Emma's House in the backyard of the manor. It was a beautiful building, far too big to be called a hut. In addition to being a place where Emma could personally research silkworms for fun, she also used it to collect other thread-producing bugs and raise whatever creepy-crawlies she happened to find in the courtyard or the park. Originally, Emma had enjoyed her hobby in her room, but after the servants (mostly Martha) had complained and the scope of her research had grown too large to be contained in one room, Emma's excessively doting father had directed the hut be built for her as a birthday gift two years ago.

"Oh no... My babies! I haven't checked on them for three whole days!"

My bugs might've already started eating each other. I kept them separate from the silkworm research area, but they were still all in the same room. I just hoped that beautiful purple spider would be okay at least...

About two weeks ago, I remembered Emma had found the most beautiful spider in the forest. It quickly became her favorite, so she had shown it off to everyone.

"My lady..." Martha's glare had been cold as ice.

I could never forget the bloodcurdling scream she had let out when I'd tried to show her that spider.

But this was bad. Now that bugs were involved, Martha's lecture was going to go on for ages. I had to find some way to distract her.

Just then, we heard a reserved knock on the door that cut Martha's lecture short. It was such perfect timing, I knew just who it had to be.

"Um, sis? I heard you were awake, so I came to check in on you."

When the door opened, I saw the most stunningly beautiful boy...who just happened to be my dorky little brother, William. He was nine years old, with

stunning red hair from his mother and the Stewart family's characteristic bright purple eyes from his father. He was carrying a large bug box in his tiny little hands.

"I'm really sorry... I completely forgot about your bugs while you were sleeping. The silkworms were separate, so they made it out okay, but the rest... The only one left is this spider..."

That was exactly what I had been worried about, but it seemed ridiculously fast. How could all of my babies have eaten each other in only three days? I'd even managed to get twenty whole species of ladybugs too... I guessed without food, all my beetles, mantises, grasshoppers, millipedes, and pill bugs just had a giant battle royal... If only I'd gotten to see it and record my observations...

"Aw... Well, that's a real shame, but I guess that's that..." I said, taking the bug box from William. That purple spider I'd taken such a shine to was skittering about inside. It looked like it was the victor, the lone survivor of the bloodbath.

Hey...is it just me, or did you get bigger? Like, a lot bigger?

All eight of the spider's adorable, big round eyes were looking right at me. Or at least, that was what it seemed like.

Yeah. You're perfect. I'm so sorry I couldn't feed you...

As I gushed over the spider and opened its box, it inched closer to me until a deafening scream rang out. Martha had taken one look at the massive spider and fled. I doubted she'd be back anytime soon. Go figure, she wouldn't understand just how great this spider was.

To think my little brother would use my precious babies just to chase someone away, though... I mean, it was just Martha, but still.

William was fidgeting, looking at me with curiosity. It was like he wanted to say something, but couldn't. Like he had something to ask—something he needed to know, but also didn't want anyone else to know. He was nervous, clearly lacking the conviction to decide.

I figured we were both thinking the same thing.

William fixed his gaze on me, took a deep breath, and with a great deal of

determination, he finally said what had been eating at him.

“Is that...you, Mina-nee?”

“Peyta...?”

Then, having confirmed our suspicions, we both screamed at the same time:

“We’ve been freakin’ isekai’d?!”

Chapter 3: A Killer Punch Line

My little brother was gorgeous. Heita, or as I called him, Peyta, of all people, was stunningly beautiful. Now that I'd recovered my memories of my past life, I couldn't believe it for a second.

"How the heck are you so damn cute?! Like, you're gorgeous, dude! It's giving me the creeps!"

"Yeah, that's you all right... Mina-nee's the only one I know who talks like that!"

Peyta's expression was a mix of emotions, but even *that* was gorgeous to look at. We Tanakas had all been painfully average-looking. Peyta had been especially so since he never shaved and his naturally curly hair was always bushy and unkempt beyond imagination. He always looked so grungy, I'd always comment on that in lieu of a standard greeting. The only thing he had going for him was how nice he was, and he was such a baby that he couldn't even hold down a job. Just when we thought he'd found something, he'd always quit before we knew it. He was a loser through and through.

Unfortunately, that same helplessness just made him lovable in his own way, so our relationship was actually pretty decent.

"Martha told me you were acting kind of weird, so... I thought maybe you'd been reincarnated too."

I still hadn't come to terms with my *own* reincarnation. I mean, that sort of thing was too good to be true. But there, right in front of my eyes, was my reincarnated little brother. And he was *adorable*.

The little jerk... How much good karma did he collect while he was freelancing or whatever?! His hair is silky smooth, for Pete's sake!

"Hey, so... How much of your past life do you remember, anyway?" William asked.

"Uh... All of it?" My memories as Minato were about the same as they had

been right before I'd died in the earthquake.

"Really? For me, it's all been slowly coming back, but...there's a lot that still feels pretty foggy."

Martha was probably right. It was likely based on how much matsutake each person had eaten. And if William's memory was *slowly* coming back, then maybe he hadn't even had to sleep it off. And (although this was changing the topic), what about everyone else? Had they also been reincarnated or not?

"Peyta, did you ask anyone else in our family about this whole reincarnation business?"

"Uh, yeah no. Unlike you, Mina... Er, I mean, Emma, I'm a totally normal kid in this world. I couldn't go around asking our family weird questions!"

Even if his memory was a bit spotty, reincarnation was such a ridiculous situation, I'd kind of hoped he'd at least *tried* to check.

"Wait, what the heck do you mean, unlike me?! I don't wanna hear that kinda crap from someone who was a total *bum* in our previous life!"

Peyta could only groan in response.

I just don't get it. Why is everyone going on and on about how weird I am in this world? Whatever. I'm definitely gonna have to keep my mouth in check, because my manners totally slipped just now. Maybe it's a side effect of the reincarnation, but my verbiage and manners are getting all mixed up. It's fine if it's just me and Peyta, but I'm gonna have to be more careful.

I could understand how hard it would be to ask anyone else in the family about their situation. In the forty-plus years of my combined lives, I'd never had to ask such a ridiculous question either. It made sense why William had waited for me to wake up. If our positions had been reversed, I would've gone to him first too.

My previous life Minato Tanaka, had been a bit of an otaku. She read more manga and light novels than the average person. Her little brother, Heita, had been the same way. Add in their older brother, and it could be said that swapping manga was the secret to the siblings' good relationship.

Minato and Peyta were familiar enough with the isekai genre, but their older brother, Wataru, had been more of a manga nerd than a light novel one. While reincarnation appeared in manga from time to time, the explanations tended to be pretty wordy, so there was no telling whether Wataru knew about it or not.

No wonder Peyta came to me first. And he used my adorable purple spider to chase Martha out of the room, just in case.

Gosh, look at how cute you are, making your web like that...

My heart skipped a beat. It was a feeling that Minato had never felt. Emma Stewart was supposed to be a...countess? But her reaction just then was more like an elementary school boy in his bug nerd phase.

Weirdly enough, I wasn't all that broken up about Minato's death. Sure, I had some regrets that *weren't* beer-related, but it didn't feel like any time had passed between then and now. I was even kind of glad I didn't have to go to work the next day.

It seemed like my brain mostly held information from Minato. I wasn't sure if it was because my life as Minato was longer, or if it was because Emma's brain was just bugs, bugs, and more bugs. Both Minato and Emma had huge appetites, and although she didn't squeal about them like Emma did, Minato liked bugs well enough too.

I just didn't feel like there was much difference in our personalities. It was like Emma complimented Minato perfectly, each filling in what the other lacked without really losing anything either. Regardless, I was worried about how the heck I was going to fit in as a lady of high society. Minato was a commoner through and through, and Emma might as well have leaped straight from the pages of the Heian *Lady Who Loved Insects*.

I'll just have to uh...give it a good old college try, I guess... Ha ha... Yeah...

"So, weird question, but did you ever play any otome games, Mina-nee?" William asked with a very serious expression.

"Why, did you?"

"Nope."

“Yeah, me neither. And I don’t really remember any stories that resemble this world either... At least, I don’t think I do.”

In many of the isekai stories I’d read in my past life, someone would be reincarnated into the world of their favorite otome game or something, but neither Minato nor Heita had any memories of playing one. Here we were, hoping to use our memories of our past life to make things easier for ourselves, but it seemed we wouldn’t get the chance to be overpowered *or* overly cautious.

Reality could be so cruel. I knew that, having lived thirty-five years in my previous life. Being untouchable in another world was an untouchable concept, it seemed...

“Wait a sec! I played a game where I romanced Shingen Takeda once! You know, the feudal lord?!” The memories of those lovely CGs came flooding back into my mind. That counted, right? I was pretty sure that counted as an otome game. I played it several years ago and I definitely didn’t finish it, but I remembered the gist of it.

“Why in the world were you romancing a feudal lord?”

The honest answer was that Minato had been a bit of a history nerd.

But despite having remembered my gamer girl history, as I looked around the room and searched through Emma’s memories, I realized we were in a Western-ish world I’d never seen before. If this were Sengoku-era Japan like in that mobile otome game I played, then I could’ve easily cheated my way through life here. Heck, I probably could’ve romanced the *real* Shingen Takeda.

Now *that* was the biggest shame of all.

Though truth be told, I *really* would’ve wanted to marry Kanetsugu Naoe, the samurai... I would’ve polished his famous helmet every day with as much love as he lavished upon it.

Anyway, the reason I said this country was Western-ish was because it was just slightly off from the Western world I knew from my previous life. I started noticing the weird differences from the moment William brought up otome games. We were raising silkworms here, so clearly we hadn’t needed a Silk

Road, right? So there were probably some other differences in this world's history, but I couldn't really pinpoint them right away. I was a Japanese history buff, not a world history buff. It looked like any prior knowledge I had from my previous life would be totally useless to us here.

What was worse was that if this *was* an otome game, we had a pretty big problem on our hands.

"This is bad... If this is one of those worlds with a villainess or something, we'll have to avoid her evil schemes!" I moaned.

The otome game I had played hadn't had a noble villainess or rival teahouse girl or anything, meaning I didn't have any tips or tricks on how to avoid a bad end. The thought of getting humiliated at a graduation party in front of everyone was too much to bear.

"If it's any consolation, I think you'd make a pretty great villainess yourself, Mina-nee," William said, with not a shred of malice in those big beautiful eyes of his. I wanted to hit him so badly, but I restrained myself. Normally, I would've punched him to high heaven, but I couldn't hurt such a beautiful face!

It's not fair! Why did you get such a stupidly handsome face?! It's so gross!

"Well, I suppose we'll have to check with the rest of the family later," I said, relaxing my fist and hopping off the bed straight onto Peyta/William's little toe.

"OW!"

It was my job as his big sister to teach him that even the handsomest little guy would be in for a world of hurt if he acted up. I couldn't possibly hurt his face for *obvious* reasons, but a pinky toe was a perfect compromise.



In the end, the whole family didn't wind up in the same room until that evening. Our father had been out hunting with our older brother, and our mother had been attending a tea party. They'd been ignoring their work and social expectations until I was well again and it had finally come to bite them in the butt. *Sorry, guys...* At least the tea parties were supposedly better here than they were in the capital.

But the problem now was the suffocating silence around the dinner table.

My father, who always doted on me, was deep in thought.

My mother, who always doted on the youngest of us, was deep in thought.

My older brother, who always doted on his siblings, was deep in thought.

Nobody said a word. The vibes at the table were completely off. William was watching me to see what I'd do. I was right here after convalescing for three whole days, but they'd only asked if I was okay and then gone dead silent. Considering how much they usually indulged us, it was more than a little strange. Whenever we had custard, my older brother, George, would usually let me have his, but tonight he just ate it without a word. Even our servants could tell something was off, as they looked quite worried themselves.

I wondered if maybe it was because the three of them were all trying to work through this reincarnation business on their own. If they hadn't eaten as much matsutake as William and I had, then it would be natural for them to be a bit preoccupied with trying to figure out what was happening.

If they weren't going to talk now, it would be a real pain going to each of their rooms and asking them individually, not to mention explaining everything again and again. I really just wanted to get the whole thing over with in one fell swoop.

As much as I didn't want to admit it, my family and the servants all seemed to be used to Emma's general weirdness, so maybe I could just ask them all right then and there? That would be the fastest way.

Slam!

The second I'd finished with my custard, I shot out of my seat and took a deep breath. The whole family had their eyes on me, and I called out to them in the language we used in our previous world.

"Tanaka family roll call! Countdown!"

"Three!" My father, Leonard, stood up and saluted without a second's delay.

"Two!" My mother, Melsa, stood up and saluted.

"One!" My older brother, George, stood up and saluted.

“Liftoff!” William and I put our fists in the air.

Even though it wasn’t actually a roll call, this was a Tanaka family tradition we’d always done when we went on vacations to make sure nobody got left behind. Even after we grew up and stopped going on family vacations, all it took was one of us starting it when we were all sufficiently drunk and it’d get the whole family laughing. It was one of those things that would’ve been humiliating if anyone outside our family saw us doing it, but if any one of us gave the signal, we’d get the flow going before we could think to stop ourselves.

That’s right. It was a *Tanaka family* tradition.

Normally, it would’ve been a killer punch line for us, but this time we stared at each other in shock. It was only natural, given that we’d all acted completely on reflex. William hadn’t even needed to do it since I already knew he was a Tanaka, but it was so ingrained in us that he couldn’t help it.

“Meet me at Emma’s House in twenty minutes,” I continued in Japanese. Our other three family members all went wide-eyed and nodded. Then, I turned and went back to my room as though nothing weird had happened.

I’d known it was going to look odd, but the servants’ expressions were killing me. I wanted to get out of there before Martha yelled at me.

“M-Milady! You mustn’t run in the halls!”

Welp, so much for that.

Later on, William said I could’ve just talked to everyone in Japanese, but the roll call was proof that we were all part of the Tanaka family. I knew it was going to look weird, but I’d wanted to know if we were all one hundred percent Tanakas before we pieced everything else together. That was all. It wasn’t like I couldn’t think of any other way to check... Not at all. No way.

Chapter 4: The First Tanaka Family Meeting

Thus began the very first Tanaka family meeting.

Emma's House wasn't just a castle for her and her bugs. It was also where the Stewart family researched silkworms, and the building was even outfitted with small meeting spaces as well.

Emma had been obsessed with bugs since she was old enough to think, so this was the perfect place to cultivate a budding entomological genius. Emma carefully bred the silkworms, refined their meals, and constructed the ideal environment to raise them in. Now, a single silkworm in her care was an unbelievable *fifty centimeters*. She had hoped to breed silkworms that could produce enough silk for one whole dress per worm, but the food and upkeep would have become untenable if she'd kept pursuing that goal. Her new project was to see if she could maintain their size while also increasing the number of cocoons they produced. She was truly a beast when it came to these things.

Emma's House was a place everyone felt at home in, so that was where the family gathered to discuss their newly discovered reincarnation.

The problem was...they were all so gorgeous. Emma had thought her little brother was stunning, but now there were three more to take in. Her father and older brother both had blond hair and violet eyes. They weren't really *pretty boys*, but they both had handsome, chiseled features. Her father was especially built, and had a tall frame to match.

Her mother had long, elegantly styled auburn hair and light green eyes, with a beautiful intensity about her that gave her a domineering air. She seemed like someone you wouldn't ever want to see mad. Actually, she didn't just *seem* like it. Emma had plenty of memories to prove just how scary her mother was when she was upset.

Minato's parents, who had been in their sixties in their previous life, were now about the same age that Minato had been in *her* previous life. She couldn't help but be jealous of her mother's commanding beauty. Though Emma had the

same blonde hair as her father and older brother, it just wasn't as lustrous. She had the same sparkling, light green eyes as her mother, but without the intensity. She looked more like a space case than anything else—not a trace of strength or ferocity in her.

Well, she'd have to put a bit more thought into her appearance, then. Emma might've had her head full of bugs up until now, but there was still time for her yet. That being said, she had to wonder what the rest of her family thought of their new beautiful bodies, considering the Tanakas had all been *painfully* average in their previous life.

"So, uh...is it just me, or are we all, like, stupidly beautiful?"

"Uh... No? This is just what people look like in this world." The eldest sibling, George responded as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Well! I guess that's that, then!

Maybe it was because Minato had inherited Emma's life and Emma had never really considered others' appearances (because she didn't care), or maybe everyone else's past life memories were still pretty hazy. Regardless, it seemed the only one who was weirded out by their looks was Minato, since she was the only one who had all of her memories from her previous life. And as established before, even her stupid little brother was beautiful now.

"Okay, but we were all total Joe Schmos with black hair and black eyes back in the other world! It's weirding me out!" Standing before her was the most beautiful family, but if she let her guard down...she'd see how they looked in their previous life in comparison, which made it even harder to let go.

"You say that, but I think you've been adorable no matter *what* world you're in," her father, Leonard, said with a big goofy grin. Apparently, he was just as sweet on his daughter in this world as he had been in their previous life.

The goal of this family meeting was for Minato and Peyta to impart their manga and light novel knowledge to the rest of the family, but the small talk afterward was when things really started to liven up. The most important part—the cycle of reincarnation—was easily explained away, because Japanese people didn't really need any kind of otaku knowledge to understand the basics of Eastern philosophy. In fact, it was a bit anticlimactic the way the rest of the

family just kind of accepted it, but the Tanakas had never been the type to think too deeply.

On a side note, in the country they'd been reincarnated into, black hair was a symbol of royal lineage. As Japanese people, it was a bit strange to have found themselves in a place where black hair was a rarity, but it also meant there were no blond princes on white horses or whatnot riding around either. If this family's beauty was the norm here, it was bound to be a huge sparklefest of beauty from here on out.

"Anyway! There is something far more important to discuss here!" Melsa, the matriarch of the family said, staring down each of the siblings one by one. "You three are *getting married* in this life! I want some grandbabies! Do I make myself clear?"

The three siblings shared uncomfortable glances in silence.

"I said, *do I make myself clear?*"

Getting scolded by their mother was scary enough, but her beauty made her even *more* terrifying. She had always been harping on the siblings to get married in their previous life too, but her intensity now was off the charts.

"Mother, I'm only nine years old right now! I think marriage can wait a bit, right?"

Nice one, Peyta! You can't get on our cases when we're just widdle kids! Telling us to have babies when we're not even grown-ups is just unthinkable!

But their mother was undeterred. "Not to worry. We'll make it work."

"No, we will *not*!" the siblings shot back. There were some lines that did *not* need to be crossed.

"W-Well, uh...maybe Wataru-nii... I mean, George can get married first! He's the oldest! I'll think about it once he gets married!"

"Oh, come on! Don't put it all on me! I... Uh... Let's think rationally about this, mother! I'm uh...I'm only fifteen, you know? So in our previous life, that's like only in middle school! And I only just got to start going along on hunting trips and stuff..."

Yeah, that's the stuff! George has got us covered—

“George...” Their mother’s eyes narrowed. “You know that men can get married at sixteen in this world, right? And it’s fourteen for girls, Emma. These are the exact same excuses you used for why you couldn’t get married in your past lives, you know!”

The two siblings groaned. Why did parents always have to remember the worst things? It just made everything so much harder!

No matter what they said, there was no fighting their mother’s wishes.

“Don’t you three worry. I’ll start picking out some potential suitors for you all tomorrow!” Melsa beamed at the three of them as they hung their heads despondently.

From the moment the topic of marriage came up, their father had been noticeably silent. He knew better than to poke a mama bear.

Thus did the first Tanaka family meeting come to a close, their futures in this world all forcibly changed. From then on, it was all about marriage for the three siblings.

Chapter 5: The Tea Party

Only a mere three days after the Tanakas' first family meeting, invitations to Count Stewart's Family Tea Party went out to all the most influential people within the Pallas region, as well as the governing aristocrats in the surrounding areas.

Though they lived quite far from the capital and had middling social standing within aristocratic society, their silk products had greatly increased in quality around four years ago, bringing with it a rise in profit and status as well. Since they'd opened up sales to foreign countries, the kingdom came to be known as the Pallas Silk Country. Though there were similar products out there, whether it was through thorough marketing or superior crafting, none of them could hold a candle to Pallas silk. In other words, the Stewart family was living high on the hog. There were even some who believed the Stewarts were well-to-do enough to buy the whole kingdom if they wanted, but those were only baseless rumors.

Once word went out that the famed Stewart family was holding a tea party, it spread like wildfire. Their mother was clear to state that *all three siblings* were in search of suitors, which made the list of attendees grow even longer. She also wrote that everyone should invite their friends as well, meaning there was a deluge of aristocrats hoping to attend from all around the kingdom.

Melsa was thrilled as she carefully sifted through the letters of potential attendees, telling herself that with this many people attending, her children would be married in no time at all.

What Melsa didn't know yet was that one of those letters was from the prince and princess of the kingdom.

What the three siblings didn't know was that this would not be the only tea party held for this purpose.

And the only thing on Leonard's mind was that he kind of wished his younger brother Arven would get married before he even thought about marrying off his

own kids.



The sky was blue. The clouds were white. A refreshing breeze was blowing through the Stewart family's garden. Their first tea party had been blessed with lovely weather, thus it became a garden party.

As the guests trickled in one by one, they wished each other the best in their endeavors as they anxiously awaited the arrival of the Stewart siblings.

The eldest, George, was a strong, active young man who was already allowed to go hunting, despite not having reached adulthood.

The youngest, William, was a hardworking young boy who had been helping with the family business since he was old enough to understand how.

Their middle child, Emma, was a frail beauty with a calming and sweet personality.

At least, that was what the great majority of participants had been led to believe. This was primarily because the Pallas region was quite remote, so hardly any of the aristocrats in the surrounding territories had ever even seen the young Stewart siblings. Everything they'd heard, they'd heard through their doting father Leonard's adoring praises. None of them would have ever guessed that the eldest hated studying, or the middle was obsessed with bugs, or that the youngest was mostly used as their daughter's errand boy.

"Welcome one and all to the Stewart family garden party. I hope you all enjoy yourselves!"

Leonard's perfunctory...or perhaps *lazy* greeting marked the start of the party. The children were announced to the crowd and the servants all began waiting on the guests.

George wasn't used to wearing such formal clothes, so his face was twisted up in a frown. Though it made him seem a bit unapproachable, some of the ladies mistook his discomfort as being manly and aloof.

Emma was trying to hide her naturally airheaded expression by keeping her mouth pursed shut. Unfortunately, this made several of the lords think she was

nervous at her first tea party, igniting their desire to protect her at all costs.

William was smiling sweetly at all the young girls, but his stunning looks were attracting more of the children's *mothers* than the children themselves.

These bizarre, unintended misconstructions kept most of the guests' eyes on the siblings...from a distance.

However, from the crowd, there was one boy who made his way directly toward the three.

"Lord George! It has been too long!"

It was the only guest who had spent time with the siblings before; Joshua, the son of a wealthy merchant in the Pallas region. He was a boy of fourteen with a sweet, freckled face and chestnut-brown hair and eyes. Seeing him brought the smile back to George's face.

"Oh, it has been, Joshua! It's so good to see a familiar face!" The strong and stoic eldest son broke out into a chuckle, but despite George's welcoming reaction, the rest of the crowd still found Joshua more informal than he should have been.

"A little birdie told me you were doing something interesting out here, so I came by to check out the goods," Joshua quipped.

"Yeah, er... Once mother got started, nobody could stop her." George's pitiful, meek expression made it hard for Joshua to hold back his laughter.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to the Stewarts, Joshua?" an adorable little girl asked from behind the merchant boy.

"Oh dear! My deepest apologies, milady!" Joshua put on his business face as he introduced the pudgy young girl. "This is Lady Eulalia, daughter of Baron Marais. Baron Marais is a business partner of my father's, you see."

Eulalia raised the hem of her skirt slightly and bowed her head.

"Joshua?" George's lips pursed with displeasure.

"Isn't she just the cutest? I was thinking she'd be the perfect fit for you, Lord George!"

Joshua's betrayal was so quick, George's grin became a grimace in no time flat.

"Oh, and Lord William," he continued, gesturing to a young redheaded girl just above William's age. "May I introduce Lady Caroline, the daughter of Viscount Garrant!"

"Joshua..." William looked less than thrilled too.

A salesman would always prioritize personal gain above all. It was the brothers' mistake for having hoped the son of a merchant would have favored friendship over a situation he could use to his own advantage. They'd known this, but it still hurt to have their only friend their age throw them under the bus so swiftly.

"As for Lady Emma, I will take the reins on... Wait, where is Lady Emma?"

The middle child was nowhere to be seen.

Apparently, she'd grown tired of the rather brief introductions and chose to totter her way over to the buffet-style dessert tables, where she was swiftly surrounded by party guests.

"Emma! I'm Chris, the eldest son of Count Mons! You really are as adorable as they say!"

"Emma, my name is Glenn, son of Marquess Duke. You there! You know of Emma's quiet personality, do you not? You'll frighten her if you keep talking to her that loudly!"

The commotion around Emma worked just well enough as a diversion for the boys.

"Wow... Look at how popular Emma is..."

"How can you be so laissez-faire about this, Lord William?! We have to go save her!" All the color had drained out of Joshua's face as he frantically looked to the two siblings for help. After all, a merchant's son couldn't possibly stand up to regular aristocrats.

"Save her from what? She looks fine to me?" George shrugged.

William nodded. "Yeah, sis can handle a conversation or two on her own."

Joshua was harboring the slightest of puppy-dog crushes on Emma. George and William were well aware of this, but neither of them had forgiven him for trying to sell them out.

“W-Well, why is she talking to them in the first place?! Since when has she cared about anything but bugs?!” This was clearly a sore spot for him, as Joshua had amassed a large quantity of bug trivia just for this occasion. He knew Emma would ignore anyone who tried to talk to her about anything but bugs. Unfortunately for him, Emma had just regained memories of her previous life, and with those memories came a bit of social sense. Now, she could easily hold a conversation about things that *weren't* bugs.



This was a miscalculation Joshua never could have predicted. George and William exchanged a laugh at seeing him panic for the first time.

While Emma was certainly able to speak with others now, that didn't mean she (or more specifically, Minato) wasn't having trouble. All of the people talking to her were around elementary or middle school age. Since she had the mind of a thirty-five-year-old, the boys made her maternal instincts flare up instead of arousing any interest as potential marriage prospects. To add to her anxieties, she saw William talking to the young girls at the party. And Peyta had liked 'em young in his previous life. She couldn't help but feel gross about it.

"Oh, Emma! Your family has so many rare plants in your garden!"

"Oh, do we?"

"You do! I think they might be the same plants I saw out east!"

"Goodness, aren't you knowledgeable!"

"Well, my family made our living through the import and sales of exotic plants! I helped them out, so I wound up learning quite a bit without even realizing it!"

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"Oh, it's not that big of a deal..."

Emma giggled. The young boy, who was trying his very best to keep up with the conversation, clammed up as he felt his cheeks redden.

Another boy took that opportunity to speak. "Oh, oh! Emma! It sure is warm here in the Pallas region!"

"Oh, is it?" Emma tilted her head to the side.

"She's so cute...!" the boy whispered before he could stop himself. Emma beamed in response.

Joshua was now full-on ignoring the girls he had introduced to the Stewart brothers and was now just watching Emma from afar, brothers in tow.

"I don't get it! That angelic smile is supposed to be reserved for bug-talk only! Why is she just giving it out willy-nilly?!" Joshua wailed, squeezing George's arm

in a death grip.

“That kinda hurts, Joshua.”

“Listen to me, Lord George. That baron’s son has been standing *directly* in front of Lady Emma for a full two and a half minutes!”

“Uh-huh.”

“And that marquess’s son is standing twenty centimeters to her right! He’s practically *breathing* on her!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Uuugh, what I wouldn’t give for her to look at me like I’m an insect!”

“I think you should stop talking for a bit, Joshua.”

Though Joshua was normally so cool and collected, he’d completely lost his composure over Emma’s sudden change and was saying the sort of things that were probably best kept to himself. Before she’d recovered her memories, Emma wouldn’t have spoken to anyone. And if anyone *tried* to speak to her, she would have ignored them entirely, choosing instead to crouch down and observe a line of ants.

Joshua thought that would’ve been the perfect moment to ask her if she knew why ants never get lost, or if she knew how much weight an ant could carry. He’d never seen her so sociable before. He couldn’t even approach her...

“Hey, Joshua... If you introduce me to that girl with the book in her hands over there, I’ll tell you how you can rescue my sister,” William said, a mischievous grin on his face. Joshua had never seen William make a face like that before either, but it wasn’t about to stop him from introducing him to the girl in question.

Lady Marina was the youngest of the party’s guests that day, a six-year-old girl with pink hair and pink eyes that the Tanakas never would have seen in their previous lives.

“What’s that you’re reading?” William asked.

Marina must not have been very shy, because she immediately responded in earnest. “It’s a book about a mage! Have you ever met a mage before, Lord

William?” The thick book appeared to be part of a series that chronicled the adventures of a famous mage; the series had gained popularity within the capital.

“A mage? No, I don’t think I have... But tell me what happens in the book!”

“Omigosh, okay! So, um!” The girl began rambling all the details of her favorite book. Meanwhile, Joshua was getting antsier and antsier, still wanting to separate all of the lords away from Emma as quickly as possible.

“Soooo...are you going to tell me how to rescue her anytime soon, Lord William?” Joshua tugged on his sleeve, nearly forcing William to turn his way. He looked positively chuffed.

“Oh, right. Hey, Lady Marina, would you like some cake? The cake here is the best of the best!”

“Ooooh, I want a chocolate one!”

“All right, Joshua. Could you go and get some cake for us?”

“Bwuh? No no no, Lord William, there are more important things on my plate than cake right now!”

“Make sure you get the biggest plate with *every* flavor on it, okay?”

Joshua stared blankly at William.

William gave Joshua a wink, which George picked up on instead. The older brother decided to help out as well and headed for the table with all the cakes.

Right about then, Emma was starving, and all she wanted was cake. She kept trying to inch her way toward the dessert table, but again and again people stepped in to try and talk to her, so she had yet to reach it. She *wanted* to hurry things along by telling these little lords that she just wanted some cake, but her mother had given her strict guidelines of what she was and was not to say at this tea party. She could greet other guests. She could say yes and no. She could give stock responses. And that was it. She couldn’t talk about bugs, she couldn’t hog all the food, and she wasn’t allowed to smile unless it was with her whole face. And if at any time she felt uncomfortable, she would just have to laugh it off.

“You don’t wear a lot of jewelry, do you, Lady Emma? When’s your birthday? I’ll buy some for you!”

Emma giggled in response. She was surrounded by boys, which did make her popular in a sense. But these were all boys around the same age as the children of Minato’s friends in her previous life. From her perspective, she just saw a bunch of little kids trying their hardest to do what their parents told them to.

And that was when she saw the cakes begin to move. Joshua and George were each carrying plates in both hands with an assortment of cakes on them, and Joshua was looking toward her with a worried expression.

What, is he upset that the cakes are heavy or something? He is a lot weaker than George is... And look at how much he’s carrying! I didn’t know he liked sweets that much. And there’s one of every type on there too!

“Wow, Joshua! Those cakes sure look heavy! Why don’t you let me take a plate off your hands?” *So I can have some too!* Just as Joshua had hoped, Emma approached the table he and William were standing by with that trademark angelic smile. However, the smile came at a price:

“Wait, Emma...!”

“Who *is* that guy?!”

“He’s not nobility, is he?”

“And we were just hitting it off too...”

And thus Joshua made enemies of several lords attending that day...but that’s a story for another time.



When Joshua and George returned with cakes aplenty, William was gleefully talking to the young girl he’d just met.

“So, do you want to be a mage too, Lady Marina?”

“Uh-huh! I wanna use my magic and fly high in the sky!”

To anyone else, this would have been an adorable sight, but through Minato’s eyes...she just saw a dirty, hairy old man with bushy, unkempt hair laughing

with a little girl.

Anyone gonna do anything about this? Someone call the cops, man...

“Peyta...” Emma said his old nickname without even thinking. As his older sister, she knew she couldn’t just sit back and watch anymore.

“Oh, Lady Emma!” Lady Marina noticed her and gave the most adorable little curtsy.

Oh my god. She really is the cutest. Emma could not hide her disdain for her little brother any longer.

“Hey Marina, why don’t you come and have some cake with me?” Emma said. She was going to get Lady Marina away from Peyta no matter what.

Joshua presented a piece of chocolate cake to Marina. “It’s quite delicious! The chocolate they used is outstanding!”

Marina was quick to come over once she knew the flavor, giving Emma time to gently prod her and make sure William hadn’t done anything untoward.

“I was just talking to Lord William about my book! It’s about a mage!” Marina said, proudly holding up a book that was quite thick for a six-year-old to be reading. The title was *The Chronicles of the Great Mage Connie*, and it was a biography of this country’s most popular historical figure: the Great Mage Connie Moo. In it, he traveled to the unexplored lands of the east to slay a dragon.

That’s right. It was a *biography*. After all, the Tanakas were now in a land of swords and sorcery: an isekai’s bread and butter. Though magic was excessively rare in this world, with only about one person per country who was able to use it. It might as well have been nonexistent.

There hadn’t been a magic user in the Stewart family in generations. Emma thought that might be a sign, so she had tried using her knowledge from her previous life to see if it would work for her, but didn’t feel anything magical within herself at all. She tried shouting the words for a tried-and-true fireball or a bombehameha like every kid had always dreamed of and all she got from it was a boatload of cringe.

“You know, we haven’t had a mage in this kingdom for about thirty years now. We should be seeing one any day now!” Joshua piped up. He was always helping his father with business dealings around the country, so he was up to date on the latest gossip.

“Wow, really?” Marina latched onto the topic immediately.

“That’s right. You see, monsters have become a lot more active these days, and we don’t have enough hunters to handle them. More and more remote regions are asking for the assistance of knights. The fact that monsters are becoming more active may be because the mana in the air is growing more potent, so I believe we can expect a mutation to occur soon enough.”

In this world, people weren’t born as mages, nor did they undergo harsh training to become one. Rather, a mutation would occur at some point that allowed them to become a mage. It was an exceptionally rare occurrence that happened in maybe one person in a given country per decade. The kingdom the three siblings lived in was certainly not the only one vying for a mage to appear at the moment.

“You know, I did get the feeling there were more monsters than usual lately. We’re lucky to have quite a few capable hunters in our land, so we don’t have much to worry about, but I imagine it must be pretty tough for some of the other regions,” George responded. As the eldest son, he had been allowed to tag along on hunts.

The various nobility in charge of each region would appoint monster hunters for their land who would, as one might expect, hunt monsters. Since time immemorial, the kingdom relied on barriers put in place by mages to prevent monsters from invading. However, the strength of said barrier occasionally wavered. As such, it was easy to imagine that monsters would target those weak points and attempt to invade from there. These Distortions didn’t occur with any particular regularity, and any lands on the outside of the barriers were left on their own to protect themselves from monster invasions. Thus, they had a sort of border patrol...that patrolled for monsters.

The longer the barrier was up without maintenance, the weaker it would become and the more often Distortions would occur. If a mage didn’t appear

soon, there wouldn't be any way to put up a new barrier, repair the current one, or strengthen it either. Since the kingdom the siblings lived in hadn't seen any mages in many years, more and more monsters were appearing every year. Though it had previously been difficult for some of the stronger monsters to make it past the barrier, in the past decade there had been plenty of reports that the stronger ones were able to infiltrate. And since the patrol was all human without a shred of magic ability within them, their only recourse was to try to brute force their way to victory.

Marina hung her head despondently. "I sure hope a mage shows up soon..."

In the more remote regions, even children couldn't ignore the threat of monsters appearing. This was especially so in the Pallas region, as it was the widest and most remote region facing the barrier.

"Well, you have nothing to fear while you're in our territory, Lady Marina. I'll be here to protect you," George said gently while patting Marina's head.

"Wow, you're so cool, Lord George!" Marina looked back up at him with what could only be described as hearts in her eyes.

"Bro..." William glared daggers at George.

Come to think of it, I do remember kids always loved George best, he thought. He could see parts of Wataru in George as he effortlessly captured Marina's heart.

Emma placed a hand on William's shoulder and whispered in a voice only he could hear: "Poor baby Peyta. Looks like thirty-plus years weren't enough to turn you into a wizard after all."

Way to rub salt into the wound, sis...

Chapter 6: Stray Cats

Though the Stewarts were seen as an overall pleasant family, they didn't tend to proactively involve themselves in high society, and they rarely invited anyone to their mansion. Just two days after the tea party, the family was back to life as usual. Their mother had apparently been satisfied with their performance at the tea party, so the three siblings were now diligently looking after the silkworms in Emma's House.

"Hrm... Maybe I should change the silkworms' diet again..." Emma muttered to herself as she observed the massive larvae that were soon to begin their cocoon stage.

Meanwhile, George was putting each of the larvae into its own individual box. "What are you thinking this time, Emma?"

"Well, I'm thinking, wouldn't it be great if we could change the color of their cocoons through their food?"

There was definitely room for improvement in the dyeing process for Pallas's silk threads. The water in Pallas wasn't suitable for dyes, so they had to use water from other regions. The dyeing process took a *lot* of water, so the costs of both the water and the shipping were starting to build up.

"Heh. That's just like you to come up with an idea like that instead of improving the dyes themselves, Emma." George chuckled. Though it was easier to communicate with her now that she'd gotten her memories of her past life, her love of bugs and flexible ingenuity were still just as present as ever.

"More importantly, I hear you've been keeping in touch with Lady Marina, George." William glared at his brother while weighing the larvae.

"It's really not what you think. I'm only responding to what she sends me, and it's not just her," George refuted. "Mother told me I have to respond to *everyone* who sends me messages."

"You're just as popular—with little kids—as ever, George. And

William...you're such a little creep even dying won't cure you of your gross obsession with little girls."

"Why are you picking on me, sis?!" He was whining, but he couldn't exactly deny it either.

"Well, you liked Lady Marina, didn't you?"

"I sure did. She was the cutest loli I ever did see..."

The look of contempt on Emma's face was palpable.

"W-Well, I mean! You never see pink hair and eyes like that, y'know? And those perfect ringlets!"

Wait a second... Ringlets?

"If we've been reincarnated into an otome game...then I bet you that girl's gonna be a villainess in the future!" William declared. After all, in the isekai stories he'd read before, ringlets were the hairstyle of villainesses! But...

"Yeah, no... She was a nice girl. I don't think that's gonna happen." Both George and Emma were of the same opinion.

"Anyway...we were *all* reincarnated here and none of us seem to have any kind of insight that'll help us out, so maybe we should just stop trying to figure it out," George said.

The Tanaka family had no skills to cheat their way through this life. As of right now, the only tangible positive of the reincarnation was that Emma was now able to hold a conversation with people outside of her family.

"Well, we have no way of knowing what the future holds, so we may as well focus our energy on the stuff we *can* do, huh?" And with that, Emma went back to pondering the food composition that would work best.

Emma was lucky enough that her hobby was the same as her work. She knew exactly what she loved and had the funds and talent to do it as much as she wanted, so she was living a life of luxury. And even if their family didn't have any advantages in this world, they were able to live in peace, and they were content with that much.

"Oh, by the way...have you found any cats since you've been here, George?"

“Cats, huh...?”

The Tanaka family adored cats, but this world they’d reincarnated to had little in the way of fauna, and most existing species were nearly extinct. Instead, this world was full of monsters, which had essentially eliminated most of the animals out there. The animals they saw most often were hunting dogs and pack animals like horses. Cows, pigs, and chickens were mostly used for food, but territories on the border tended to avoid raising them out of fear their smell might attract monsters. Emma’s beloved bugs had evolved to protect themselves from such frights, so they were content to live even beyond the barrier.

“There *are* cats out there, but...they’re *really* expensive...”

Though cats used to be kept as mouse catchers, there had been a plague among them about a century ago that wiped out a vast part of their population. Even now, there were very few left. Pets were a luxury in this world, and cats were especially so given their scarcity, so the cost of them was through the roof.

But the Tanaka family *adored* cats, and it would be their father, Leonard’s, birthday in a month. The three siblings wanted to get him a present no matter what, but they also wanted a cat of their own again. They wanted to spend their days rubbing up against soft, fluffy fur once more.



“Man... The size of this place never fails to surprise me.”

The three siblings had decided to visit Joshua to try and obtain a cat. His family were the wealthiest merchants not just in the Pallas region, but the whole kingdom, and their mansion was on par with the Stewart family’s own.

The parlor they waited in was part of Joshua’s personal mansion, and the tea he served them bore the seal of a company that also served the royal family.

“Thank you for your patience, Lady Emma!” Joshua entered the room in the highest spirits, plopping himself down next to Emma.

“This tea is soooo tasty, Joshua!”

“Oh, I’m delighted to hear that! I’ll be sure to pack some for you to take home, then!”

Emma smiled radiantly and sipped from her third cup. Joshua grinned back and asked his maid to prepare some tea for her to take with her.

“So, Joshua, we wanted to come by today to ask you a favor,” Emma said, cutting right to the chase.

“You can leave it to me!” Joshua gave a winning smile and answered without missing a beat.

“We haven’t even told you what it is, though?”

“I couldn’t possibly refuse any favor you ask of me, Lady Emma!” After all, a personal request from Emma was a prize Joshua would never give up. After seeing how popular she was at the tea party, he realized that he could no longer play the long game of wooing her or pinching pennies.

But even still, Joshua couldn’t believe his ears when she asked for a cat.

“Wait, you like cats, Lady Emma? I’ll get a cat for you! In fact, how many cats do you want?”

“You know we’re here too, right, Joshua? And we’re trying to ask you to introduce us to a merchant who specializes in cats.” George looked exhausted by this turn of events. They couldn’t ask *Joshua* to get their father a birthday present.

“Still...even one cat would be extravagant enough to make the family who owns it the envy of the whole kingdom, y’know?”

The siblings all groaned. While Joshua could afford one as the son of the wealthiest merchant in the kingdom, it would be impossible for the three siblings, as they didn’t receive allowances. Rather, they had a system where they could ask their father for anything they wanted and he would likely get it for them. In fact, he’d gladly get it, but it didn’t feel right for him to get his *own* present.

“Not to mention, there aren’t any places that handle cats in the Pallas region, so you’d have to take the time to contact someone and worry about transport

as well.”

Reality could be so cruel. In a remote region like theirs, there wasn't a person around who would even think to own a pet, let alone a cat. Owning pets was a luxury, and given the concerns about food, monsters, and money, it was difficult for any but the aristocracy toward the center of the barrier to own one.

“Back in the day, we could've just picked up a stray...” Emma couldn't help but miss the old world now. Especially because their old home was out in the boonies, so there were all sorts of strays they'd wound up taking in.

Though their homes in both lives were rural, in this new world, kitties were no longer a given. And being catless was a serious problem for the Stewart family. A world without cats was like a boba tea without boba or tea. It was just plain nothing.

“Stray cats, huh... Oh! Y'know, I *have* heard a rumor going around lately!” Joshua recalled. “Apparently, there have been some sightings of cats in the Skyte region. They don't seem to be runaways, they don't have any owners, and some say they're in a pack hunting for monsters!”

“Wow, really? But I thought cats were supposed to fetch a high price. Don't you think people would try to catch them?” Emma asked. You could easily buy a house for the price of one cat, so it'd be absurd not to want to try. You'd likely make more money than if you struck gold or won the lottery.

“Many people *thought* it could be the perfect way to get rich quick, but none of them succeeded. You see, these cats are also especially enormous and smart, so nobody has been able to catch them.”

It made sense. If these cats were capable of hunting monsters, it was unlikely a human could catch them. But Emma was focused on something much more important.

“A giant...cat?” Her eyes glittered with excitement. Enormous cats... The very thought was dazzling. She wanted to pet them so badly.

But William knew what she was thinking and had to give her a reality check. “The Skyte region is pretty far from here, sis.” Even if the cats were moving around trying to find monsters, Skyte and Pallas were much too far apart to

even consider it.

With no other recourse, the siblings decided to have Joshua procure a catalog of available cats for them and they made their way home. As the carriage swayed, they discussed ways to raise money, but none of them were able to come up with anything substantial.

Chapter 7: General Kongming

That night, Emma had a dream about when she was still Minato. It could've been because she'd been thinking about cats all day, but this dream was the memory of a very important cat from when she was young.

When Minato was still a child, she had a calico named General Kongming. The cat had been about the same age as Wataru, thus she was older than Minato and Peyta both. Whenever the siblings came home from elementary school, Kongming would always be there, resting on the gatepost, waiting to see them. She'd twitch one of her ears when they said they were home, and then go right back to ignoring them.

But if one of the siblings had a fight or a bad day at school, it was like she knew. On those days, she'd give them a supportive meow. Back then, any time Minato was having trouble, she could always count on Kongming. They hadn't been allowed to keep pets inside the house, so she used to step out into the yard where the General was sleeping to cry.

Minato had hated school. She wasn't bullied, and it wasn't as though she had no friends, but she truly hated it because she was afraid of so many things. She was terrified of the playground equipment, and anxious when they'd play dodgeball during breaks. She was afraid of all the things the other kids enjoyed, so it was never easy for her. And then there was the labrador retriever, Labbie, she'd run into on the way home, but everyone was afraid of Labbie.

Even in her dreams, little Minato was still crying her eyes out. But this time, she wasn't crying in the yard, and Kongming was nowhere to be found. She was alone in a forest. One that people had been forbidden from entering due to its many perils.

This was a memory.

When Minato was on her way home from school that day, Labbie managed to wrench free of its chain and bolted toward her. It likely was just hyper and wanting to play, but Minato was so terrified, she started running immediately. It

kept following her, and since they were in the middle of nowhere, there was nobody around to help her. She ran and she ran, dashing when the dog would leap at and nearly catch her, until she finally reached the forest and it gave up the chase.

Once there, she became too scared to move. All she could do was cry as the sky became darker and darker. As the light coming through the treetops grew dimmer, her fear only grew stronger. And what if she left the forest and the dog started chasing her again? That thought only made it worse. She didn't even know how to get home. She'd been so focused on running away, she had no idea where she was or how to get out. She was utterly petrified. The tears streaming out from her eyes didn't help matters as her vision was fully blurred.

All she could do was weep. And as she sobbed in anxiety and terror, she heard a sound.

Mrowr... Mrowr...

It was a cat.

Mrow... Mrow...

It was like a mother cat searching for her kittens, and it grew closer by the second. If it had been a dog, Minato's trembling would have only worsened, but she'd always loved cats. And this voice was familiar.

"Meow!"

The voice was now right next to her, and when she lifted her head...there was Kongming the calico.

"G-General Kongming?"

"Meow!"

"Did you...come to get me...?"

"Meooow!"

Kongming never really liked being held, but now she crawled up on Minato's lap and licked her tears away. Cat tongues were always so scratchy, so it did hurt a little, but it brought a smile to Minato's face nonetheless. She loved cats so much, and she loved Kongming even more.

“Thank you for coming to rescue me, Kongming.” She had been so afraid, she hadn’t even been able to think straight. But now, she felt her smile and courage return.

“Meooooow.” Kongming hopped off Minato’s lap and walked slightly ahead. It was like she was asking Minato to follow her, as she would walk a little bit, then check behind her to make sure Minato was still there before continuing. Up until that point, Minato had been petrified, but strangely enough, she felt like everything would be okay now. She wiped her tears, stood up, and followed after Kongming.

Kongming guided her without once getting lost, and they exited the forest onto a street Minato recognized. The dog that had been chasing her for so long was nowhere to be seen either. Even in the dimly lit streets, with Kongming by her side, Minato had nothing to fear.

After safely arriving home, her mother welcomed her back with a simple, “Well, someone was out late.” Her previously hair-raising experience had started to feel like a real adventure, so her mother’s rather cursory greeting felt like a bit of a letdown.

That evening at dinner, Wataru informed the whole family of a shocking turn of events.

“So...apparently our General Kongming got in a fight with Labbie.”

The whole family gasped in horror. This was a regular-sized calico versus a labrador retriever. Just thinking about the size difference was enough to see the writing on the walls.

“Is Kongming okay?” Peyta worriedly inquired.

Wataru went quiet for a moment before he answered. “She, um...beat the daylights outta that poor dog. Sent it packing with its tail between its legs.”

“WHAT?!” Nobody in the family could hide their surprise.

“I know General Kongming’s the boss around this area, but like...”

“Labbie’s a domesticated dog, and Kongming’s both a stray and not really a stray...”

“General Kongming’s the *coolest!*”

While the whole family was singing Kongming’s praises, Minato could only chuckle to herself. After all, Kongming had avenged her.

Ever since that day, any time Labbie saw either Kongming *or* Minato, it would run away with its tail between its legs.



Mrrowr... Mrrowr...

It was the dead of night when all life should have been in a deep slumber. Emma’s eyes flew open.

Mrrowr... Mrrowr...

Her head was still swimming with sleep. *Was that...General Kongming?*

Mrrowr... Mrrowr...

It couldn’t have been. Kongming had died when Minato was in her last year of high school. It had to be a different cat.

Wait...a different cat?

Emma flew out of bed. There’s no way there could be a cat out in this territory...heck, even in this country. As she dashed out of her room, she saw two other doors swing open. William and George must have heard the meowing too, and no Tanaka could sleep through that.

Mrrowr... Mrrowr...

It’s calling to me. It’s trying to find me. Maybe it’s just the dream telling me that, but I just know it. She ran out the door without a second thought.

“Wait, Emma!”

“Sis!”

Though Minato was a part of her now, Emma was still a countess; she wasn’t allowed to leave the house by herself. The farthest she was allowed to go was the yard. The same rules applied to George and William, and their father would never allow them all to leave without a servant to accompany them. They were on the outskirts of the kingdom, after all, so there was no guarantee they’d be

safe from monsters. They certainly wouldn't be permitted to go on an excursion in the middle of the night.

The latch on the front entrance was too heavy for Emma, so she went for the back door instead. As she ran past Emma's House, she felt something strange plop onto her head. She was in far too much of a hurry to stop, so she simply reached up to check what it was and discovered her beloved purple spider.

"Wow... Looks like you're a little escape artist, huh?"

It would seem the bloodbath while Emma was in her deep slumber wasn't the only thing making it bigger. Maybe it had been getting into the food she'd devised to help the silkworms grow too, because it was now almost too big to hold in both hands.

"Well, hold on tight, okay?" She put the spider back on her head and kept running toward the cat's cries.

"Uh, George? Emma's got a spider on her head!"

"What is she, Meowsicaä or something?!"

Emma was only wearing a blue nightgown. George supposed the spider was better than a giant silkworm larvae...but as he mused upon this, Emma was getting farther and farther away from them.

"How the heck is she so fast?!" William shouted.

"Like a thousand times faster than even Minato!" George responded.

They knew they'd be in deep trouble if their father found out Emma had gone out on her own. After all, any misbehavior from Emma was also a reflection on them. Even if they ignored the monster problem and Pallas was a relatively safe location, it was hard to imagine that a kid wandering alone in the middle of the night wouldn't find themselves in *some* kind of trouble. George ran after her in his nightclothes with only his trusty sword. He'd slain a monster or two with it, but he'd never had to hurt another person. His grip tightened around the hilt and he was in pursuit again.

"And to think I thought things were improving now that Minato was here..."

The cat continued its mewling, and that seemed to have spurred Emma to run

even *faster*. There was no way a little girl could run that quickly. In fact, there was no way a *human being* could run that quickly. If Minato could've run that quickly, she would've been able to get away from Labbie with ease.

They came across a town several kilometers away from the mansion, but that wasn't about to slow Emma down. She'd fully shaken George and William at this point, and she showed no signs of stopping. As she passed down a street with several bars, she saw several people lumbering about. The next day was their only day off, so there were plenty of people getting a good drink in to celebrate.

"Hmmm? What's a little girl like you doing out at a time like—" Before he could even finish his sentence, Emma was out of sight.

"What the hell was that?! It was so fast!"

"H-Hey! One of you catch her!"

The two men shouted ahead to the drunkards in Emma's path. Several of them came to see what the commotion was about, but before they could even reach for her, she zoomed past them at a speed that made them question whether or not she was even human.

"Well, fine! All of you make a line! See her try and get through that!"

The drunkards were starting to get serious about this, and they all formed a line to block her path. But just then, the spider shot its purple webbing right at the men's eyes, blocking their vision. As they tried to peel the webbing off, Emma leaped over all of their heads.

"Bwuh?!"

These were all brawny men that had been drinking the entire night away, and she cleared all of them in a single leap. It had to have been over a two-meter jump.

"Are you freakin' kidding me?!"

And then they noticed the enormous spider riding atop her head.

"What the hell?!"

At the sight, all the men present were starting to regret having had so much

to drink. They were all starting to wonder if they were dreaming without even realizing it, even the ones who'd had their vision obscured by the spider's sparkling, purple thread. With that, they collectively decided that they'd had enough that night and started their trek home.

Chapter 8: Bapping Troubles Away

Emma sped toward a large nature park in the center of town. She recognized it, as she had been there several times before to search for bugs. When she'd first heard the cat crying, she never thought she would've come this far, or that it even would've been possible for her to. Naturally, she knew in the back of her mind that the giant leap she'd taken over the drunkards' heads was odd, but she couldn't stop running. Not back then, and not now either. She decided it must have been the cat's voice spurring her onward. She could worry about all the little details of this adventure later. The cat came first.

Emma had always had an intense personality, and it seemed even Minato herself couldn't suppress it. While they weren't able to ascertain what arrangement was being made within themselves, the two had become one so naturally that they'd barely even noticed.

Mrrowr... The cat's voice continued crying out in the night.

There were more people when Emma reached the park. Far more than the number of drunkards she'd encountered earlier.

"Where'd it get off to?!"

"Find it! We need more light out here!"

The men were all talking over each other, clearly searching for *something* when they spotted Emma zooming past them. They had equipment similar to what her father would take on his monster hunts, but hunters were public servants employed by the region itself—they were nothing like the rough-and-tumble group in the park that night. The Pallas hunters took great care of their appearance. Not to mention Emma would have recognized the officials, since they'd looked after her when she was on her bug hunts.

So who were these men? Some people from other domains looking to make some quick money? Just a bunch of ruffians? Either way, she wasn't about to stop to find out.

“What was that?!” One of the men cried after she’d dashed past them.

“A cat?”

“You found one?!”

“No, I think...it was a little girl...?”

“Going *that* fast?”

Well, it seemed she was right that they were after the cat too. After all, you could buy a whole house with the price a cat would fetch in this world. Emma could understand why they’d be so desperate to get their hands on it, though she couldn’t help but wonder why they were searching so hard. She knew exactly where it was: it was right there, calling for her. They were so close, so why did they still have to keep looking? Even if they couldn’t see it, it was *right there*.

Just a little farther. Not even a hundred meters left. When she tried to run even faster, something caught her foot and she went flying forward with the full force of her run.

“Ow, ow, ow! Wait...it doesn’t hurt at all?”

The moment she tripped, her spider had unleashed more of its thread, providing a cushion for her fall. Even after tumbling at top speed, that webbing left her completely unharmed.

Emma checked her foot and discovered something had wrapped around it. She followed the line and found she had been snagged by one of the men from the park with...a whip? Yes, it was a whip wrapped around her leg.

“What is *wrong* with you?!” she shouted. Though she wanted to scold them for how dangerous this was, she realized her energy would be better spent running away than shouting. As she tried to free herself from the whip, the men surrounded her.

“What’re you doin’ out on a run at a time like this, little girly?” one of the men said with a nasty grin. More and more of the men surrounded her. Emma didn’t see any room to escape, and they didn’t seem likely to let her go.

“I... Um...” Emma was filled with regret and shame for getting such tunnel

vision, but this wasn't something she could laugh off. This seemed bad. *Really* bad. She was hoping her spider could help her out, but it was gone when she went to touch her head. It must have fallen off when she tripped.

“Ay, Bossman! We caught us a real beaut, huh?”

“And lookit the high-quality silk on her clothes!”

One of the men reached out to touch her nightgown.

“Don't touch me!” Emma shouted, instinctively slapping the man's hand away.

“Ow! Think you can get sassy with us just 'cause we're goin' easy on you, you little wench?!” The man flew into a rage and raised his fist. Emma squeezed her eyes shut and covered her head, but nothing happened.

“Huh?” Suddenly, a rush of wind went by her ears and she heard the sound of something falling. Just the sound. Emma didn't feel any impact at all.

“Agh!”

“What the hell?!”

Emma heard panic spread through the men as the sounds continued. Over and over, she heard rushes of wind, grunts of pain, and the sounds of bodies collapsing. When she shakily raised her head, she saw one of the men being knocked into the air...and heard the sound of his body hitting the ground.

Chapter 9: All Together in the Middle of the Night!

One by one, the men were being tossed away by *something*. A large black shape was sending these men flying. It was hard to see exactly what was happening with only the men's lanterns for light—which only grew dimmer as each man was blown back. And then finally...the last man was down, taking the last of the light with him. Emma was plunged into darkness.

Mrrowr...

The cat's voice was closer than ever. It was right behind her. And for some reason, she knew without a doubt that the cat had been calling her this entire time. She turned around to see a pair of large, glowing golden eyes looking right at her.

She couldn't count how many times she'd wished for this moment, just to see those eyes one more time. And there before her they glowed golden in the moonlight. She knew logically, it couldn't be real. Yet all of her senses and her emotions took precedence, and she finally asked those eyes what she wanted in her heart to be true.

"General...Kongming...?"

Kongming had died when Minato was in her last year of high school. She'd wept herself senseless after it had happened. The loss was so excruciating, it caused her physical pain. She hadn't quite understood what grief entailed at the time, but the heartbreak she felt in that moment couldn't even be summarized in a simple phrase. Minato would know better than anyone that this couldn't be real. Even now, the pain would sometimes suddenly grip her heart and fill her with sorrow again.

But those *were* General Kongming's eyes. Without a doubt, those were the eyes she loved so much.

"Meow!"

Just like before, the golden eyes answered.

How could miracles like this be real?

“Is it...really you, Kongming?” Emma asked, hoping with all her heart that the eyes would confirm she wasn’t dreaming.

“Meow!” the eyes answered once more.

Emma pinched both of her cheeks as hard as she could. She just had to know this wasn’t some cruel dream getting her hopes up, so she asked again.

She couldn’t hold her tears back anymore. “Is it really, really you, Kongming?” She’d wanted to see her again so badly. She knew it was impossible, yet she wanted it more than anything. Even after she’d grown, she wanted to see the General waiting for her on the gatepost when she came home. She wanted her cat to comfort her with one of her meows whenever she’d had a bad day at work. She wanted Kongming to be by her side forever.

“Y-You promise? It’s...it’s really you?” she asked through her sobs. It was hard for her to get the words out now, as tears poured out one after another. In the sky, the clouds parted and the moon shone down upon them to answer her cries. The moonlight revealed the cat before her...and proved it was all true.

“Meow!”

“General Kongming!”

The calico slowly approached Emma. Her face was red and puffy from trying to hold back her tears. Kongming licked the large teardrops from her cheeks. It was just as scratchy as ever. Emma giggled, then wrapped her arms around the General.

“You’ve gotten so big!”

“Meow!”

Those golden eyes, the ever so slightly flat face, the calico pattern...all of it was exactly as she remembered; the only difference was her size. Checking the cat over again and again, the General wasn’t just bigger than that scary old labrador retriever—she was bigger than Emma herself! She was about as big as a pony or a horse...not exactly a normal cat size.

Emma tightened her hug around Kongming. She was so warm. Maybe the

reason such an average family like the Tanakas had been reincarnated into this world was just to meet Kongming again.

Kongming was purring blissfully in Emma's happy embrace when suddenly, Emma noticed something sniffing her from behind. Not releasing her hug, she turned to see a black cat with orange eyes, about the same size as Kongming.

"Meoooow!"

"Wait...could you be...Guan?"

"Meow!" the black cat replied and rubbed its face against Emma's.

Guan was another cat the Tanaka family had owned. Guan was always such a little lovebug, and here he was in front of her again.

"You must've been the one who rescued me earlier, huh?"

Guan must have hurled the men away one by one with a megabapping. She imagined the sound of impact was muffled by Guan's soft paw pads, so all she had heard was the sound of them launching through the air and hitting the ground.

"Thank you so much, Guan!" Emma separated herself from Kongming and gave the top of Guan's nose little scratches. But if Kongming and Guan were both there... "Does that mean Zhang and Liu are here too?"

Emma had only asked on the slightest chance that the other two cats the Tanakas had kept might be there...and she received two meows in response. Two more cats poked their heads out from behind Kongming. One was a white cat with a long fluffy tail, and the other was a calico just like Kongming. When the white cat, Zhang, approached her, Emma was immersed in his long, white fur.

"Zhang!"

"Meow!"

Zhang wasn't a Japanese breed and had long, fluffy hair more like a western cat. His fur was less dense around his ears and nose, giving them a pink color. Zhang had always been Minato's father's favorite. Despite the western-style fur, Zhang had a very Japanese-looking face, which always made the family

laugh. They'd never known a cat could have a "Japanese-looking" face before.

"Oh, Zhang...father is going to be so excited to see you!" Emma said, stroking Zhang's nose as well.

"Your turn, Liu!" Emma called the other calico over to her side. When Minato graduated high school and began her job search, Liu was the cat who kept her company in Kongming's stead. Liu was Kongming's daughter, and both Guan and Zhang were Liu's sons. Emma stroked Liu's nose and giggled with that smile Joshua was so in love with. "Now we have father, mother, Wataru-nii, Peyta, General Kongming, Liu, Guan, and Zhang... I guess we can really say the whole Tanaka family is here now!"

"Meow!" The cats all answered in unison.

Chapter 10: Brothers on the Move

George tried to keep running down the road to town, but his legs eventually gave out. This was a road that normally would only be taken by carriage, yet Emma had run the whole way at that insane speed. He gasped loudly for air, and his side had begun to hurt, which was a rare occurrence for someone as fit as him. William had passed him not long ago, but as George leaned against his sword for support, William came tottering back with the same gasping breaths, clutching his side. George forced a laugh as he approached his little brother.

“Hey, George...”

“Emma totally outran us. I just hope she’s okay...”

What had happened to her? George felt like he’d heard a cat’s cry when he was half asleep. He remembered thinking that if Emma heard that too, there was no telling what she might do. William must have had the same thought, as both of them had simultaneously flown out of their rooms right afterward. Just as they’d feared, Emma had definitely heard the cat. Up until she’d left the mansion, they thought they would be able to catch up to her easily. After all, she was just an eleven-year-old girl, and George was well-built with lots of stamina to boot.

Yet he hadn’t caught her when she’d reached the yard. Once she’d cleared the courtyard and started running along that path, she accelerated even more and was gone in the blink of an eye. George thought about turning back and procuring a horse, but thought it would be too dangerous to ride in the dark.

Surely she can’t keep up that pace forever...right? he thought to himself, yet he was out of breath when she didn’t even look like she was slowing down. And soon, even the cat’s cries had faded into the night.

The road split into two paths before them. Even if George and William were to split up, there was going to be another split down the way as well. They’d lost her trail.

Emma had a tendency to get tunnel vision like this from time to time, but usually George and William were able to back her up. They thought things might've been easier now that Minato was a part of her, but Minato's love of cats was overwhelming. With Emma's focus and her sudden power surge, the brothers couldn't keep up with her. They'd have to go back to the mansion, wake their father, and have the servants put together a search party. It didn't matter if this was Emma's or Minato's doing; she was their sister, and her safety took precedence above all else.

"William, we're gonna have to give up here. Let's head back to the mansion and tell father what's happened." He knew they were going to get the tongue-lashing of a lifetime. Both as a Tanaka and a Stewart, their father had always doted on his daughter more than anything. After all, both families were mostly boys, and Emma/Minato was the sole daughter he'd wanted for so long. It was only natural he'd treasure her.

"Oh, sis... Please just be safe out there!" If Emma had so much as a scraped knee, their scolding would be even worse. But they were the men of the family, and Emma was adorable, so even though they'd complain about whatever punishment they got, they'd take it. The only one who would ever scold Emma herself was her mother, so they'd have to make sure she had that coming for her.

The boys turned on their heels and started dragging themselves back to the mansion. The moon had finally come out of hiding, lighting the way in the darkness. That would have likely aided in their search earlier, but they'd long surpassed the limits of their lungs and legs, so it was all they could do to lug their bodies back.

Suddenly, something passed soundlessly by them, followed by a gust of wind. The two brothers instinctively brought their arms up to protect themselves.

"George! William!" Emma called.

When the two brothers looked up, the road that had stretched empty before them was now occupied by four massive cats. The cats were larger than most of the monsters that George had encountered while out hunting. Riding on the back of the big white fluffy cat...was Emma.

“Who do you think you are, Princess Meownonoke?!” George couldn’t hold back his surprise.

“Meeoooow!” A black cat bigger than George’s whole body rubbed up against him.

“H-Hey, George? Th-This cat looks a *lot* like General Kongming!” William shouted, pointing at the calico rubbing its head against him. George wanted to tell him he was being ridiculous, but then he got a good look at the black cat who was cuddling him.

“Is that you...Guan?”

“Meow!” the black cat replied.

But how could this be? Gotta be rational about this. Kongming and Guan died a long, long time ago. I just need to get a better look...

Wait. Is Emma riding...Zhang? And the one that purple spider is riding... Is that Liu? Seriously?!

“That’s right! Our cats reincarnated too!” Emma announced, with a great big smile.

George and William couldn’t hide their simultaneous shock. How the heck could those giant beasts be their own cats?! And they had been reincarnated too? Not to mention, how was it that everything in this world, from the silkworms to the spiders, got to be so damn huge?!

As George tried to collect his thoughts about the situation at hand, he felt Guan bite down gently on his back. Just as he realized what was happening, Guan lifted him off the ground in his mouth. Looking over, he saw General Kongming doing the same with William. It was like they were treating them like little kittens...and it felt pretty unfair, given how Emma got to ride on Zhang’s back.

“We can talk about this later! It’s almost daylight!” Emma said, looking out at the eastern sky. With her in the lead, they made it back to the mansion in what seemed like no time at all, compared to how long their run had felt. Though both brothers wanted to complain about the unfair treatment along the way, the fear of literally biting their tongues kept their whines at bay.

“I think they’re carrying you because Zhang’s the only one with long enough fur to hold on to!” Emma said. Liu was the only one not carrying anyone, and she meowed in the affirmative.

I’m not the only one who finds it weird that she can just understand them now, right? The brothers both thought.

The four cats sneaked into the manor without a sound and brought all three siblings back to Emma’s room. They were all plopped onto Emma’s bed, where they collapsed into sleep in their utter exhaustion, surrounded by four giant cats and one giant spider. With all that fluffiness to go around, they certainly had the sweetest and fluffiest of dreams.

They rested soundly until the next morning, when Martha found them and let out a bloodcurdling scream. While initially furious when the siblings confessed to all that had happened, their parents (especially their father) were reduced to tears when reunited with their beloved pets once more.

After Guan had knocked the men who attacked Emma senseless, they had been wrapped in spider silk and left in the park. Though normally they would have only been tried for unlawfully entering the domain, because they’d attacked Emma, their punishment was three times worse.

From then on, the cats would tag along on monster hunts with the family, and their father updated the Stewart family crest to include a cat motif. Because of that, dresses with said crest were selling like hotcakes, so the four cats truly were lucky cats for the family—both personally and financially.

Chapter 11: I Am a Cat

My name is Zhuge Liang Tanaka. The name is quite long, so I am usually known as Kongming. From before I could even open my eyes, my mother told me that for generations, our lineage was deeply indebted to the Tanaka family. It was our duty to patrol the district around their house and protect the peace. Should any of us be born with strong spiritual powers, we would be brought to the Tanakas to be their personal pets.

When my eyes were opened and I was able to walk, my mother brought me to the Tanakas' yard to receive a name. Once a stray received a name, it would be easier to obtain food and their life expectancy usually increased. However, my mother told me to beware of the Tanaka family patriarch, Kazushi.

My mother was a large, white cat who patrolled the district for many years as the boss, and she could scale the walls of the area with unbelievable agility. Yet in his infinite love for cats, Kazushi had been able to confine her for a time. But what was worse was his terrible names. My mother told me that if he named you, your life would be over before it even began. He was the one who had named my mother...Shiratama Mochipuff. It had none of the dignity a leader like her should be afforded.

Luckily for me, it was the matriarch, Yoriko, who found me in the Tanakas' yard that day. She gave me this long, yet noble name. Since I had quite strong spiritual abilities, I was allowed to stay as the Tanakas' family cat and never had to worry about food. There I spent my days, peacefully growing into adulthood. Yet soon I was to be plagued with a new problem.

Because my powers were so strong, I was unable to give birth. Though I could grow pregnant, the kittens would be subjected to the powers within me and die within my womb. Without any powers of their own, they were unable to even take form as kittens. After so many stillborns, I finally gave birth to one healthy kitten, only for it to be stolen away from me by a crow.

I was gutted. Shattered. Overwrought with sadness and rage. My emotions

threatened to overtake me like a storm, robbing me of all my senses.

And then Minato was born.

This baby who suddenly appeared in the Tanaka household cried so very much. It was as though she was always sensing something, always afraid. I swore that I would protect her when her mother could not—I could handle most things with a single meow using my powers. When I slept beside her, she would calm and her crying would abate. I would spend my days resting on the warm windowsill near her.

Then soon after, Heita was born, and the house grew lively again. Unfortunately, he was born with asthma, and the family was unable to handle having fur in the house anymore. My days sleeping next to Minato were over. Though Kazushi skillfully made a Kongming-Special bed for me to sleep in, I was more interested in the cardboard box he kept his tools in and slept in that instead. I know he hated that I wouldn't use his bed, but the box was the perfect fit for me, and that was what mattered most.

Once Minato was old enough to go into the yard by herself, we were able to spend more time together again. By that time, I'd taken over the responsibility for patrolling the area from my mother. I'd also honed my spiritual abilities well enough that if there was *anything* threatening to Minato in my jurisdiction, I could protect her—as long as she was in my domain.

But as she grew older, she had to start going to school, and that took her away from my territory more and more. From then on, I learned when she would come home, and waited for her at the gatepost by the house. Sometimes she'd come home with strange beings haunting her, so I couldn't let my guard down for a moment.

But one day, Minato did not come home on time. Yoriko didn't seem too bothered, as she was busy looking after Heita and preparing for dinner. She figured Minato was out playing with friends. But I knew that wouldn't be the case with Minato; I knew something was wrong.

I had gathered all the cats under my command to search for her when I received a report from a cat outside my domain (a tuxedo cat called Batman, named by Wataru).

“Boss! That mangy mutt Labbie has been chasing Mina-chan all around town!” The dog must have gotten loose, and it used all that pent-up energy to chase Minato.

Whenever I was sleeping in the yard, Minato would tell me how frightened she was of Labbie, the labrador retriever she passed on the way to and from school. I felt so terrible for her. She was probably running for her very life right now. Why were dogs always begging for attention and love like that? With those massive bodies of theirs, you’d think they’d be able to suppress such desires.

I’d have to teach it a lesson.

It didn’t take long to find the beast. It was wandering back and forth, looking nervously around the entrance to the forest.

“You the brute who’s been chasing my Minato around town?” I hissed menacingly. It stepped backward, clearly ready to flee. “Where is she?”

The dog looked anxiously toward the forest and my blood boiled. I wasn’t about to let the thing leave without giving it several parting gifts from my extended claws.

That forest was dangerous. No one was supposed to go in there. After all that running around, the dog must have come to its senses the moment it saw Minato run in. Most animals instinctively knew how wrong that forest was. That was why the dog hadn’t gone in itself. It knew how dangerous it was, but it had still chased Minato in there regardless.

“You’ll be *really* sorry if anything has happened to her!” I said, leaping on the dog and biting down behind its ear as hard as I could. It yipped and howled as it absconded, and I ran into the forest.

Mrowr... (Minato? Where are you?)

Mrowr... (Minato, answer me!)

Mrowr... (Minato!)

I’d only been in this forest once before, when I was chasing that crow who stole my kitten. That devil lived here. I never found my child’s body...but I

would find Minato. I swore it.

Mrowr... (Minato!)

Mrowr... (Minato, say something!)

Mrowr... (I'm begging you!)

Mrowr... (Please!)

Mrowr!!! (Please be okay!)

The forest was growing darker. I needed to get her out before night fell. Minato didn't have night vision like I did, so it would be even more dangerous for her. If only I was big enough to carry her myself. I wasn't going to let this forest take another one of my precious children. I was going to bring her home.

Mrowr... (Minato!)

I called her over and over, fighting off a miasma that threatened to overwhelm me. As I carefully focused on the forest's dense aura, I saw it converging on a single path. Following it, I found an area where it was thick and stagnated. Though it was so dense that it blurred my vision, I could hear Minato crying faintly within. With the miasma impairing one's vision this much, I didn't think a human would ever have found her. My poor Minato was sobbing within the dark cloud. She was probably unable to move in such a suffocating fog.

"Meow!" With a single sound, I blasted it all away, and Minato raised her head.

"G-General Kongming...?"

"Meooow!" I'd finally found her. I sent more miasma flying with my response.

"Did you...come to get me?"

"Meow!" I said, blasting the last of the miasma from her and crawling up on her knee. I licked her face clean of tears and she giggled.

"Thank you for coming to rescue me, Kongming."

"Meooow." I wanted to stay and comfort her until she'd fully calmed down, but it was getting dark fast. We needed to leave. I meowed to signal I wanted her to follow me.

At last, I had done it. My child was safe.

But the world could take the most precious things from you without a moment's notice, so I needed to be stronger. I needed the power to protect Minato no matter what.



My days were spent peacefully with the Tanakas until I came to a realization: my tail had split in two. I had become a cat yokai: a nekomata. Legend had it that cats with strong spiritual powers would become nekomata after living long enough. I hadn't realized I'd lived so long.

It didn't seem the humans could perceive my split tail. Even though I'd finally become such a mystical creature, I hardly had any spiritual powers remaining. I knew I didn't have much time left, so I gave birth in secret. Just one kitten took all my strength. Though I worried my newly awakened yokai body would have hurt my whole litter, luck was on my side. Both spiritual and yokai powers came from one's life source.

And I was sure my time was coming to an end.

The Tanakas named my newborn Liu Bei, saying that was the perfect name for a daughter of Kongming. I didn't understand, but they all agreed.

As my child, Liu Bei had powers as well. She had the ability of foresight. Whenever it was about to rain, she would meow incessantly at Yoriko to bring the laundry in. She'd cry any time they were about to forget to feed them. She'd cry when they were about to leave something behind. Unfortunately, these messages didn't quite convey themselves effectively, and she was simply labeled as a noisy cat.

I was growing weak as the days grew colder. On the coldest nights, Minato would secretly let me into the house. She could have been sitting happily with her family in the warm living room, but she went out of her way to sit at the front door and warm me up on her lap. I had no powers to protect her anymore, but she still let me rest on her lap and stroked my fur. These were the happiest times in my life.

I wanted to be with her forever.

Before I knew it, Minato had stopped crying as much. She'd grown so big and strong, and she was no longer afraid. Yet there was still something after her...and I didn't have the power to protect her anymore. Though I wanted it to be me, I could only ask Liu Bei to watch after her in my stead. I wanted it to be me.

One day, Liu Bei told me of a future far away; one long after I passed, and she passed, and her children passed. The family would all go their separate ways and there would be no cats to look after them anymore. Whatever it was that had been after Minato for all those years would catch up to them...and kill the whole family. The world would finally come for Minato and the Tanakas' souls.

What could I do when I was so close to death? My body was so old and frail. There was nothing I *could* do. Not now. I couldn't fight against Liu Bei's foresight.

If that was how it was going to be, then I would go wherever the world took them and be there when they arrived. I'd wait for her. They always said cats have nine lives, after all. It was a blessing I'd managed to become a nekomata right at the end, as that gave me all nine lives to live. I had eight more lives after this. Eight more lives to live and to figure out how to protect her. I didn't care if I became a nekomata, a bakeneko, or even a god. I'd amass as much power as it took and wait for her. We would be separated for a time, but we would meet again.

"General Kongming?" Yoriko called for me. I didn't have the strength to respond.

"Kongming?"

I was dying. But I wasn't sad. This was the first of nine. My body was growing stiff. But this was nothing. It would only be my first death out of nine.

I heard footsteps.

Minato had come home from school. She'd been running home as fast as she could every day once it'd become too hard for me to move anymore. She pushed herself that way every single day. But that would end today.

Minato... I'll only be gone for a little while to get stronger. Then I'll be back to

see you again. Then we can nap together again.

Minato's tears fell in waves onto my body. I hadn't seen her cry in so long.

Please don't cry. You don't have to cry. I'll be back again someday.

"Kongming..." Minato called for me. She was crying for me.

Minato... I cried weakly.

Yoriko was astounded. I hadn't responded for so long, she'd thought I'd pass on in my sleep. Yet there I was, mustering all my power to respond to Minato's cries. I simply should not have had that strength left.

"Kongming, please... Please don't go. I love you so much, Kongming! Please...you can't die! Don't leave me... Please don't leave me alone... I don't want you to go... Please, don't! Please! Please!"

Minato was crying. I didn't want her to cry.

Minato... Minato... It'll be okay. Everything will be okay. I love you too, Minato. I love you so much. And I promise I'll be so much stronger when we meet again. I'll only be gone for a little while. I promise.

But I want you to know...more than anything. I never, ever want to be away from you.

Please don't cry, Minato. I'll be home again. I promise you, I'll be with you again.

We'll be together.

Forever and always.

Minato...

I...love...you...

The cat opened her eyes. She had been dreaming of a time long ago. She'd wrapped her body lovingly around the young woman resting next to her. Though her hair, eyes, name, and everything had changed, she was still the same Minato.

And they could be together again.

Forever and always.



Chapter 12: The Sudden Return

Early one morning after the Tanakas were reunited with their beloved pets, a carriage arrived at their mansion. Their uncle, Arven, who was supposed to be in the capital, frantically scurried out. He was a scholar through and through, and the wisest in all the family. He too had the characteristic Stewart family purple eyes, and he couldn't hide the exhaustion in them. The gardener on duty that morning, Imoko, informed his pupil Jack to hurry and wake Leonard. Since Jack had only recently been employed about a month prior, he was unfamiliar with the manor's layout and instead decided to call for Leonard in a loud voice, waking the whole family, who all decided to see what the fuss was about.

Upon awakening, Emma emerged from her room in her nightgown and saw their guest just as she reached the front door. "It's Uncle Arven!" she shouted as she rushed forward. George and William arrived soon after, rubbing the sleep from their eyes as they came out, but they couldn't conceal their shock at their surprise guest.

Arven had a sweet face most unlike Leonard's, and it softened even further as he lifted Emma into the air.

"I'm home, my sweet darling Emma! Not even a goddess can compare to how beautiful you've gotten! And how have you been, George and William?" While the men of the Stewart family were all very fond of Emma, Arven loved her the most of all. Every time he spoke to her, all the sweetness in the world came flooding out. He loved her so much that he'd rather spend time holding her than fighting off the exhaustion from his long journey. He wasn't a doting father, nor a doting uncle. He was an uncle possessed.

Leonard came out of his room, still in his pajamas as well, though he had taken the time to throw on a robe over them. He was shocked by his little brother's sudden return. After all, it took about fifteen days to get from the capital to Pallas, making it about a month round trip. It wasn't the sort of visit one would make on a whim.

“It’s been some time, Leonard. I’ll tell you more about what’s going on later, but...what’s with the cats? And why are they so big?”

Naturally, Emma had slept with Kongming every night since that fateful evening. The other cats also found rooms of their own. Each of them had emerged from their rooms with their guard up after Jack’s loud cry.

“Oh, let me introduce you, Uncle Arven! This is the calico, Zhuge Liang, but we call her General Kongming for short!” Emma exclaimed, and Kongming meowed a greeting in response. “This calico is Kongming’s daughter, Liu Bei! And these are Liu’s two sons. The black one is Guan Yu and the white one is Zhang Fei! We just call them Guan and Zhang.”

The other three cats greeted Uncle Arven in turn.

“Nice to meet you... Er, wait, do cats greet people like that?” Arven mused out loud, but decided to ignore it because of how happy Emma clearly was. He was truly a Stewart through and through, choosing not to think too much about it, even though other scholars would’ve found that attitude most tiring.

Melsa, who had emerged from her room fully dressed, had a bath drawn for Arven to wash away the grime from his long travels. As the siblings got dressed, she had the servants hurry preparations for the morning’s meal. The family ate earlier than usual, then moved to the living room to hear Arven out while they had their after-meal tea.



“There’s been a coup d’état in the capital?!”

The news Arven brought to the family was most grave indeed. News from the capital didn’t tend to travel to the borders very often, so this was the first Leonard had heard of such a thing. It was a shock, to say the least, and his face reflected the seriousness of the situation. The fact that it hadn’t leaked even among the merchants made it seem like a strict gag order had been in place before it could ever reach the Pallas region.

“The King’s older brother, Cain, commandeered armies from nearby domains and a branch of the knights to surround the castle.”

Only the royal family and the duchies to the north, east, south, and west of

the capital (otherwise known as the Four Duchies) were permitted to have armies in the kingdom. Though the Stewart family was allowed to keep hunters on staff to protect against monsters as a domain on the outskirts, they weren't granted the right to an army. After all, an army was meant to be used in fights against humans. Hunters honed their skills, but their goals were far different. These domains were meant to raise armies to protect the king, so for those same armies to turn against him was nigh unthinkable.

"And what of the king?" Leonard asked with a steely expression. If the king had been overthrown, the whole kingdom was in danger. However, his younger brother was astute and had pointedly called it a coup rather than a revolution. In other words, it wasn't in the name of the people; it was likely simply an act of terrorism by the king's brother.

"The king is well. They even say he stood alongside his own guards to fight them off himself."

Leonard sighed. Not from relief, but exasperation. The king was the most important person in this kingdom. Why in the world would he step onto the battlefield himself? It seemed he was as battle-hungry as they said—an unprecedented trait in the long history of the royal family.

"While the fighting seems to have subsided, the university was not spared from the conflict. All of the research labs were ravaged, and they think it'll take around three months before everything is up and running again," Arven lamented. The esteemed royal university was right next to the castle itself, and its wide campus made it the perfect spot for battle.

"I only just managed to gather up whatever research was still intact before coming home." Three years' worth of research, reduced to whatever he could gather. The exhaustion on his face made it plain just how extensive the losses were for him.

"Then that means you're gonna be staying with us for a little bit, right, Uncle Arven?" William beamed.

"That's right," Arven said with a strained smile, giving Leonard an apologetic glance. "I'm so sorry for my sudden intrusion, though." He'd apparently sent notice that he'd be coming home, but somehow he arrived before the

notification. The coup was likely causing delays in the postal system. It was certainly possible for him to arrive sooner, given that he'd taken off immediately after sending it.

Arven's main regret was that he'd likely be graduating without producing the research he'd hoped to after being given the opportunity to attend university.

"Oh, Uncle Arven! I can help with your research! I'm researching silkworms too! Father's given us so much to work with, so you can keep studying while you're here!" Emma chimed in.

Arven was researching silkworm production, the main source of commerce in the Pallas region. He would occasionally send the results of his research back to Emma, and she would use that to run tests, experiments, and comparisons to her heart's content.

"It's true, Arven. The lab we've made for Emma is on par with the ones you have at the university. Your research has contributed a great deal to our land, you know. You have nothing to apologize for," Leonard said, placing a comforting hand on Arven's shoulder.

Ah, of course Leonard would have put that much effort into a research lab if it was *for Emma*. That was just like him. And given that they now were in possession of four luxurious cats, Arven deduced Pallas must have been economically prospering.

Though he still hadn't determined why the cats were so big. Were they a new species?

Emma had missed her uncle dearly after he'd gone off to university, and she was always pestering her father to let her read every letter he sent. That included every single paper from silkworm researchers in the region that happened to go through him. She'd perused these research papers over and over, consulting a dictionary for whatever technical terms she didn't know. And since it was all about her beloved bugs, this play-research would have her completely immersed. Arven had no idea just how much knowledge she'd accumulated by this point.

"Well, why don't you go ahead and show me these labs, then, Emma?" Arven said, bringing the conversation to a close as he faced Emma and her big goofy

grin. He didn't want to keep discussing such dour matters in front of the children, and he figured Leonard had work he needed to get to as well.

Though it seemed the coup had been quelled, something still seemed fishy about it all. Just as Arven decided he'd bring it up to his brother again after the children went to bed, he remembered something from his journey.

"Oh, by the way. When I was passing through the Chiari region, a representative for the second prince and princess came up to me and personally requested that we invite them to our next tea party. Did you all turn them down for some reason?"

The whole family turned to look at Melsa.

"Huh?"

Melsa was stunned silent.

There had been far more responses than Melsa had expected for the tea party, so she thought it would be fine for her to just invite some the next time. But maybe she'd turned down too many? Had she somehow turned down someone truly important?

A chill ran down her spine.

Upon entering the research room in Emma's House, Arven had to nervously force a smile. "Wh-What on earth is all this?"

"What do you mean, Uncle Arven? They're silkworms, silly!" Emma beamed as though it were the most natural answer in the world. The thing in William's arms that was big enough to be a teddy bear was actually a *silkworm larva*. He held it up to give Arven a closer look.

"Y-Yes, but...why are they so big?" Silkworms were *bugs*. The biggest they tended to get was still under ten centimeters. As a specialist in this field, Arven couldn't conceptualize that the massive thing William was holding was the same as the bugs he'd spent years researching. These things were fifty centimeters and fat all around.

"Around a year ago, you sent a research paper that hypothesized methods to make silkworms bigger, so I did a few experiments myself!" Emma said, her

eyes shimmering with excitement. By experiments, she meant she had tested their food, breeding, environment, and every little variable she possibly could. In the end, she had decided to stop feeding them mulberry leaves and instead gave them a specialty blend she'd devised through trial and error...and it had made them grow to this massive size. She explained that fifty centimeters was the most suitable for cost-effectiveness and ease of rearing. Then, she said she wanted to ask Arven's opinions on whether or not it would be possible to change the color of their silk through their food. She chattered on and on with starry-eyed excitement.

She's a genius, Arven thought to himself. He knew the reports he'd sent back had plenty of theories on how to increase silkworm size, but there were hundreds of samples and hundreds of control tests to get through. Not to mention, after they'd finished their control groups, they had to figure out which theory produced which results, then they'd have to turn it all into data, carefully sort everything out, then go back to comparative testing again. It had been such a pain in the neck that even the university researchers threw in the towel on the whole matter.

Yet Emma had managed to do it effortlessly. And not only had she managed to do the experiments successfully, she'd managed to produce valid results. This wasn't just yielding results; it was more like she'd mastered the science of biology altogether!

"Did you research all this by yourself, Emma?" Arven inquired.

"Huh? No, no. I let George and William help with caring for them. We had to test out the feed on each and every one of them, so it was pretty tedious!" Emma said with a grin.

How can she still be so cute when she's talking about the grueling work she put her brothers through? William's thousand-yard stare said it all.

Arven had heard that the quality of the silk from the Pallas region had improved while he was away at the university. He knew the climate and temperature were ideal for silkworms, but that hadn't explained just how much improvement there had been. He'd asked Leonard how it had happened, and all he said was that they'd gotten the help of some "expert researchers." Arven

had figured it was some sort of trade secret that his brother couldn't risk revealing in a letter, but he never would have expected that Leonard had been talking about his own little girl. Now, he understood all too well why Leonard had been reluctant to tell him the truth. It was likely Leonard was just as baffled as Arven. He probably still couldn't fathom it.

As Arven was lost in thought, Emma went to one of the nearby rooms to grab a large bug box.

"Allow me to introduce my favorite spider too, Uncle Arven!"

And how did we get here? Why is there a spider now? Arven had a hard time following Emma's train of thought, but he did as Emma asked and peered into the bug box. Just as she said, there was a purple spider about as big as Emma's face.

Why are the spiders huge too?! Arven thought, utterly gobsmacked.

"Isn't it just the prettiest purple you've ever seen? It's as vivid as your and father's eyes! That's why I named it Violet!"

Why is the color the part you're explaining?! What about the size of the thing?! But she was right. A spider with the same characteristic violet eyes of the Stewart family *was* quite beautiful, and Emma was so adorable as she gushed about it. Maybe she was so fascinated with it because she was the only one who hadn't inherited the Stewart family's purple eyes; she'd gotten her mother's green eyes instead.

Emma took the spider out of the bug box. William seemed to have noticed how awkwardly Arven was smiling and threw him a bone. "So, um...this spider probably got into the special food we made to help the silkworms grow."

I appreciate the explanation, oh nephew of mine, but that doesn't really help... They don't just get this big in a day.

The spider crawled up Emma's arm and plopped itself down on her head. It was, to put it lightly, a creepy sight.

"Oh yeah! And that's not the only reason this spider's amazing!" Emma bragged, still gleaming with excitement. At this point, Arven figured nothing could surprise him more than the gargantuan size of these things. "If you put it

on your head, you can run with superspeed!”

Ah. I stand corrected.

About three days ago, after the three siblings had gotten thoroughly scolded for their late night escapade, Emma decided she would try to figure out what had given her that sudden burst of speed. She went to the yard (carefully watched by her family and cats), broke into a sprint and...

Nothing happened. Even the cats were confused. Kongming wanted to run alongside her, but had outpaced her in an instant. George easily ran past her, and even William could have caught up to her if he'd tried hard enough.

Emma couldn't figure out how she was already out of breath after just one lap around the courtyard. She'd managed to run several kilometers that night, so what was different now? She hadn't said anything since it hadn't come up, but she didn't feel like she'd be able to do that two-meter jump anytime soon either.

Leonard and Melsa had turned to stare at George.

“It's not what it looks like! I'm telling the truth! Emma was running like the wind that night! And she was still in her indoor shoes and everything!”

Emma's usual lace-up boots were too much of a pain to tie in her hurry, so she'd run out wearing her indoor shoes. After Martha had recovered from the initial shock of finding the siblings the morning after, her usual castigation had resumed when she saw Emma's indoor shoes covered in mud.

“Could it be because it was at night...?” William proposed, thinking maybe Emma could only run like that under certain conditions. Emma was annoyed that he'd compared her to something like a werewolf or a vampire, but she decided to test his theory that evening anyway. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and went to the yard, family and cats in tow and...

She was still pretty slow.

Kongming slowed down to Emma's pace as she ran alongside her. The night could be dangerous, and Kongming wanted to watch out for her. She'd always been such a sweet kitty.

Emma was even slower than she had been in the daytime because of the low light. At the time of her miraculous sprint, the dark hadn't bothered her even a bit. The only time she even noticed the darkness was after those men tripped her.

"Maybe it was just an adrenaline rush?" William wondered, desperately trying to figure out what could have caused the phenomenon.

Leonard and Melsa looked to George again.

"I-I swear, we're not lying," George said, trailing off as he mentioned there wouldn't be any point to lying in the first place. The family was starting to wonder if this was just a mystery that would remain unsolved when General Kongming pawed at the top of Emma's head with a meow. Her paw pads felt so nice and squishy.

"Wait a second!" all three siblings said in unison. "The spider!"

Emma *had* had that spider on her head that night. William ran to go fetch it while Melsa gave Emma another scolding for running around with a spider on her head. *Serves her right, really*, he thought.

Melsa furrowed her brow when she saw the spider. It was clearly much bigger than when Emma had first caught it and showed it off to her. It was far beyond the realm of common spider size.

While Martha ran screaming from the massive thing, Melsa wasn't like most countesses. She was *Emma's* mother. Even in her previous life as Yoriko, she had been born and wed in the countryside. She was unbothered by bugs, and was by far the gutsiest of the family. Even Leonard was more squeamish than she was.

But this spider was riding on Emma's head.

It was grotesque.

"Oh, hey! I think I can see a little better now!" Emma said before taking off again. This time, she was far faster than Leonard or Melsa could ever have imagined. It was exactly like George and William had begged them to believe. This time, all four cats happily ran alongside her.

“See? I *told* you I wasn’t lying!” George said, puffing out his chest with pride, but Leonard and Melsa were distressed by the revelation. If only it *had* been a lie.



“And that pretty much sums it up!” Emma remarked, happily summarizing the past few days for her beloved uncle. Though she’d left out the part about her whole family being reincarnated from another world, she couldn’t help but be filled with joy when she remembered the way she had been reunited with her pets.

“I don’t even know where to start,” Arven said with a deep sigh. The whole family (mostly Emma) seemed to have gone completely mad while he was away. He was so flabbergasted by the ridiculous events Emma was recounting—proved by the massive spider and cats before him—that he didn’t even have the wherewithal to be hurt that his niece had thoroughly surpassed him in his field of study.

“Oh, but I’m not allowed to put my spider on my head outside of the bug labs, so it feels like a total waste...” Emma pouted. Melsa had been *very* clear that a countess couldn’t be seen with a spider on her head. The only ones allowed to see such a thing were her family.

Arven put a comforting hand on Emma’s back and decided to just give up on understanding it all. Emma was adorable, so he’d let it slide. The cats were cute (and huge), so he’d let it slide. The spider was beautiful (and huge), so he’d let it slide. It was important for researchers to give their brains a rest sometimes, so therefore he’d let it all slide because of Emma’s overwhelming cuteness. His love for his niece overwhelmed his need to think too deeply about it all. He decided to stop thinking about it to protect his peace of mind. After all, at this point, dwelling on it was just going to make things worse.

Chapter 13: The Second Tanaka Family Meeting

While Arven went to visit an old friend, the Tanakas met up in Emma's House once more for the second Tanaka family meeting. The topic at hand was the news Arven brought them about the prince and princess.

"I went through the letters I received again, and I think...this might be the one," Melsa said, putting forward a letter. Normally, a letter involving the prince or princess would have the royal seal on the envelope, but this one had the family seal of a marquess from a region some distance away from the Pallas region. It was from the Vallery family whose domain neighbored the Chiari region where Arven had met their messenger.

The marquess's daughter had been accepted into the royal family as the king's concubine, and she was the mother to the second prince and the sole princess of the kingdom. Rumor had it that she'd recently gone back to her homeland of the Vallery region with her children in tow.

"The letter doesn't really say anything that would make me think the prince or princess were involved." Leonard sighed after carefully reading through the letter a second time. George, Emma, and William had a look as well, but they came to the same conclusion.

"Why did you turn this family down, anyway?" one of the siblings asked. After all, they remembered even barons and viscounts had been in attendance that day. If she were barring guests from entry based on social status, there was no way she would've turned down a marquess.

"Well, firstly, I didn't know them. Second, all the regions around here are quite vast, unlike the ones around the capital, and I wanted to prioritize families who could get here in under three hours by carriage. And lastly, their seal felt super pompous to me, so I guess it just ticked me off."

All but the last explanation was reasonable enough. Considering the sender, it wasn't something that should have *felt* pompous, it was something fully deserving of all the pomp and circumstance.

“You sure we can’t just...keep ignoring it?” William asked hopefully. Most aristocrats would be champing at the bit to get closer to the royal family, but the Stewart family was not among them. Getting closer to the royal family meant getting involved with a lot of drama that was more trouble than it was worth, and the Stewart family just wanted to live a stress-free, peaceful life without a care in the world. This desire only grew stronger after they’d realized they’d been reincarnated.

“We might have been able to get away with it if Arven hadn’t told us,” Leonard said, shaking his head. Unfortunately, that messenger had gone out of their way to inform the Stewarts how much they wished to attend the next time, and the royal family’s desires were absolute. They might as well have said, “Plan your next tea party and call us this time!”

“Maybe it’s their fault. *Maybe* they went out of their way to make it so we wouldn’t recognize them,” Emma whined, very clearly not thrilled at this prospect of another party. The only good thing about those stupid tea parties was that she got to have cake. She hated having to talk to all those strangers and play nice with them. It was a huge pain.

“Emma, I know what you’re trying to say, but don’t let anyone else ever hear you say that. You don’t want us to get arrested for treason, do you?” Melsa warned. You never knew who might be listening. All it took was one servant who was exceptionally loyal to the royal family and they’d be locked up forever.

“So then...what are we supposed to do?” George asked, completely exasperated.

“I suppose...we should make arrangements for the next tea party?” Unfortunately, Leonard’s answer was really the only one. The whole family sighed.

This suuuucks.

Even Melsa, who was initially gung ho about the tea parties, was less than enthusiastic. Not even the desire to see her future grandbabies’ faces was motivation enough.

Melsa huffed. “Well, fine then. Maybe I’ll just invite a bunch of families who seem like *they’d* want to get closer to the royal family. Then, those families will

be extra grateful to me *and* it'll mean less time for the royals to hang around my kids." It was a tiny bit of payback, but it was enough to make her smirk.

Chapter 14: Perfection

The hastily put together tea party was, to everyone's dismay, on a cloudy day. It looked like it might rain at any moment but just wouldn't. It was like the sky reflected the family's anxieties about hosting a tea party with the royal family in attendance. They'd hidden their ever so slightly larger-than-life cats in Emma's House. If anyone attempted to sneak in to find the secret to Pallas silk's success, the four of them would work as the perfect guard dogs...er, guard cats.

Melsa had spitefully gathered a bunch of aristocrats who were excited by the chance at the royal family's hand at this tea party, so the vibes were entirely different from the previous one. As the weather was spotty, this party was held inside instead of in the garden. All of the aristocrats gathered were either counts or of higher statuses. Additionally, while the previous party had a lighter, more casual dress code, this one had everyone in full feather—the kind of formalwear one would expect from an event of the highest caliber.

It was well past time for the party to start...but the prince and princess were nowhere to be found. An uncomfortable quiet hung over the whole party. They couldn't possibly start without them. They couldn't even chat among themselves. So they all just sat there in horribly awkward silence.

Emma was wearing the same light green dress she'd worn to the previous tea party, which was much plainer than the dresses the other women were wearing. The current trend was off-shoulder dresses that were quite revealing, so naturally that was what most of the other guests were wearing. Due to her age, Emma didn't exactly *fill out* the top of her dress, and she was quite skinny all around, so she tried to cover up as much as she could to hide all of that. Not to mention, she'd loosened her corset so she could eat more cake, meaning she'd valued both fit and function over what was fashionable. She was *not* going to push herself too hard at this tea party.

George and William were wearing black formal suits that were designed with details in the Stewart family purple here and there. Since they would be

meeting the royal family, they even bore single-shoulder capelets, which they hardly ever had the opportunity to wear. The men of the family were always wearing purple somewhere on their clothes, as it was the trademark color of the Stewart household.

In the silence, the attending lords were all shyly glancing over at Emma. All aristocrats at count status or above were given strict schooling. The ladies there were brimming with confidence, had perfectly followed the latest fashion trends, and were all on pins and needles waiting for the royal family to arrive, like cavalry awaiting the order to charge. Emma seemed so delicate compared to them, and the little lords couldn't help but have their hearts stolen.

That being said, she was mostly just trying to hide her disappointment that she couldn't have any of the cakes on display yet because the prince and princess were running late, and she was clutching her stomach to keep it from growling. However, the lords interpreted her shaking as nervousness and swore they would protect her from then on. It seemed the whole "Emma getting more popular every time they held a tea party" thing was becoming a trend.

Finally, a little under an hour later, they received notice that the second prince and princess had arrived with their mother, the king's concubine. All present rose from their seats to face the door and bow to the royal family.

"I am so deeply sorry. I was just having the hardest time picking the right dress, you see!" In walked the concubine Rose Alicia Royale, speaking in the sweetest affect to Leonard, who had gone to welcome her.

"Why, you have nothing to apologize for. The very notion! The royal family shouldn't be apologizing for something so trivial."

"Oh, right. I'm still not used to this whole 'royal family' thing, sorry. Oh! Dear me, I've gone and done it again," Rose said with a chuckle.

All in attendance were still bowing politely, but they couldn't help but be annoyed that she had kept them waiting so long over a *dress*. Of course, the royal family wasn't supposed to apologize, but on the flip side, they weren't supposed to create situations that *merited* apologies. The fact that she had been so choosy over a dress made her seem like a young girl on her first date. And her saying she wasn't used to being in the royal family would have made

sense if she hadn't become the king's concubine over fifteen years ago. Of course, they couldn't *voice* any of these complaints without getting thrown in the slammer, but they could think it all they wanted.

Rose gave all the lords and ladies permission to be at ease, and that was when they finally raised their heads for the first time. The prince and princess stood before them, each with the most beautiful raven hair. The prince seemed a bit displeased, but with an air of authority befitting the royal family. Coupled with his handsome features, he gave quite the frosty impression.

The princess was peering around the prince like she was trying to hide and gripping his sleeve. Her black hair was in a stunning updo, and she wore a red dress that matched her mother's.

All present who'd gotten a glimpse of the family were doing their best to hide their astonishment. Those with royal blood in their veins had black hair—this was common knowledge. However, there were only a select few who had even *seen* the royal family before, and they could not help but be fascinated by their dark locks. Those outside of the capital might go their whole lives without seeing black hair, and it was said that even chancellors who were regularly interacting with them couldn't help but feel on edge because of it. The prince and princess's hair color was enough to make any who encountered them feel like they were dealing with someone who was *beyond* human.

The three siblings were similarly astonished, but their gaze was somewhere else.

The Tanakas were true-blue Japanese people, raised in the countryside, so black hair wasn't anything special to them. In fact, it was more like a breath of fresh air. While the rest of the crowd was staring at the prince and princess's black hair, the three siblings were looking past them and straight at the king's concubine, Rose Alicia Royale. She had orange hair and hazel eyes, which weren't all that unusual in this world.

The main feature that drew their eyes...well, to put it completely frankly...

She had big honkin' hooters. The kind of boobies the Tanaka siblings had only ever seen in manga. And since off-shoulder dresses were all the rage in this world, she was practically *busting* out of that dress.

Sure, there were some Japanese people who had large busts. Heck, there were even some with *massive* boobs, though they hadn't ever seen anyone like that before. Even if they had, most Japanese people tended to cover up a bit, and many would choose to wear bras to minimize their chests. The three siblings had never seen such fabulous funbags just hanging all out before. Their chances of seeing jiggly jumblies on nearly full display in their last life had likely been even lower than someone in this world seeing a person with black hair, and the siblings were *transfixed*. Her mountainous mounds could surpass all preferences; whether one liked 'em flat or stacked, her twin peaks were simply peak.

Once Emma had gotten her fill of Rose's bountiful bosom, her gaze traveled along the rest of her body. Having once been a woman in her thirties, Minato knew one thing for certain: this woman's beauty hadn't just come through plain hard work. She was at the age where her skin should have started to lose its luster, but it was still perfectly soft without a wrinkle to be found. Minato had honed her beauty senses over her thirty-five years of life, so she was easily able to tell how healthy someone's skin was even if they had makeup on. Even though most would have gotten extra flab on their upper arms or back in their late twenties, Rose didn't have any at all. Minato herself had noticed hers when she was twenty-eight. She hadn't even gained weight, but the damn flab appeared before she knew it.

But what was more, Rose had already had two children, yet her waist was *snatched* and her hips were *taut*. And on top of all of that, there were those big beautiful boobies.

Rose Alicia Royale was *out of this world*.

As the hosts, the three siblings were the first to introduce themselves to the prince and princess. Though they were both attractive in their own right, neither of them had the same impact on them as Rose. After a brief (but not too brief—they didn't want to be rude) introduction, they swiftly made their way over to Rose.

"Lady Rose, it's such a pleasure to meet you. I am the eldest son of the Stewart family, George Stewart."

“I’m the second son, William Stewart.”

“And I’m the Stewart family daughter, Emma Stewart.”

All three of them took a bow that was clearly more deferential than when they’d greeted the prince and princess. Rose Alicia Royale beautifully gave the signal that they could raise their heads once more, and they all grinned.

Minato’s beauty sensor was going off again. She didn’t even have *laugh lines*. Was she some kind of goddess? She had to be! She was simply superhuman!

“Are you...not going to talk to Edward and Jadwiga like the others?” Rose asked the three, with a confused expression.

There were lords and ladies aplenty surrounding Prince Edward Tholus Royale and Princess Jadwiga Hall Royale. From Rose’s perspective, the prince was being reserved as always with that steely expression of his, and the princess was excruciatingly shy. Yet everyone in this country flocked to them because of their black hair. Rose was *painfully* aware of this fact. Yet these three siblings were reacting in a way she’d never experienced before.

My god...even her voice is beautiful! How can this be possible?! they all thought. She wasn’t putting on a higher-pitched affect like when she’d spoken to Leonard earlier. This was her natural alto voice, and it set off Minato’s beauty senses all over again. It was a nonstop flood of beeping inside her head at that point.

“Okay, it’s my turn to talk to Lady Rose! How is it you’re so beautiful, Lady Rose? Are you a goddess? I mean, to be really specific, your skin’s smoother than silk! And your hair’s as *silky* as silk too! And your body’s absolutely stunning! You’ve got to be a goddess, right?! Did heaven rain a gazillion blessings upon yo— *Mgrph?!'*” William clapped his hand over Emma’s mouth to keep her from gushing even more. Otaku always tended to babble nonstop when the object of their obsession was right in front of them.

“Sis, you’re getting too excited!”

“FWUH! I know, but William! She can’t have gotten this beautiful through hard work alone, okay?! And that’s not even going into her tig ol’ — *Mmmph!'*” Another hand clapped itself over Emma’s mouth. It was George’s this time.

“My deepest apologies, Lady Rose. My little sister has a tendency to get tunnel vision when she becomes too enamored with something, and it seems your beauty has captured her attention at this time.”

“GUH! Seriously, though, George! Lady Rose isn’t just naturally beautiful, she’s also perfectly crafted herself through hard work and restraint...and she’s even using the highest quality...products...?” When Emma got a good look at Rose’s face, she was completely taken aback again. Minato had been a makeup fanatic in her previous life. And her beauty sensor, which could see through *anything*, was ringing off the charts right now.

“We both can’t apologize enough for her!” George and William said, forcing Emma to lower her head into a bow.

Rose couldn’t help but laugh. The siblings’ interactions were like some sort of comedy act. Once she’d started and realized she couldn’t stop, she covered her mouth with her hand until it became a soft chuckle that shook her shoulders.

“Omigosh, even her *laugh* is adorable!”

“Emma!”

“SIS!”

Rose couldn’t stop laughing as their comedy act started all over again. Rose Alicia Royale spent the whole day giggling at the sibling’s antics.



Chapter 15: The Melancholy of Rose Alicia Royale

Rose Alicia Royale was always on edge. As she was the daughter of a marquess, she received all the education befitting of one, and *flourished*. In fact, talk of her beauty even reached all the way to the capital. When she took that first step into high society by attending school in the capital, the king fell in love with her at first sight and she soon became his concubine. The king was head over heels for his young and beautiful (and extremely well-endowed) concubine, so she was soon with child.

And that was where it all ended.

Whenever I looked back on my life, I knew that was the moment everything fell apart.

Before, I'd always been the center of attention. Ever since I was little, all eyes were drawn to me. Yet from the moment the prince was born, the focus would be on him and his black hair first. *Then* they'd look at me...while praising the prince.

The prince's hair was black as night and silky soft, so people were naturally captivated by it. Yet it made me feel like I'd simply become an accessory to my son. Of course I still found him adorable, and of course I still loved him. That was exactly why I hid such feelings away, ensuring nobody would know.

My only salvation was the king's adoration; his attention was still all mine. I couldn't imagine losing that. I was sure to do my part as his concubine and supported him alongside the queen.

I went ten years—ten years of being not myself, but the prince's mother. Nobody could understand why I was so upset. The more I tried to explain myself, the more people began to whisper that I was a greedy and selfish woman. And it was during this volatile mental state that I bore my second child with the king.

She was his very first daughter, born with the same black hair as her brother.

And he loved her more than anything. Even the king no longer looked to me first.

I tried to get his attention again. I wore expensive dresses and accessories. I took extra care of my skin and hair. My fervent desire to become more and more beautiful took so much time and effort, yet it amounted to nothing in comparison to the princess, who just grew cuter with every passing day.

Soon, those who only saw me as the prince's mother began to look at me with scorn. They saw me as nothing more than a frivolous, wasteful concubine. Thus, eventually, the king and queen were blamed for my behavior.

I knew it was pointless, but I couldn't stop my pursuit of beauty. I was terrified of what would happen if I stopped.

Horrible rumors were spread about the royal family. I was told to limit my appearances in public. The king's visits dwindled as well. My position only worsened over time. I tried wearing dresses that would show off the body I'd worked so hard to beautify only to be told it didn't suit a boorish woman like me. Yet if I did nothing at all, nobody would speak to me.

If that was how it was going to be, then I thought I might as well become the boorish profligate they already saw me as. That blackened anxiety in the pit of my stomach finally came to settle, and my irritation was constant.

When I finally heard from the king, he sent a letter telling me to take some time to rest back in my hometown.

My hometown was far from the capital. If I went back home, I knew the king would forget all about me. Even going home wouldn't help me recover from this constant irritation. And since the people in my home had never seen someone with black hair, their special treatment of my children was sure to be even more obvious. I knew we had no choice but to bring the princess with me, but the fact that my son was coming with me made me think that this stunk of the queen's involvement.

We'd both been working together to support the king, yet just because my son (the second-born prince) was born with hair a deeper black than the firstborn prince's, some of the idiots among the aristocracy had started throwing their weight behind whichever boy they thought should be the next

king.

My son grew cold toward me, critical of my behavior that was so unbefitting of the royal family. My daughter could clearly tell how irritated I always was from my facial expression alone.

My son turned fifteen, and my daughter five. It was rare that children of the royal family would not have a fiancé picked out for them by now. I thought it might be a fun way to relax and kill time to hide my social status and attend the neighboring aristocrats' tea parties—feigning a search for eligible prospects for my children. Certainly, my children's hair would end the ruse, but the look of panic on the aristocrats' faces when they saw it was simply priceless, and getting to pour salt in their wounds with a spiteful comment or two helped distract me from my constant irritation.

Then I heard that the Stewart family was holding a tea party. The Pallas region was the most affluent place in the kingdom, and they were searching for candidates to marry their children. While Pallas was quite far from home, as a "boorish profligate concubine," I just *had* to befriend them. After all, if I could get their daughter to marry my son, I'd have even *more* money to spend.

As if to crush all those calculations, my inquiry was rejected. Yet I began hearing rumors from those who *had* been invited. Such as...

"The eldest, Lord George, is only fifteen years old, but he's skilled enough to go on monster hunts already! He's quite tough, and he's reliable, and he's good with children too! What a splendid man he is!"

And...

"While their daughter, Lady Emma, seems quiet and shy, she tried so hard to make all the guests feel welcome! She had this innocence about her that just made you want to protect her. And her smile was just the cutest thing ever. Gosh, she was adorable...pretty much the cutest ever."

And...

"Their youngest, Lord William, had this ephemeral beauty about him that had all the mothers and maids falling all over him!"

There was no way that a tea party where the guests of honor were *children*—

who had no knowledge of self-restraint or consideration for others—would have nothing but good rumors swirling about it. But no matter how many rumors I listened in on, it was all the same. Maybe it was no coincidence that they'd turned down the letter where I'd deliberately hidden my status.

The Stewart family seemed to have full control over the narrative.

I had to meet them.

Luckily for me, I happened to hear that the children's uncle, Arven Stewart, was staying in the neighboring Chiari region, though he usually resided in the capital. I sent a messenger out to him right away. There was no way they could refuse now.

And just as predicted, I soon received an invitation to the next Stewart tea party.

As always, I arrived an hour late. Count Stewart came to greet me, and that's when things started to feel off. I put on the sweetest voice I could for the count in front of his wife, as always. Yet, once again, something seemed strange.

Their mansion certainly wasn't as spacious or ostentatious as one would expect of the kingdom's most prosperous region, but I quite liked how sturdy and clean it was.

After the count guided me to the reception room, I allowed the guests to be at ease and they raised their heads. That was when I finally discovered what was so unusual about the situation.

About twenty children and their accompanying parents and maids all stared at the prince, as people always did. His black hair effortlessly captured their attention. Yet three of those children, who must have been siblings, were looking at *me*. And they were looking at me the same way the others were looking at the prince. Their accessories were purple, so I assumed they must be the three Stewart children. I realized then that the count and the countess had *also* ignored the prince's hair and were looking at me instead.

Only the Stewarts looked at me. I'd longed for someone to look at me like that ever since the prince was born. People used to look at me and be stunned silent by my breathtaking beauty. I'd missed it so much.

The Stewarts were admiring my beauty. Just that fact alone made my heart swell with joy. They saw me not as the prince's mother, but as *myself*—Rose Alicia Royale.

Afterward, the three siblings gave my son and daughter a simple greeting, then came directly to me. I'd heard the Stewarts' daughter, Emma, was a quiet girl, yet she immediately started gushing my praises without end. Her brothers were on both sides of her trying to keep her from going too far, but she never lost sight of her goal. She just kept laying on the accolades, focusing on things I'd never expect a child to notice.

It was all so adorable and...*strange* that I couldn't stop laughing. I don't know how many years it had been since I'd laughed so wholeheartedly. I hadn't laughed in so long, I thought I might've forgotten *how* to laugh.

One thing was certain:

Emma Stewart was *unbelievably* cute. She was absolutely delightful. I just wanted to pinch her little cheeks.

As a joke, I asked her if she wanted to marry my son, and she responded:

"This might be rude, but I'd rather marry *you*, Lady Rose!"

Goodness, she was adorable. I'd almost think it a waste to let my son have her.

Chapter 16: Squealing Over the Fave

“Lord Arven, where should we put this bird-looking thing?” After they’d finished their hunt and were sorting their haul, one of the young hunters pointed at one of the monsters.

“That’s a cockatrice. It’s venomous, so it goes in the black container. Aah, not with your bare hands!” Normally, Leonard and George would have been on hunting duty, but they had been unable to step away from their tea party with the royal family in attendance. Thus, Arven was filling in for them. Though he hadn’t gone hunting in many years, the Stewart family men had honed their family trade well enough that his muscle memory kicked in and did the job for him.

Though Arven’s skill as a hunter was second to none in the Pallas region, there had been more monsters than usual today, and sorting them took quite a bit of time.

In this world, humans still occupied very little land, and most of the continent was overrun with monsters. For some reason, monsters never appeared around the ocean, so the only place humans tended to settle were on islands or lands protected by a barrier, like the kingdom the Stewarts lived in. However, due to Distortions, monsters still managed to get through the barrier.

In order to lessen the threat as best they could, all the countries on the continent were facing the ocean, and there were no overland routes between them. One had to travel by boat from country to country, as there were no monsters in the sea. Even the area the Stewarts lived in was situated on a peninsula surrounded by the sea. It was founded long, long ago when a mage placed a barrier around what would become the capital.

The Pallas region was on the landside border of the barrier, so monsters regularly appeared. In order to rule these regions, one needed to have the strength to hunt such monsters and a vast amount of knowledge to identify them. While George—who was meant to inherit the region—was strong enough

to hunt, his inability to differentiate between monsters was...troubling. On the other hand, William still had a long way to go on his hunting techniques, but he was doing quite well on the knowledge front.

They were like mirror images of Leonard and Arven. Leonard had never been good at studying, but after their father passed, he learned every little bit there was to know about monsters. Because of his hard work, Arven had been able to study at the royal university far, far away. George would need to study hard like Leonard had if he was going to properly manage the Pallas region.

The Pallas hunters would sort the monsters they hunted into select categories for use. Without fail, the one who would run the final checks and take responsibility for what came after had to be of the landowner's blood. Sorting these monsters poorly could come at the cost of civilian life.

The monsters would be sorted into four categories:

Food

Clothing (furs and skins for leather)

Tools, weapons (bone and horns)

Disposal

If one was careless and sorted a monster with strong toxins into the food category, all the civilians who ate it would die. One had to pay very close attention to cockatrices, as they were so rare and so birdlike, amateur hunters had a tendency to think they should be sorted into food. They were meant to be disposed of, but could only safely be thrown away after the poisons had been removed, so it was a tedious process.

Each season would bring an increase in venomous monsters, or monsters who would catch fire when they touched water, or monsters who would split into new versions of themselves when cut, and it was the hunters' job to remember all of them and categorize them accurately.

After they'd finished sorting the monster parts, Arven left cleanup to the other hunters and headed home. It was the landowner's job to oversee sorting into the correct colored containers, and the other hunters' jobs to bring them to their proper locations. The only monster that required disposal that day was

a single cockatrice. It would have to be labeled with the code for *Detox* and brought to the processing plant. The rest would be taken to be sold in town.

He was of two minds about going home. Though nobody complained about it in front of Arven, he knew their personalities well enough to know they didn't exactly worship the ground the royal family walked on. They didn't care much for power or prestige, so they likely thought this whole situation was a pain. Arven felt terrible for having carelessly been caught by the prince and princess's messenger.

Their mother, the concubine Lady Rose Alicia Royale, didn't have a stellar reputation in the capital. They said she spent money like it grew on trees, and that she was a pompous and selfish woman. Some even said that she was making moves so *her* son would become the king, despite her status as a concubine. He wondered whether his brother's family, who never had to deal with others' ill intent, could handle dealing with someone like that. He'd intended to finish hunting as quickly as he could so he could mediate the situation, but the sun was already setting. A tea party with so many guests from far away would have already started long ago.

Though his heart truly wasn't in it, he rode home on horseback rather than carriage, so he arrived at the manor quite swiftly. He'd only hoped his darling Emma hadn't had her feelings hurt...

But when he opened the door to the family lounge, he found his elder brother and the three siblings each lying on the floor with the cats curled up around them. It had come as a shock the first time he'd seen this, but after a week he'd gotten used to the sight. Sometimes, the family would even lay all sprawled out on their stomachs too. A part of him thought it was shameless and filthy, but apparently they'd had new carpet put in and shoes weren't allowed in this room. He'd mentioned several times that cats didn't tend to cozy up to people so soon after meeting them, but they all ignored him.

Emma was usually near the calico they called Kongming. She seemed more relaxed around the cat than even her beloved uncle, who doted on her endlessly, and she gave the most heartfelt smile to the beast as well. He couldn't help but feel a little jealous, but it was so cute that he let it slide.

George was usually with the black cat, Guan. William was usually with the other calico, Liu, and Leonard and his wife were usually around the white cat, Zhang. William once told Arven that they each had a cat they “stanned,” but he had no idea what “stanning” meant.

“Ah, welcome back, Arven. I take it the hunt went well?” Leonard asked while brushing the white cat’s long fur.

“Indeed it did. We faced a cockatrice today, but the rest of the monsters were relatively commonplace,” Arven responded.

“A cockatrice?” George asked. He might as well have had a giant question mark over his head. Arven made a mental note to drill this sort of thing into his nephew’s head during his stay.

“It’s that bird-looking thing, remember?” William explained. He was right on the money.

“Don’t you remember? You could fight them in Final Nyantasy and Meowgon Quest!” Even Emma knew of the monster for some reason. Arven had no idea what a “Final Nyantasy” or a “Meowgon Quest” was. Emma was using such strange, unintelligible words in such quick succession.

“Oh, right! That chicken with poison, right?” Whatever she’d said, it seemed to get through to George, because he was right about that as well.

“Exactly. Their venom makes it so you can’t use them for food, clothes, or tools. You have to detoxify them and get rid of them. The code for it is twenty-eight!” William prattled on. His memory was something to behold. It was no wonder he had been able to successfully perform those experiments on such a large quantity of silkworms without making a single mistake.

“Huh... Maybe the stuff we learned in video games *could* actually be useful here.” George seemed to have realized...something.

“Oh, I know! I’ll make us some karuta cards! Monster karuta cards! It’ll help us memorize them *and* it’ll be fun!” Emma was starting to say more and more things Arven couldn’t understand, and it was starting to get a bit painful. However, George seemed excited enough, and William seemed on board as well, so he would let it slide...even if it did make him sad.

“So...how did the tea party go?” The family all *seemed* to be in good spirits, but Arven couldn’t help but still be concerned.

“It was the most fun ever!” All three siblings exclaimed with wild enthusiasm. This had been the children’s first time meeting the royal family. It was said the prince and princess’s black hair was exceptionally beautiful, so maybe Lady Rose’s attitude didn’t leave much of an impression on them. Arven looked to their parents to see if they looked worried, but they were nodding along with the siblings, seemingly quite satisfied with the party themselves.

“I never knew anyone could be so beautiful.” If even Leonard was taken in by the prince and princess, Arven could only imagine that Rose must have gotten brazenly angry at him, given her opinionated nature...

“Guess what, Uncle Arven! Lady Rose invited me to come to her house! I’m so excited!” Emma exclaimed.

There wasn’t a girl alive who could resist Prince Edward’s jet-black hair. Arven had heard this time and time again, but to think it would happen to his precious niece...

“I understand being smitten with the prince and his black hair, but Lady Rose has a bad reputation in the capital. It might be prudent to think about that before deciding to marry—”

“What? People don’t like Lady Rose?” William seemed shocked by this revelation.

“Well, no. They say she spends far too much money on her dresses and frivolous things, and those dresses tend to be a bit...revealing. It says a lot about her character...”

Emma began to tremble, making Arven wonder if maybe Lady Rose had picked on her in some way.

“I guess those people in the capital have no idea,” Emma said with a sigh. “The money Lady Rose spends on her beauty is *small potatoes!*”

“Wh-What?”

“She works so hard to maintain her beauty every single day, and her body is

proof of that! You really think she can cover something so ravishing with common *rags*?!”

“Um...”

“She goes out of her way to show us her stunning figure, and people think that’s a *bad* thing?! I’d say that says a lot more about *their* character than hers!”

“Er... Emma? What are you... Huh?”

“Lady Rose is a national treasure! Who in their right mind would skimp on quality for a *national treasure*?!”

When Arven looked around at the family, Leonard, George, and William were all nodding in agreement with Emma’s analysis. It’d been so long since he’d come back, and he found that now he often felt like a stranger in his own home.

“So wait...it’s not the prince’s black hair you’re interested in? It’s Lady Rose?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Oh, Uncle Arven. Of *course* the prince has black hair. He’s royalty.”

Wait, why am I the weird one for thinking this?

“Are you seriously telling me you’ve got *nothing* to say about Lady Rose and her exquisite physique?” Emma was giving Arven a look like he’d just stumbled into a pile of dog poop. He had no idea how he was going to recover from this. The pain... The pain...

In truth, Arven had seen Rose a few times during social events, but she’d always had the prince and princess nearby. To him, their sable locks were something truly awe-inspiring, so he had naturally been more drawn to them than Rose.

“You seriously have no eye for women, Arven.” Now, even Leonard was giving him a look of pity. And it wasn’t just him, but George and William too.

“If this kingdom’s going to be that stuffy, maybe we should make Lady Rose’s dresses ourselves. What do you think, father?” George suggested. It was an absolutely outrageous idea. The cost of making clothes for the king’s concubine was unimaginably high, and Lady Rose was infamous for spending far too much

money as it was. Pallas's silk was the highest quality in the kingdom, which would make the cost even higher.

"That's a lovely idea, George! Let's do it!" Leonard answered.

At least take a second to think about it, Leonard! Arven thought.

"Oh, father! We should make the fabric out of the silk we make in Emma's House! Oh, the thought of getting to embellish such a lovely body is giving me so much inspiration, I just can't stand it!" Emma squealed.

NOOOO NO NO NO! Arven hadn't known this until coming home, but the most treasured, highly valued, and highest quality silk among all the silks produced in the Pallas region was what was produced from the silkworms Emma raised. There was hardly any available. It was exceptionally rare, to the point where it was hardly ever found in general markets. Using it to make entire outfits for Lady Rose would cost an astronomical amount of money.

"Emma...the whole family will be destitute if you start doing that," Arven gingerly advised.

"Huh? Oh, don't worry about that, Uncle Arven. We have a whole bunch in storage. Just between you and me, Joshua's dad told us we should only put out a teensy bit at a time so he could raise the market prices!" Emma grinned, casually dropping what the merchants referred to as "marketing know-how."

All sales of Pallas silk were handled by the Rothschild Company, a merchant group run by Joshua's father. The Stewart family's current prosperity was entirely thanks to this man's expertise. Considering the Stewarts hated that sort of tedious work and were only interested in their artisanry, the kindhearted family needed someone like him around. They'd essentially just left the business up to him.

And so, it was decided from that moment forward that they would make Rose Alicia Royale's dresses entirely out of Emma Silk, the legendary material one could save up their whole lives for and still struggle to afford. What the Stewarts didn't know was that this inspired a revitalization of the dwindling faction of aristocrats in the capital who supported the second prince, and there were now rumors among them that the dresses were all part of a scheme to set Emma up as the second prince's future wife. They thought the Stewarts were

spending exorbitant amounts of money to gain full control of the kingdom, and the concubine Rose would gladly sell out her children out to obtain such riches. The poor prince and princess were nothing more than puppets in the palm of their hands. The Stewarts' reputation was being taken down with Rose, but given that they lived so far away from the capital, they had no clue.

Of course, no matter what terrible rumors were spread about them, the aristocrats couldn't give up Pallas silk. Some of the first prince's faction tried boycotting it, but since exports to other countries had increased, it hardly put a dent in the Stewarts' sales. In fact, they made *more* money from exports, so their profits actually increased. Their income grew as their reputation fell.

Naturally, Joshua's father had a hand in their continued success, but it was also because the Stewart family, who lived like they hadn't a care in the world, needed to amass a substantial amount of money so they could live in the capital by the next year.

Chapter 17: Playing Dress-Up

A month had passed since the prince and princess came to the Stewarts' tea party. From that point on, the Stewarts and the concubine Rose began mingling together with regular frequency.

The three siblings brought a massive amount of luggage to visit Rose's home at Marquess Vallery's manor.

"Goodness, Emma. Even if you *are* staying overnight, that's quite a haul you've brought. What in the world could she have in there?" Rose gazed out the second floor window as all her servants *and* the siblings brought their heaps of luggage into the manor.

"Oh, is Emma here, mommy?" Princess Jadwiga beamed up at her mother. Though she'd been a timid little thing at the tea party and hardly spoken, she'd been playing dress-up with Emma, gotten piggyback rides from George, and was bribed with sweet treats from William so much in the past month that she'd grown quite fond of them. The siblings were happy to engage in childish play, unlike her brother Edward, and thus they were the first people the princess could truly call friends.

"She just got here, Jadwiga. What sort of things do you think we'll do today?" Rose replied with a serene expression that obscured the daily irritation she'd felt for so long. The siblings always told her everything she wanted to hear, and they never showed any signs of awe or reverence toward the prince and princess's raven locks.

The princess used to pay careful attention to her mother's expression before fearfully trying to speak to her, but these days the princess had begun actively coming to her mother for affection. Thus, Rose's relationship with her daughter had even begun to improve.

Every day since that tea party felt blissfully peaceful.

Until suddenly, Rose received a letter telling her to come back to the capital.

The king's orders were absolute, so she began making preparations immediately. Yet even with so much on her plate, she still found time to inform the Stewart family that she'd be returning to the capital the next week. She soon received a reply saying that they wanted to see her one more time before she left, and she responded that they should make it a sleepover since it would be their last visit. It took about three hours by carriage to go to and from each other's manors, so their visits always felt woefully short. Thus, Rose and Jadwiga were both simply buzzing with excitement for the day of the sleepover to arrive.

There was a quiet knock at the door and Rose's butler entered, carrying a massive load of luggage as he invited the siblings in. Bedrooms had already been prepared for the three, so it seemed this luggage was for something other than sleeping.

"Lady Rose. Lord George, Lord William, and Lady Emma of the Stewart family have arrived." Behind the butler were several other servants, who were also carrying luggage.

"Thank you so much for helping carry all that!" Emma exclaimed, as George and William gave their thanks in turn. The children were always certain to thank everyone, from the servants, to the cooks, and even the gardeners.

"You have nothing to thank me for. I am simply doing my job. And now, I shall fetch you all something to drink." Some of the newer servants took pause when the children thanked them, as they were only doing what the job demanded. However, this butler was exceptionally experienced, so he was able to effortlessly reply and make his leave.

"You really say thank you to everyone, huh, Emma?" the princess asked, clearly wanting to know why. After all, that wasn't the sort of behavior one would normally see in a castle, so she must have thought it strange. As the butler said, he was just doing his job.

Emma crouched down to the princess's eye level to respond. "Well, princess, if you don't *tell* people that you're thankful, they might not ever know. Even if someone's only doing their job, if it makes you happy, it's perfectly okay to thank them!"

Jadwiga nodded along, showing Emma she had the princess's full attention.

"Okay! Well then, I want to say thank you to all of you for coming to my sleepover! It makes me really, really happy that you're all here!" Jadwiga exclaimed.

"HNGHCUTE!" William unleashed a truly bizarre sound, which Emma answered with a piercing glare.

"Well, I'm quite happy to be here! Thank you, Princess! And I thank you for having us, Lady Rose!" Then all three siblings finally gave a bow. Early on in their relationship, Rose had told them they didn't need to do all the stuffy formalities with her. However, the siblings insisted they at least pay respects to Rose's beauty, so they were certain to give her a polite bow every time they met.

"So, what shall we play today?" Though on the surface they were "mingling," they really were just playing around. In high society, mingling was all about exchanging information, shows of power, looking down on one another, or picking on those deemed weaker than yourself, but the siblings hadn't shown any signs of caring about any of that for the entire month they'd known Rose.

What most aristocrats would consider "play" was enjoying a fancy spot of tea out on the lake, or calling a jeweler to their house and picking out accessories, or showing off their own illustrious collections, but the siblings preferred playing hide-and-seek or tag with Jadwiga instead.

"With your permission, I think we should..." Emma began.

"Emma, what have I always said once you've finished your bowing?" Rose couldn't stand such stiff formalities from the children.

"Ack, I'm sorry! You wanted us to talk like friends!" Even though the siblings were from a count's family, they were terrible at formal speech. They tried to make up for it by always speaking in exaggeratedly formal ways, so Rose had told them to speak normally the last time they played house together.

Emma cleared her throat and corrected herself. "So, I was thinking we could play dress-up today, Rosie!" Emma seemed to be a lot less nervous now that she'd been given permission to speak more casually. She was practically brimming with life now.

“Well, I suppose I should get us a doll or two, shouldn’t I?”

“No, there won’t be any need for that!” William replied as he dug some caramels out of his pocket to give to Jadwiga.

“Exactly. *You’re* going to be the one we dress up today, Rosie!” George continued as he put the princess on his lap.

“I-I am?” Rose asked, clearly confused.

The siblings gave each other a knowing look and opened all the luggage they’d brought with them.

“Oh, my goodness!”

“Wow! It’s all dresses! So pretty!” Neither Rose nor Jadwiga could contain their wonderment. There were dresses of every color spilling out of the luggage.

“I was hoping we’d be able to make some more, but once we heard you had to go back to the capital, I just gathered up all the stuff we’d already finished,” Emma said, holding up a dress to show Rose. Since Rose was taller than her, Emma stood on some of her luggage so she could hold it up to Rose’s shoulders.

“Wow, you look so pretty, mommy!” Jadwiga exclaimed excitedly.

The dress was unbelievably soft against Rose’s skin. It was a simple, dark blue dress that was less revealing than what she’d normally wear, but the fabric was far silkier than anything she’d ever worn.

“What fabric have you used for this?”

“Oh, it’s Emma Silk!” George answered nonchalantly.

Emma Silk?!

The same Emma Silk that was named after the count’s beloved daughter, that’s said to be worth even more than gold itself?! The same Emma Silk that’s hardly ever seen in the markets, and the only way to get your hands on it is to have a personal connection with the Pallas region’s Rothschild Company? The same Emma Silk that’s so expensive it’s only used for ribbons, accessories, and small portions of dresses?!

“Gosh, blue looks great on you, Rosie! You’re the spitting image of an intellectual beauty, huh?” Though Rose was trembling down to her fingertips after touching the fabric, Emma was still holding it up against her and praising her without a care in the world. George and William were nodding their heads and opening even more of their luggage.

Rose kept trying to speak, but no words would come out. Now that she got a good look at it, the dress didn’t just have a *section* made of Emma Silk. The entire thing was made of it. *You could probably buy an entire manor with this dress, couldn’t you?*

“William!” Emma called, then threw the blue dress over to him.

Is she out of her mind?!

“Okay, now try my favorite dress!” George said, tossing a red dress over to Emma. She caught it with ease and held it up to Rose again. The fabric was just as soft as the first dress.

Is this one made of Emma Silk too? Are these children simply mad?!

Out of the corner of her eye, Rose caught William taking the blue dress and balling it up to shove it into one of their trunks.

“William, you’re going to ruin the dress!” Rose shouted instinctively. The moment she shouted, her hand brushed up against the red dress and her heart nearly stopped. She thanked her lucky stars that she hadn’t been wearing a ring.

“Oh, Rosie! Emma Silk doesn’t wrinkle. Every silk thread is super strong, so you can be as rough as you want with it!” Emma beamed at her.

Jadwiga had no idea the significance of Emma Silk, so she was just having a grand old time. “Mommy, the red looks pretty on you too!”

The red dress was embroidered with flowers of elaborate black silk thread, and while Rose initially thought it was modest like the blue dress, she then noticed it had slits that went all the way up to her hips, giving a peek of her legs with every step.

“Let’s do my favorite next, sis!” William said, handing over a lemon colored

dress. There were vivid green beads sewn onto this one, making it look like ivy was coiled around it. It looked modest enough from the front, but it had a bold open back where the only thing covering her bare skin was the beads that brought the fabric together. This dress, with its contrasting front and back, was also made with the same Emma Silk.

“This one’s pretty too!” Jadwiga was spellbound by the way the beads sparkled in the light.

“Okay, so now it’s time to see you actually wear these!” Emma said, handing Rose’s maid the dresses in question. The two brothers excused themselves to go spend some time with the prince, who was in the library, while Rose changed.

The poor maid who’d taken the dresses into her hands was trembling. “L-Lady Rose, I’m too scared to hold dresses of such caliber!” She entreated Rose with tears in her eyes.

To tell the truth, Rose was scared to wear the dresses herself. While she couldn’t deny how lovely they were, the thought of how much she’d have to pay if anything were to happen to them made her shudder.

“Emma... I don’t know if I can wear these.”

“Do you not like them?” Emma asked despondently.

“It’s not that! They’re quite lovely, but I wouldn’t be able to afford paying you back if they were to get damaged or dirtied.” As shameful as it was to admit as the royal concubine, Emma Silk really was just that valuable.

Emma seemed a bit puzzled and she tilted her head in thought. “Oh! No no no, these dresses are all for you, Lady Rose! We’re giving them to you as a gift! You can damage or dirty them as much as you want and you won’t have to pay us anything! And Emma Silk is really durable, so you don’t have to worry about damage anyway.”

“A-A gift? For me?” There were at least twenty more dresses she hadn’t seen yet. They were *all* for her? “I-I simply couldn’t! These are far too valuable!” Even if she *was* known for throwing her money around, she had the good sense not to accept something *this* extravagant. There was nothing she could possibly

repay them with that could equal their value.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’m the one who designed all these dresses. George did the accessories and William did the beading. Our family did everything from start to finish, so there’s no cost of labor or anything. Us Stewarts start helping out with the family business from the moment we’re mature enough to learn, so we know the whole process.”

To be able to make twenty dresses in such a short period of time was a feat in and of itself, but Rose’s beauty had filled the whole family with inspiration, triggering an indescribable wave of enthusiasm that led them to finishing the garments lickety-split. The family sat together talking about Rose the whole time as they made quick work of every dress.

“Besides, we sized the dresses just for you, so they wouldn’t fit anyone else.”

“Even the sizes...?” One would be hard-pressed to find someone with a figure like Rose’s. Not to mention, Rose couldn’t recall Emma ever measuring her.

“I’ve pretty much just been making clothes and doing careful observations of bugs since I was super little, so I can tell someone’s size just by looking at them!” This was a special ability of hers she developed from combining the Stewart family’s business and her hobbies, but she never found any use for it other than surprising the servants with clothes on their birthdays.

This child’s spacey expression truly belies skill.

The designs and the stitchwork could put even the pros to shame, and making dresses *required* one to do special measurements in all sorts of places. Rose simply couldn’t believe anyone could make a dress just by observation alone.

“Y-Yes, well...you know how expensive this fabric is, don’t you, Emma?” That was really the crux of the problem for Rose.

“Oh, the Emma Silk? So you know how I love bugs? Well, I used my uncle’s research to improve our silk production, and that’s how we made it. So we actually have a whole bunch at our house. Problem is, our merchants don’t want to sell too much of it at once, so it’s just kinda piling up... It’d actually help us a lot if you could take it off our hands.”

“Wow, you made that silk yourself, Emma?” Jadwiga piped up to join the

conversation after having been quietly listening to most of the discussion.

“That’s right! Silk is made from the cocoons of little bugs called silkworms. I’ve always loved bugs so much, it was all I’d ever think about. Who knows what people might’ve thought of me if I wasn’t born a Stewart!” Emma laughed.

Someone really needs to tell her that most people still find her obsession rather strange...

However, she was certainly a product of her environment. Growing up in such an exceptional household, Emma couldn’t have turned out any other way. It would be very hard to raise an ordinary aristocrat to grow up the way Emma had. Rose was struck with admiration for how well the Stewarts had managed to cultivate their children’s talents.

“But anyway, I’d appreciate you keeping all that a secret,” Emma said with a wink. “We’re going to live in the capital next year, and we want to make it as normal as possible. Oh, and the merchant company said it was okay for us to use our stash of Emma Silk as long as we’re only making dresses for *you*, Lady Rose, so we’d be really, really happy if you would wear them!”

“Meg... I’d like to wear the dresses after all.” Rose had made up her mind, and she gave her still quivering maid the order. The siblings had gone through all this trouble for her, so it would be an insult not to honor their effort by wearing the dresses. She’d have to remind Meg and Jadwiga to keep everything Emma told her a secret later.

That day, the siblings watched with the greatest adulation as Rose put on a one-person fashion show for them. She wore every single dress they made for her. Even those of the marquess’s household, who should have been quite used to Rose’s beauty, were awestruck to the point of forgetting all about the prince and princess. The priceless, high-quality fabric brought out the best in Rose. Even the less revealing outfits were sexier than one might have expected, and the more revealing ones emphasized the allure of her skin. When Rose wore these dresses, they were unmistakably *her* dresses, for she was the only one who could truly make them sparkle.

Chapter 18: The Brothers and the Prince

While Rose was getting changed, George and William wandered to the library. It was far larger than the Stewarts' library, boasting a vast collection covering a wide variety of subjects. They found the prince right away and gave him a bow.

"You're quite studious, aren't you, Prince Edward?" George couldn't stand studying, so he had nothing but respect for the young prince. Just looking at the titles of the thick books stacked in front of the prince made the difficulty of the subjects clear.

Edward glanced up from his book and sighed. "You're here again today?"

Ever since the tea party, the Stewarts came over what seemed like every week. His mother wouldn't stop gushing over them, Jadwiga wouldn't stop fawning over them, and even the servants had started to take a liking to them. Edward thought they were all imbeciles for falling for such obvious attempts to curry favor with the royal family.

What his family *should have* been worried about at the moment was what their standing would be like in the capital. They'd managed to get by until now because the king was so doting on their family, but Rose was now over thirty and desperately trying to maintain her youth. Day in and day out, all she did was focus on her looks. Didn't she have anything better to do with her time? When Edward thought about the things they called her in the capital, it gave him a splitting headache.

He didn't want to become the king, nor did he think he was capable of becoming the king. The firstborn prince was five years older than him, quick of wit, and upstanding in character. As the second-born prince, he had to learn as much as he could for his country's sake. The boys in front of him, sons of a wealthy count, were nowhere near his level.

"We sure are! We brought a bunch of dresses we made for Lady Rose. She's trying them on right now. Do you want to come see when she's all done? I just know she's gonna look *amazing*. My sister's designs always get rave reviews."

William smiled gently, trying his best to talk up both the dresses and his sister at the same time.

The Stewarts were obviously trying to get Edward to marry Emma. He was disgusted by their clear attempts at flattery.

“Sorry, but I’m busy. I don’t have time to mess around.” Though it might have sounded a bit harsh, he hoped it would get the message across that he wouldn’t be fooled like the others. Not to mention, he had to finish the assignment from his tutor by the end of the day and he couldn’t find the book he needed, so he was already quite annoyed.

“Would you like me to help you?”

“It’s not something you can help with.” Edward shut William down in an instant. He didn’t know exactly how old William was, but the boy was definitely younger than him.

“Your Highness, I know William looks quite young, but he’s actually even smarter than I am. It couldn’t hurt to let him look, right?” The older brother happily advocated for his little brother, but it just demonstrated how little pride he had.

Edward tossed his homework over to William. If he thought he was so smart, he may as well just prove it. Edward couldn’t understand why his tutor was asking him to look up old laws or whatever anyway. He couldn’t even find a single document on the subject.

William looked the homework up and down, then sat in thought for a moment. It made sense that he’d be stumped. A little kid couldn’t possibly understand such a complex question.

“So, I think your homework’s wrong. You can’t find any supporting information on it, can you?” William gave Edward a pitying look and pointed to the problem at hand. “This law wasn’t enacted yet in the royal year 256. It didn’t go into effect until the localized barrier crisis of 326.”

“What?”

“A localized barrier crisis... That’s horrifying.” George’s expression was suddenly quite grave.

When no mages appeared for long periods of time and the barrier couldn't be repaired or reinforced, Distortions in the barrier could occur anywhere within the border, causing a hole to open in that localized area. This phenomenon was known as a localized barrier crisis.

Though regions along the border of the barrier had always had powerful hunters on hand, in the year 326, it hadn't been unusual for more inland regions to have no hunters at all. The crisis that year occurred near the middle of the kingdom in a region that had never had to worry about monsters before. It had no hunters, and the crisis happened so suddenly that the casualties were unfathomable. It was one of the greatest tragedies in history.

Given that the region wasn't permitted to have a military, there wasn't a soul in the region who knew the first thing about combat. It took three days for the nearest hunters to reach the nexus, during which time the citizens were overrun by monsters. Once the hunters had located the hole, they began constructing a wall around it while simultaneously eliminating all the monsters that had leaked through. There were only ten hunters fighting the monsters off, and as a consequence, over two hundred lives were lost in the region.

Disposing of monsters had always been a difficult process, as one wrong move could cause the corpse to explode, or to summon more of its kind, or to curse whoever felled it. As such, a major cause of death during the incident was due to collateral damage.

After the disaster, the Six Precepts for Regional Monster Subjugation (the law that Edward had been asked to study) was created.

The lord of a region must have baseline knowledge about monsters.

A manual describing emergency procedures in the event of a crisis must be drafted and presented to the government for authorization.

All men in the lord's family must be formally educated on monsters and how to hunt them at the royal academy. They must have both the knowledge and power to defeat monsters, and also pass an exam proving their understanding.

In the event of a localized barrier crisis, lords of regions on the border must proactively lend their aid and cooperate with other regions.

Lords of regions on the border of the barrier must regularly accept hunters from regions where monsters aren't present and train them in the art of monster slaying.

Any regions where monsters appear with more frequency will have lower taxes.

"There hasn't been a mage in many years, so the barrier hasn't been reinforced in a while. I think whoever gave you this assignment wanted you to be aware of what measures have been put in place since that tragic localized barrier crisis." So saying this, William handed the prince a thick book that was precisely what he needed to complete his assignment.

The prince was already shocked enough, but after scanning its pages, he was even more surprised. The tome was filled with the baseline knowledge a lord would need to know about monsters—and it was *thick*. What was more, the book's subtitle was Volume One.

"The basics of monster hunting and disposal are all contained in volumes one through six, since those contain the sorts of monsters you'll see during a barrier crisis," William happily explained.

With a look of annoyance, George expanded on William's point with something even more outrageous: "People who live on the border of the barrier like us tend to get a wider breadth of monster types, so we have an unspoken rule that we all should learn everything from volumes one through thirty-two. That being said, it's not like the books have every monster ever in them, so to compensate, it's up to the lord of the region to pass down the knowledge of the previous lords and then to pass whatever knowledge he gains to the next generation."

Despite the massive effort expended by the lords of these remote regions, all they received in return was a measly tax reduction. After this law was enacted, countless lords of these border regions buckled under the pressure, and it wasn't as though a replacement was readily available; the usual routine was for a neighboring lord to serve both regions instead. That was why most of the regions around the border tended to be so vast.

For generations after the law was enacted, the Stewart family had it firmly

drilled into them that they must intentionally seek out marriage candidates who were exceptionally intelligent or powerful warriors. Whether or not her intelligence had been a factor in her marriage to Leonard, the matriarch Melsa had been at the top of her class. One of the beloved family legends was how Leonard had gotten down on his hands and knees to beg Melsa for her hand in marriage.

“I...had no idea,” the prince whispered. He’d thought those in the royal family like himself had it harder than anyone else in the country. However, dedicating day and night to the study of negotiation with foreign countries, people skills, or the art of governing never put his life at risk. He’d heard George was already taking part in monster hunts, yet when Edward imagined himself fighting any of the horrifying beasts depicted in his book day after day, it made his legs tremble. Monsters were practically nonexistent in the capital or Vallery region. But every last page of the book in front of him demonstrated just how horrifying each monster was.

“Does it...not scare you to have to fight these horrifying things?” Edward asked in full sincerity.

“I mean, I’m pretty athletic and stuff, so...to be honest, I find it harder to be cooped up in a library reading books all day like you are, Your Highness,” George answered with a pitying laugh. Everyone had their good and bad points. William was all brains and no brawn. Emma was assertive and imaginative, but had no common sense. “But I think I lucked out because my siblings can pick up the slack on whatever I struggle with. There’s only so much you can do on your own, you know?” Even his father, Leonard, struggled to retain everything he needed to know about monsters. He’d said it was so difficult, he couldn’t have done it without Melsa’s support.

“Oh, George...” William was truly touched. Normally, he was just the oft-ignored youngest child, but here George was praising him right in front of the prince of the kingdom, telling him just how much he was needed.

Edward was starting to realize how he’d misjudged the Stewarts. George was a dependable man with the strength of character to recognize his little brother and sister’s strengths, while also acknowledging his own weaknesses. William was able to function as a foundational support for his older siblings, using his

exceptional knowledge base unpretentiously to fulfill his role in the family. But what about Emma?

“So what role does your little sister play for you two? What sort of person is she?” This was the first time the prince had ever taken an interest in other people.

“Emma’s, uh...well, she’s cute. Especially when she smiles.” George seemed rather hesitant to answer. From their perspective, Emma was a weirdo. Where other people went right, she’d turn left. Then, after she’d done something completely absurd, it’d somehow turn out to be a shortcut to where she needed to go after all. Even her obsession with bugs was a major contribution to the Stewart family being lifted out of financial ruin. But he couldn’t exactly tell the prince that his little sister was an aristocratic lady with a preoccupation with bugs. His answer was faulty, but at least it was true. His sister *was* quite cute. This was the curse the Stewart family men were plagued by.

George gave William a pleading look.

“U-Um, I just realized this at our tea parties and stuff, but Emma’s super popular too! One smile is all it takes to make everyone fall head over heels for her!” William was realizing just how hard it was to praise his sister in a socially acceptable way. Sure, her bug expertise made her a certified genius, but he couldn’t say that about a high-class *lady*. Her huge appetite wasn’t exactly a good thing, and she was especially harsh on William, so he couldn’t call her “kindly” either.

“So...would you say she would make a good wife for me?” Edward dropped a bomb of a question, very clearly misunderstanding the brothers’ attempts at covering for her.

Both brothers shouted in unison, “ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“I want to keep Emma as close to me as possible!” *Because it’s bad for my heart not knowing what she might get up to!* “I couldn’t possibly let her marry into the royal family!” *Because who knows what might happen to this kingdom if she did?!*

“George is right! I wouldn’t want her to be away from our family either!” *She’s gonna cover the whole kingdom in bugs!*

The brothers finished their rant simultaneously, “We couldn’t possibly let you marry her!” *We can’t let her take any more victims!* Both of them seemed incredibly worked up about this, and while their impassioned speech shocked the prince, his previous disinterest was replaced by an even stronger curiosity. Emma’s brothers were protecting her like they were her knights. The prince felt like an outsider trying to steal their precious princess away.

Just then, they heard Rose’s voice from the entrance of the library. “Goodness gracious, you two sure love little Emma, don’t you?”

The three turned to find her in a classy blue dress. Unlike her usual fare, all areas she usually left exposed were fully covered, yet the way the dress clung to her body so snugly made her look more alluring than ever before. It was the first time Edward had ever thought his mother looked beautiful. *William and George said Emma had designed that dress, didn’t they?*

Jadwiga, who had tagged along with Rose, pulled on Edward’s sleeve. “Doesn’t mommy look pretty, Edward?”

Edward nearly nodded before he caught himself, then held his tongue out of sheer embarrassment.

“Oh, brother dearest! You have to tell people what you’re thinking or they’ll never know! They’ll never, ever know!” Jadwiga parroted Emma’s earlier words to scold Edward. Somehow, being admonished by the little girl made him honestly think that she might be right on this occasion.

“Erm...that dress looks really nice on you, mother. I was quite taken by how beautiful you look.” Edward couldn’t look his mother in the eye as he spoke, but her lack of response made him look up to see her reaction.

His extraordinarily strong-willed mother...had been moved to tears. Then, with all the joy in the world, she went in for a hug. He hadn’t been embraced like this in so many years, and it made him wonder why he’d been so stubbornly against her for so long. He was utterly ashamed. He’d given this adorable woman—who was overjoyed simply by being called beautiful—the cold shoulder for so very long.

I’m going to become a knight. That way, I can protect my mother and Jadwiga the way George and William protect their family. If the king’s favor ever waned,

the prince might be the only one left who *could* protect them.

Then, the prince caught a glimpse over his mother's shoulder at Emma, who was grinning ear to ear—a heartfelt smile from the Stewart family princess.

There was no way a smile like that could be legal. It was unreasonably adorable. A passing thought flashed through the prince's mind: *It's the prince's job to steal the princess away.* He could feel his face flushing red in an instant. There were two powerful knights right there before her, but all he could think about was how he wanted to make that smile his own.

George and William both knew immediately that the prince had fallen for Emma the second he saw her smile. Their distress was almost palpable.

How does this keep happening, sis? You haven't even talked to him yet, have you?! William thought.

If George could have groaned, he would have. *Emma, you can not learn that this library has all fifteen volumes of the bug encyclopedia in here right now. And put that smile away unless you want even more victims of your charm!*

Chapter 19: The Little Detectives and the Unthinkable Creature

The next day, they all decided to play hide-and-seek at Jadwiga's request. They'd been given the whole wide area of the Vallery Manor to hide in, so it wasn't exactly an easy task for her to find them. To kill time, Emma started thinking back to her bath the previous night.

Since the sleepover was such a special occasion, Rose decided to let the siblings use their hot spring. It was a rarity in this kingdom to have a free-flowing hot spring, so the natural spring was her pride and joy.

Rose herself said the hot spring was great for the skin. It was so clear and gentle, yet it really did leave one feeling silky smooth. Rose, Jadwiga, and Emma all got in together. The bath was so wide that even if they all stretched out, there was enough freedom to move around.

And then there was the matter of Minato's inner beauty sensor beeping off the charts again.

There was plenty one couldn't see when Rose was clothed, but now the only thing keeping Emma from seeing her in her full glory was the steam.

Lady Rose... You're incredible! Your tummy is so beautiful! Your belly button is a perfect vertical line! Your buttocks are so toned! And most important are those big beautiful boobies of yours! They're huge and such a perfect shape! How much do they even weigh?! How are they not sagging?!

There was only a wall between the girls' and boys' baths, so Emma tried to keep her voice down while praising Rose's beauty so Edward, William, and George wouldn't hear.

"Rosie, there's not a single part of you that isn't stunning! You're perfect in every way!" It would be absurd to think Emma was jealous. The only thing on her mind was thanking Rose for the eye candy.

Rose swam through the water to sit near Emma, and a mischievous grin rose

on her face.

“Do you want to touch them?”

It was entirely obvious *where* Rose was offering.

“A-Are you sure?!” Emma’s eyes nearly popped out of her skull.

Rose gave a most captivating chuckle and nodded her assent, at which Emma’s hand *instinctively* was drawn right to Rose’s chest.

“Whoa... WHOA!” So soft! So squooshy! Her breast was so soft, yet pliable. *What is this? How could this be?! I’ve never touched something like this before! This sensation is all too new!*

This size was something she’d never even seen in her past life. She was so utterly fixated on it, yet sadness was starting to encroach upon her. God really played favorites and it just wasn’t fair.

“I wanna play too!” Jadwiga must have thought they were just playing around, so she hugged Emma from behind. After a quick squeeze, Jadwiga seemed a bit surprised, then gave her another poke.

“Aaah, Jadwi! That tickles!”

“Mommy! Emma’s skin is soooo smooth!”

“Oh, is it? Let me have a feel!”

Jadwiga and Rose both closed in on Emma.

“Wait, agh! Not there! *Not there!*” Emma cried in agony as they focused their two-person assault on her ticklish sides. While Jadwiga giggled playfully the whole time, Rose’s expression grew deathly serious.

“Emma...how is your skin so smooth? I just want to keep touching it even if it detracts from the hot spring’s effects. *How did you get your skin so smooth?*”

“Rosie, please keep your voice down! EEK! Aah, not there! Stop! Eeek! No more!” Rose was now inspecting the bottoms of her feet, even though Emma was way too young to be worrying about her heels being dried out. Apparently, Minato wasn’t the only one with a built-in beauty sensor.

“Emma, you *must* tell me your secret.” Rose’s sudden command made Emma

panic a bit. *Don't you have enough, Lady Rose? You can't seriously be asking an eleven-year-old girl for beauty tips!*

The pressure was getting to her, so she thought very seriously about the matter. There was only one thing she could think of: "To retrieve the silk from the silk cocoons, we have to soak them in water. Water's a pretty precious commodity in the Pallas region, though, so I usually just use that same stuff for my baths. Maybe...that's why?"

The Pallas region got most of its water from underground sources. It didn't have many large rivers or ponds, so they had to draw water from wells. Thus, people tended to use it sparingly. The water they used in Emma's House was high-quality water they'd purchased from other regions, and it didn't exactly come cheap. The family felt it'd be a waste to only use it for silkworms, so they reused it in the manor. It meant the servants didn't have to draw as much water from the well, so they were quite happy with the arrangement.

Emma figured the protein or whatever from the cocoons must have dissolved into the water, and maybe that had some positive effects on skin or something. Unfortunately, there wasn't really a way to test the chemical components of water in this world, so she didn't have any conclusive proof.

"So silk is good for skin?" Rose's single-minded pursuit of beauty had her latching onto this concept.

"Indeed. In fact, I would highly recommend silk sleepwear as well! I brought a set we made for you with me today, so if it is to your liking, then it would be my honor to send you as many as you please in the capital!" The pressure still hadn't let up, causing Emma to revert back to formal speech in her nervousness.

"Oh, Emma! You're simply the best!"

Silk was a highly valuable material, so it was normally only used for fancy clothes like party dresses. However, the Stewart family experimented with silk frequently (with Emma Silk as just one example), so they had amassed quite a bit. Being able to use their stock for something was a boon for the Stewarts as well. Not to mention, Rose had an eye for all things beautiful, so she would play the part of quality monitor expertly. It was a win-win no matter how one looked

at it.

Relaxing in a warm bath with the most stunning Lady Rose right before her eyes... Emma felt like it was the greatest night one could have asked for.

“—ma... Emma! *EMMA!*”

Emma was snapped out of her reverie by Jadwiga’s voice.

“Whoops, sorry about that, Jadwi. I was totally lost in my thoughts. Aw, darn! I guess you found me!” She’d managed to hide herself well enough, but gotten carried away fantasizing about Rose’s bountiful bosom. Jadwiga managed to find her while she was distracted.

“You’re the last one! Lord George and Lord William and mommy are all in the yard now! So what’s next? What are we gonna play next?” Jadwiga was giddily preparing for the next activity with no signs of being tired yet, even though they’d been playing all morning. She took Emma’s hand and the two of them went out to the yard, where they found Prince Edward casually chatting with George and William. He’d been with his tutor all morning, so they hadn’t seen him yet today.

Emma would never cease being impressed by her brothers’ communication skills, as they’d become friends with the prince before she even knew it.

“Brother dearest!” Jadwiga said, rushing toward Edward. She hadn’t let go of Emma’s hand, so Emma had to hurry along after her as well. Once she reached the prince, she gave a courteous bow.

“There’s no need for such formality. Please, you can treat me the way you treat my family,” Edward said.

Emma had hardly seen him during the many times she’d been by, so she’d started to wonder if he’d been avoiding them, but apparently it was all in her head. Or maybe Big Brother George and Compassionate Little William just managed to win him over.

“Ah, of course. Um, are you feeling any better today, Your Highness?” His face had been bright red when he came out of the bath the previous night. Emma was worried, as kids his age had a tendency to get lightheaded in the bath much more easily. But just as she asked, his face suddenly turned bright red again.

“Your Highness! Are you okay?” Emma reached out to try to support him.

“I-I’m fine! J-Just...don’t touch me, okay?!” The prince grew even redder and backed away from her raised hand. She was glad to hear he was okay, but she wondered if he might possibly have some kind of strange illness.

While it seemed the prince had come to accept George and William, Emma was shocked to find that he hadn’t let her in yet. She supposed it was only natural since they hadn’t gotten the chance to talk much.

George and William both gave the prince a look of utter, patent pity, while Rose looked on at the bittersweet scene grinning ear to ear.

“I know! Let’s play house next! Brother Edward can be the daddy and Emma can be the mommy! And they just got married!” Jadwiga was a five-year-old who could already read the room.

“WHA?!” The prince’s face *grew even redder*. Emma didn’t even know people’s faces could *get* that red.

“Then George and I can be the married couple next door! And William and Jadwiga will be our darling little children!” Rose playfully jumped onto Jadwiga’s idea.

“Oh, are you going to be playing with us too, Your Highness?” Emma asked, thinking it quite unusual for him. However, she found he was crouching down and shuddering when she looked at him.

“I-I’m married...to Emma?! Emma’s going to be...my wife?!” He was muttering something, but Emma couldn’t quite make it out.

“Your Highness? Are you okay?” Emma probed.

“Emma! We’re supposed to be playing house now!” Jadwiga was in full play mode now, and she was *especially* strict when it came to playing house.

Right, I need to get serious about this! Emma thought. Since her “husband” seemed to be feeling unwell, it was her job as his wife to look after him.

“Darling, why don’t you lie down for a bit?” So saying, Emma had the prince lay down on the lawn. She was so nervous that she might get arrested for disrespecting the prince on this one. *Who ever thought playing house could be*

such a heart-pounder? At the very least, she thought she should keep his head off the ground, so she let him use her lap as a pillow.

“Ngwhoa?!” The prince made an odd sound, then suddenly went stone stiff. He didn’t move a single muscle.

“Oh, deary me.” Rose giggled, checking to make sure her son was okay.

George and William seemed to be agonizing over the whole affair.

“It’s like Emma doesn’t even realize she comes off as a perfect angel!”

“George...she’s no angel. She’s a devil. A devil who lures people in with promises of heaven while she drags them *straight to hell!*”

In all this chaos, Jadwiga approached Emma and the prince with a curious expression.

“Oh no...I think our neighbor died.” With that single question from Jadwiga, their peaceful little game turned into a murder mystery.

George followed her lead right away. “Gasp! Is that almonds I smell? It must be cyanide!”

They could all practically hear the Paw and Order theme playing in the background.



The supposedly happy newlywed had suddenly become a widow, and all present turned their suspicions toward her. Emma needed to get on the ball, and fast.

“H-How could you all! Do you really think I would kill my beloved husband?!”

(The prince twitched at the sound of Emma calling him her beloved husband, but he was supposed to be dead so they all ignored him.)

“But *you’re* the only one who could have poisoned him! You must have mixed it in with his dinner!” Rose had *really* gotten into this scenario.

“The pr—I mean, Edward surely has quite a large insurance policy. Knowing how much of a money grubber Mina—I mean, Emma is, it’s certainly possible!” George was merciless in his follow-up.

Uh...did I do something to George in my previous life to deserve this?

“Oh, how terrible! So Emma never really loved Edward after all?” Rose’s acting was getting more dramatic by the second.

(The prince twitched again, but everyone ignored him.)

“Hold it right there!”

“Yeah, hold it right there!”

William and Jadwiga interjected.

“We’ll be the ones to solve this tragedy!”

“Yeah, we’ll be the ones to solve this *tagerdy*!”

Their innocent game of house had suddenly become a whodunit, and now they had tiny little detectives ready to solve it.

“After all! Though I have the body of a child, I have the brain of...”

“A NEET?” George and Emma both interrupted William’s snappy catchphrase.

“Ugh, c’mon! Does ‘part-timer’ mean nothing to you two?!” William whined, the wind taken out of his sails. Jadwiga asking William what NEET meant was the final blow.

“Well, I don’t exactly know what you’re all talking about, but it sounds like

William and Jadwiga believe the murderer is someone else,” Rose said in an attempt to get them back on track.

“Y-Yeah... The real murderer...is among us!” William got back in his groove again and continued the usual detective trope.

“I-It can’t be! A locked-room murder?!” George gasped, adding more mystery tropes for fun.

You do realize we’re all outside, right, George? Anyway, if we’re playing detective now, shouldn’t we find a cliff or something for the finale? Emma looked around to find something suitable, but obviously there was nothing terribly useful in the yard.

“Lord Geo—I mean, daddy, why did you seem to think it was *poisoning* that killed him?”

Oh right, that was the plot. Jadwiga was always very serious about her playtime, so she faithfully kept to the storyline as she questioned George.

“I smelled almonds on Edward. So clearly, the killer must have used cyanide! Meaning Emma must have mixed it in with his food!” George insisted. He seemed to have only just remembered the plotline himself.

“Interesting... It seems my bro—I mean, my father has gotten a bit confused,” William said, eyes sparkling with excitement. “You see, many thrillers like to talk about cyanide smelling like almonds, but it actually only smells like almonds *before* they’ve been harvested. You’ve never smelled almonds before they’ve been harvested, have you?”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Not to mention,” William continued, “even if you were to mix enough cyanide into someone’s food to kill them, the cyanide would be too intensely corrosive for them to finish their meal!”

“Y-Yes, but Edward loved Emma very much!” (The prince twitched again at George’s flustered excuse, but everyone ignored him again.) “No matter how terrible his wife’s cooking might have been, he would have powered through it with the power of love!”

Dude, I'm not that bad at cooking...

“George is right! Edward loved little Emma so very much, he would have eaten every last bite, no matter how painful it was!” Rose added dramatically.

“I seriously don’t want to be with someone who would power through *cyanide* for me,” Emma said. She felt bad for refuting Rose, but Emma didn’t want to marry someone who was such a tryhard. She just wanted someone who’d eat the food because it was *good*.

More importantly, the prince’s twitching was starting to get too frequent to ignore at that point.

“Well, Emma didn’t love Edward in the first place! So she’s got a motive for it and everything!” George’s nervousness was awfully suspicious.

“Father...I think it’s about time you come clean. *You* killed him, didn’t you?” William was finally starting to bring the mystery to its climax.

“Wh-What?! But I have no motive!” George shouted.

“Exactly! He’s just her neighbor!” Rose supported George, playing her part of dutiful wife perfectly.

And here came the explosive reveal: “Father. You had connections to the person Emma was having an affair with, didn’t you?”

When the heck did I become a cheater? When was that established? Oh, c’mon, George! Don’t make such an obvious “busted” pose!

“That’s right. She was cheating with *your* best friend. And you’re the one who introduced her to him,” William continued.

“H-How do you know that?!”

Who the heck is this best friend supposed to be?!

“Your friend was so very rich. And he told you that if you introduced the two of them, he would make all your debts go away, didn’t he?” William pressed.

“H-How did you—”

“Not to mention, you knew what a money grubber Mina—I mean, Emma is. I’m sure you thought that if you could match her with your wealthy friend, you

might be rewarded handsomely.”

“Nngh...”

Okay, seriously, what did Minato do to deserve this kinda ire from these two? Okay, I can think of several occasions, but why are they taking it out on me now?

“Certainly, Edward was quite rich as well. And he likely had a large insurance policy to boot. However, your best friend was wealthy beyond reason. An affair with him would be a far more tempting prospect than a measly *insurance policy* for Emma. She wouldn’t have any reason to kill her husband,” William reasoned.

Good lord, what kinda scumbag am I?!

(The prince’s twitching was so intense, it was getting much harder to ignore.)

“But you have no proof! There’s no proof I have a friend like that!” George retorted.

“Oh, but you do. A man with brown hair and freckles...”

“Are you talking about Joshuaaaa?!” George screamed dramatically.

Holy cow, no need to go all Super Stray-in on us, George!

“Now hold on a second! Who’s Joshua?!” Suddenly, the corpse...or rather, the prince sat up. Jadwiga coolly admonished Edward for not playing dead properly.

Not even the prince is safe from Jadwiga’s playtime admonishments, huh?

Emma wondered if she should still try looking for a cliff to end their little murder mystery with. She started glancing about their surroundings...and saw something impossible.

“George, look!” Emma shrieked. This was too much of an emergency to do much else.

“Emma, you have to follow the...” Just as Jadwiga started scolding her, Emma pulled the girl behind her to shield her.

Just behind George, a hole about three centimeters wide had opened up. That was the only way to describe the thing floating in the air. And from it, a slimy

liquid began seeping through.

They had never seen something like this before...but they knew. It was very likely a localized barrier crisis.

Chapter 20: Localized Barrier Crisis

It really was a tiny hole. The only reason Emma could see it was because liquid happened to be streaming out of it. That fluid dripped onto the ground, but rather than seeping into the grass, it congealed to form a round, wobbly droplet. At a glance, it looked like a large, tasty gelatin.

“What in the world is that?” The prince pointed at the strange creature, shocked by the siblings’ reactions—they’d all taken battle stances within seconds.

“It’s a monster... A slime,” William responded, his voice trembling.

George’s expression darkened. “A-A monster?!”

Of everyone there, William was the most knowledgeable about monsters. Even if George didn’t want to believe it, if William said it was a slime, then it was definitely a slime. George slowly moved to cover the rest of the group, then grabbed hold of the whistle hanging around his neck. “All of you, run! William, once you’ve gotten everyone to a safe place, I want you to clear the area and find something we can use against this thing!”

The prince came to a slow realization at the siblings’ changed demeanor. “Don’t tell me... Is that a localized barrier crisis?” the prince whispered. *What are the odds after we talked about it today?*

“It is! So hurry up and get out of here!” George shouted and blew his whistle as hard as he could. The sound rang out, well beyond the royal estate, to the ears of every hunting dog in the region. At this signal, the dogs would alert the hunters that a localized barrier crisis was occurring. The hunters would triangulate the location of the crisis point and issue an evacuation notice to the area. Then, they’d call for backup from the other regions where hunters were trained to move out at a moment’s notice. This system was a lesson learned from the vast casualties the kingdom suffered in the first incident—the one the prince had just been studying.

“Emma, come with me!” Rose extended her hand to Emma.

Emma forced herself to smile as she refused. “No, I’m staying here. My brother needs me.” She would have loved to run if that was an option, but she couldn’t leave her brother to face a barrier crisis by himself.

“But we can all run away together! You *and* George!” Rose insisted, but they didn’t have time to debate this.

William picked up Jadwiga, who was on the verge of tears. “We’ll leave Emma and George here! But we need to get out of here *now*! Please, just listen to us!” William shouted frantically—so out of character in his panic that the danger of the situation became clear. Having people who had no knowledge of monsters on the hunting grounds was dangerous for all involved. Royal family or not, the fact that Rose and her family were there put *everyone’s* lives at risk.

“I’ll be fine! You can leave this to us borderlanders. We can handle this! Now hurry and get as far away from here as you can!” George tried to ease Rose and Edward’s hesitations with his bravado as William dragged them away.

Until backup arrived, they needed to figure out what monsters were manifesting at the crisis point. If any of the monsters could move long distances at high speed, it would greatly increase the damage they could cause.

Emma waited until Rose and the others were out of earshot before calling out to George. “Seems pretty early for us to be dealing with the biggest crisis of our lives, huh?”

Sweat was building on George’s brow. He didn’t have his trusty sword or any of his hunting gear. Unfortunately, this wasn’t one of those, “Oh, it’s just a slime” worlds. Their previous world’s perception of slimes was completely different from the reality of slimes in this one. Here, slimes were some of the rarest and most dangerous monsters—nobody even knew how to defeat them.

“If you try to cut them down, they split into more. If you try to burn them, they trigger a steam explosion. You can’t smash them, and their highly alkaline body is corrosive to the touch. I’m sorry, Emma, but I need you to leave too.”

Of the three siblings, William’s survival was the most important because of his monster knowledge. This was a rule aristocrats of the border had followed since

time immemorial. Even among family, knowledge was the most important thing.

But why did they have to run into a *slime* of all things? The air was tense, and George moved to protect Emma, steeled himself, and slowly began approaching the slime.

“Wow, looks like your studies are paying off, George,” Emma teased.

When slimes appeared in Pallas, several hunters in heavy protective gear would use glass shields to push them back to the other side of the barrier, but Vallery was much too far away from the barrier for a plan like that. Slimes weren’t exactly pleased to be forced away either, so it took a great quantity of hunters to push them back. There were no small number of casualties with each appearance. Since George didn’t have the specialized glass shields they’d use against slimes, he didn’t even have anything to protect himself.

“No chance you’re a nice slime, is there?” George wiped the cold sweat off his brow, doing everything he could to lighten the mood with a joke.

“Yeah, I doubt that,” Emma said with a giggle.

How were they going to get out of this?

“Hey, Emma. Did you bring your little friend?”

“Aw, how’d you know?” Emma replied, rolling up her fluffy skirt to reveal the vibrant purple spider clinging to her slender thigh. “Oh well, I *guess* I could let you borrow her.”

George balked. “Eugh, why’d you put her *there*?”

Emma took the spider into her hands and looked it right in its many eyes. It was such a beautiful thing. And so, so cute. “Violet, could you lend my dearest brother your help?”

As though it understood Emma’s request, it shot out some webbing and was on George’s head in an instant.

The moment the slime finished oozing through the crisis point, it attacked George, who was closest to it, with a caustic blast similar to a water gun.

“Whoa!” Though George was able to dodge effortlessly with Violet’s help, the

grass where the attack landed began to sizzle and froth away.

Slimes didn't have very good heads on their shoulders (or any heads or shoulders at all, for that matter). Once they'd selected a target, they wouldn't attack anything else until they'd consumed their prey. With that in mind, George had decided to use himself as bait until the hunters arrived. Though the slime kept using its caustic blast and body-slam attacks on George in rapid succession, with Violet on his head, he was able to hold out quite easily.

In the meantime, Emma was carefully observing the slime. When she'd made the monster karuta cards for George, there was something that had caught her attention. Though she hadn't been schooled as thoroughly as her brothers, Emma took lessons on monsters as well. However, when she really thought about it, all of the knowledge about monsters had been accumulated through battle experience alone. Nobody had really looked into their ecology to figure out why they were the way they were. If they could understand what made each monster tick in more detail, wouldn't they be able to hunt them more efficiently?

All the hunters up until this point had their hands full with just cataloging and fighting off the monsters, but Emma's specialty was relentlessly chasing down whatever caught her interest. Since she had all the know-how one might get from careful observation and research of her insects, she could come at the problem of monsters from a different angle and add her unique perspective to the fold.

In just one month, during the tiny amount of free time they had between taking care of Emma's insects and making Rose's dresses, the siblings had all been tackling monster research as well. As an extension of the siblings' playtime, Emma would listen to William's thoughts and explanations and come up with theories of her own, which George would then test out when he went on his hunts. Once they had enough evidence to back up Emma's theories, they'd report their findings to their father and uncle. Both of them scolded the siblings for not discussing this with them before doing it, but in the end, their guardians decided to help. They spread the results of the siblings' research to the hunters of Pallas, leading to the continued creation of new weapons.

Naturally, William had talked about slimes when they were making the karuta

cards as well. Emma had considered what might happen if one were to adjust the pH levels of it. Since the slime was made of strong alkaline, she surmised one should bathe it in something acidic instead. If the acid neutralized it, it stood to reason that the slime's internal components would change significantly and it would be unable to maintain its form. However, it was only a theory she'd considered, and they had no proof to back it up. After all, slimes very rarely appeared, thus the information they could gather was limited.

Even so, if William remembered the theory Emma proposed back then, he'd likely return to the crisis point with something acidic.

In a localized barrier crisis, the first move was the most crucial. As time passed, it was likely that more monsters could come through the hole as well. Even after Vallery's hunters arrived, George would still be the slime's main target.

It would be far too risky to bet it all on an untested theory in a moment of crisis. Emma watched the slime carefully. Surely it had to have some sort of weakness. Even just something that would help them buy more time until their father and uncle could arrive from Pallas. Emma kept observing the slime as it single-mindedly kept attacking her older brother.

However, the situation was about to get worse. Once again, liquid came flowing through the crisis point. It came faster than the previous slime, forming the same round shape. The only target this second slime had to choose from was Emma.

"Emma, RUN!" George noticed the second slime, but his warning came too late. The second slime was smaller than the first, making it even faster when it unleashed its caustic blast at Emma. Since Emma had been focused so fervently on observing George's slime, she was too slow to react. "EMMA!"

Emma gasped.

George couldn't reach Emma in time, but *just* before the attack reached her, Violet was able to spray a web barrier in front of her. However...

"Agh... Hnngh!" Though the web kept Emma from taking a direct hit, the fluid splashed onto her right side. Everywhere the liquid touched was struck with a horrible burning sensation. Emma collapsed in pain, and the slime unleashed

another one of its caustic blasts.

“EMMA!” Just in the nick of time, George scooped her up and brought her to safety under the shade of a tree, quickly putting some distance between her and the slime. He needed to check her injuries. “Emma, are you okay?”

George couldn’t hide his horror. All of the skin that had been splashed, from her face down her upper right body, had reddened and blistered. Her right arm had taken the brunt of the attack, and it seemed to still be corroding as the wound widened before his very eyes.

“Hey George... S-Sorry... I-It...does kind of...hurt...a bit... Agh... AGH!” Every time Emma opened her mouth to speak, it sent a wave of pain through her.

“Damn it all... You’re just a little girl. How could this happen to you?!” George agonized. Even the slightest movement caused the skin to tear, blood seeping through the wound, and her right arm was still being eaten away. Without treatment, the burns could seep down to her bone, and they’d have no choice but to amputate. He didn’t have a knife or anything else to excise the affected area, and he certainly didn’t have time to hesitate.

“I’m sorry, Emma. This is seriously going to hurt, but try and bear it!” With that, George bit down where the wound was corroding, tearing the flesh with his teeth and spitting it out.

Emma couldn’t hold back her screams. She wanted to flail away from the pain, but her brother held her down. All she could do was bear it as best as she could. Once he’d spit out the last bit of burnt flesh, he took the ribbon out of Emma’s hair and tied it as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. He wanted to let her rest after the ordeal, but the slimes were approaching fast. Instead, he cradled her limp body in his arms and ran.

Just that small splash had started corroding Emma’s skin, and even the inside of George’s mouth was starting to burn. The slimes of this world were not to be trifled with.

The slimes stopped shooting at the siblings; it seemed to be a limited attack. In George’s arms, Emma desperately tried to think of whether there was some way out of this situation, but it was hard to organize her thoughts and observations through the extreme pain. Two things, however, were clear:

She noticed that every time the slimes used their caustic blast attack, they seemed to get a little bit smaller.

The first slime seemed to have ten shots before needing to cool down, while the second only had two.

Each slime was a different size, so she wondered if perhaps the reason they had differing amounts of ammo was due to the amount of liquid within their bodies.

“George!” William came back, gasping for breath and clutching a bottle of vinegar. When he noticed Emma limp in George’s arms, he rushed toward them. “Emma, your face!”

Emma’s right cheek was still slowly melting away, and her right side was stained bright red with blood that still gushed out of her. Emma tried to give William a smile to put his worries at bay, but it sent a jolt of pain through her cheek.

“There are two slimes out there, William. The smaller one is targeting Emma, so try out our theory on that one.” George was trying to keep his calm, but Emma was in grave condition. He wanted to get her treated as soon as possible, but couldn’t until the slime targeting her was defeated. Slimes never gave up pursuit of their target until they’d consumed them. The smaller slime had been feasting on the bits of flesh George had torn off of Emma’s arm and the blood that had dripped off of her, and it seemed to have gotten bigger as a result.

“How dare you hurt my sister?!” With utmost precision, William threw a lemon at the slime. Though it hit its target perfectly, it just bounced off with a goofy *boing* sound.

“Oh right...blunt strikes don’t work on them...” Unfortunately, William wasn’t the brightest when it came to actual battle tactics. He pulled himself back together and threw the bottle of vinegar at a tree near the slime. The glass broke open and the vinegar spilled all over the monster. “How do ya like *that*?!”

The slime absorbed the vinegar and grew larger.

“Are you kidding me?!” William screamed in despair.

“It’s not...over yet! You need more...to fully neutralize it... If it’s

absorbing...the liquid...we might be...on the right track!" Emma was gasping through the pain to help William.

The first slime started using its caustic blast attacks again and George deftly avoided them with Emma still in his arms. He tried to lessen the impact as best as he could, but every time his feet hit the ground, Emma groaned with pain. William kept throwing vinegar at the smaller slime, but it didn't seem to be doing any damage.

"It's not working! I'm out of vinegar and all it did was make it bigger!" William cried in bewilderment.

"But...they're getting...slower..." Emma responded. It was likely that the vinegar wasn't acidic enough to neutralize the alkalinity of the slime. But that didn't mean it wasn't working at all. Emma noticed that the inside of the second slime had gotten ever so slightly murkier, and it hadn't fired a caustic blast since it had absorbed the vinegar. On the other hand, the first slime had regained its original size, fired off another ten shots, and then stopped its assault. There had to be something causing the second slime's behavior.

Keep watching. There has to be some logic their movement follows. I just need to figure it out. It feels like I'm just right on the brink of understanding...but everything burns. I can't muster enough strength...

"William... I want you to retreat for now," George commanded. Of all the siblings, it was most important for William to survive. Since the vinegar hadn't worked as intended, it was imperative that the siblings get William back out of danger. Luckily, the crisis point hadn't widened since it appeared, and it didn't seem like it was going to. At that size, it was unlikely any other monsters could get through, but he wanted to make sure William got away in the event that a third slime appeared.

"But George...!" William tried to argue, but his brother's face made it clear there was no room for debate. Emma's body drooped languidly in George's arms, unmoving as though she'd lost consciousness.

"Whoa!" The first slime tried tackling George, and the impact of his landing after he dodged caused another wave of pain to rush through Emma, which woke her once more. The slime was right in her line of sight. Strangely enough,

it seemed the grass the slime had passed through was green as though nothing had touched it, with no sign of corroding. It seemed the slime, or rather the outside part of it, was not liquid after all. But of course it wasn't; they wouldn't be able to make their signature round shape if it was. So why did she find this so strange? What was nagging at her mind?

“Over here! Hurry!”

A great clamor arose as more people approached. It seemed the Vallery region's hunters had arrived. When George and William turned to face the group, they found it was headed by none other than the second-born prince of the kingdom.

“Th-The prince?! Why is he here?!” George gasped.

Edward was at the forefront running toward them, dozens of hunters in tow.

George clicked his tongue as the slime tried to tackle him once more.

“William! Bring the prince with you and get to safety!”

“O-Of course! What are you doing here, Your Highness?!”

However, Prince Edward shook off William's attempts at stopping him and ran straight toward George and Emma.

“Wh— Is that a slime?!”

“And there's two of them!”

“Were these three children facing *two* slimes all on their own?!”

The Vallery hunters couldn't hide their shock. The grass all around the siblings was mostly burned away, showing just how many of the slime's attacks they must have evaded. There was no way... All the hunters stood with mouths agape.

“Emma! What happened to you? Emma?! EMMA!” When the prince saw the girl covered in blood, he could only fixate on calling out to her. At the sound of his voice, Emma regained consciousness again.

The prince...? It's too dangerous for noncombatants to be here...

“Your Highness! The slimes are coming! You need to get away!” George

deliberately put some distance between himself and the prince to avoid putting the prince in harm's way. The slime was gearing up to tackle George again, but as it crossed Edward's path, he instinctively sliced it in two with his sword.

"No! What have you done?!" George shouted. George had been dodging about so that in the worst-case scenario, the only victims would have been him and his sister. Now, he clicked his tongue again and hid the prince behind him. The first slime was now split in two, making a third slime to fight. Naturally, its target was the one who had cut it in the first place: the prince. The Vallery hunters shrieked.

"What?! They don't die when you cut them?!" The prince sputtered, but he was the only one who hadn't known. There was nothing more dangerous than an amateur on the battlefield. Now that the prince had become the slime's target, there was nowhere for him to run.

"You saw what just happened. How could you bring the prince with you?!" George glared daggers at the hunters, whose faces had gone deathly pale.

One of the younger hunters stepped forward to argue his case, but he was stopped by one of his elders.

"I've got my hands full with these two!" George continued. "If you don't want the prince to die, then *do something!*" George was dodging two slimes' attacks while keeping his sister in his arms. The second slime's movements had slowed, and Violet was helping him deftly stay out of the way, but it was clear he didn't have the capacity to help the prince as well.

The eldest hunter gave George a word of apology and confiscated the prince's sword. One couldn't have a sword when facing a slime. No matter how tiny you sliced them, they'd just split into more slimes. The more slimes there were, the more targets they'd have, and the more people whose lives would be in danger. And at this point, any more slimes would wipe out everyone in the courtyard.

The hunting dogs in Pallas would have been able to pick up on the sound of George's whistle no matter how far away they were. He just needed two hours. Two hours of dodging before his father, uncle, and the hunters of Pallas arrived. The hydrochloric acid Emma had made was in Pallas as well. That might be what they needed to defeat the slimes.

However...Emma was fading fast. George's clothes were soaked with Emma's blood. She was bleeding out, and this world didn't have any concept of blood transfusions. Emma wasn't going to last much longer. Even still, George held on to her. He knew it was probably the right course of action to leave Emma behind and protect the prince, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Whether they were George and Emma or Wataru and Minato...he was her older brother. And it was the older brother's job to protect his sister no matter what.

Chapter 21: Desperation

“I wanna play too!” The boys could hear Jadwiga splashing around in the girls’ bath.

“Sounds like they’re having fun,” William said to the prince, rinsing the bubbles off his head.

“Sounds like it.” Just hours after he’d fallen in love with Emma, they were bathing in a hot spring with only a thin wall separating them. She was only eleven years old, and the thought of her playing with Jadwiga in the hot springs was so cute, it brought a gentle smile to Edward’s face as he soaked in the water.

“Aaah, Jadwi! That tickles!” Just hearing Emma’s voice made the prince’s heart nearly leap out of his chest. He’d never experienced anything like that before. He’d been to plenty of tea parties and social events, been in close contact with several girls he thought were beautiful, and even danced with them time and time again. Yet today, his heart leaped as though it were just beating for the first time.

“Mommy! Emma’s skin is soooo smooth!”

Edward wasn’t *trying* to listen in on the girls in the bath, but Jadwiga’s excited voice carried quite well. And naturally, now that the conversation had turned to Emma, the prince couldn’t help but focus on it.

Emma’s skin is smooth...?

“Oh, is it? Let me have a feel!” His mother’s animated voice reached his ears as well.

“Wait, agh! Not there! *Not there!*” Emma’s voice grew noticeably louder as she panicked, clearly backed into a corner by them.

Not...where? Edward’s heart felt like it was going to explode. It was beating fast as if he’d just finished running a marathon, and his ears were filled with its loud pounding. *Not where, Emma?!*

“Emma...how is your skin so smooth? I just want to keep touching it even if it detracts from the hot spring’s effects. *How did you get your skin so smooth?*”

Emma’s smooth skin... It’s so smooth you don’t want to stop touching it...
Emma...is so smooth... This new information kept spiraling in his head.

George and William seemed to be enjoying themselves chatting about the dinner they’d had as though they couldn’t hear what was happening on the other side of the wall.

“Rosie, please keep your voice down! EEK! Aah, not there! Stop! Eeek! No more!”

Her voice was so...so...*charming* that one wouldn’t have imagined it coming from an eleven-year-old. And all that separated them was that single wall.

Seriously, not where?! Where is my mother touching her?! Edward was trying to keep his mind out of the gutter. Those sounds she made...they were too adorable! Where would you have to touch to get her to make those sounds? Ah...! What’s wrong with me? Stop thinking about it! Forget you ever heard this! Just stop thinking about how smooth Emma might be...and how you would want to touch her skin forever and ever...and how she’d make those adorable little sounds...

Edward remembered her smile from a few hours ago and his pulse quickened even more as the blood rushed to his face. Finally, he dived (or more like drowned himself) into the water in shame. After a few dozen seconds, George and William had to rescue him in a panic. He somehow managed to cool his head and settle his heart rate before Team Girl made it out of the baths. And he made damn sure George and William kept their mouths shut about his bathtime shame. The judgment in their eyes was exceptionally painful.

But the moment he saw Emma’s smooth, glowing cheeks as she got out of the bath, all the dirty thoughts he’d suppressed came rushing back.

“Your Highness, are you all right? Your face is all red. Are you getting lightheaded?” Emma asked with a face full of concern. Since Edward was slightly taller than her, she was looking up at him at an angle that would kill a lesser man. Her damp hair was draped over her ear, and her green eyes were looking straight at him, watery with worry.

He felt like his heart was going to detonate right then and there.

“I-I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong at all.” He could only stammer out two sentences before quickly averting his eyes. Edward could talk to major political figures from other countries without a shred of anxiety, yet Emma made him a sputtering mess. It was maddening. Humiliating. Pathetic.

“Well, if you say so,” Emma said, and when she flashed that winning smile at him, he didn’t care how maddening, humiliating, or pathetic it made him. He was completely head over heels for her. Emma had his heart going topsy-turvy after only a few moments with her. He’d give anything for her smile. And yet...



“Your Highness! The slimes are coming! You need to get away!” George shouted, and at the exact same time, the droplet monster passed before Edward at an unbelievable speed. He moved without thinking. He’d taken lessons in swordsmanship every day, and as a result was able to react on instinct. He sliced through the droplet. There was no give, and the monster was easily split in two.

“No... What have you done?!” He heard George shout and click his tongue. Then the droplet he’d cut down the middle reformed as though it had taken no damage at all, and both halves began moving independently of each other.

“What?! They don’t die when you cut them?!” Edward realized just how badly he’d messed up. The tip of the blade that struck the droplet was sizzling away, and the newly split off part of the droplet was targeting him relentlessly with its attacks. Though the hunters dutifully tried to protect him, every time an attack hit one of their shields (which he’d initially thought they’d brought far too many of), it would melt away. Soon, he thought they’d brought too *few*.

It was clear to Edward that it was *his* fault the situation had worsened. Why hadn’t he listened when William and the hunters had tried to stop him? If he’d retreated right away as they told him, none of this would have happened. Regret filled his heart.

The slime’s attacks were quick, and though they’d thought the hunters’ armor was heavy enough, the metal corroded with each attack. Edward didn’t have time to regret his actions or apologize. He could only run from the single

droplet.

Meanwhile, George was dodging *two* of them while cradling Emma in his arms. They were so fast, it was hard to follow, and Edward heard gasps of surprise from some of the hunters as well.

Yet every time George moved, it caused more of Emma's blood to spill.

Edward wanted to help her, but there was nothing he could do. He was at an even greater disadvantage than George. Once the hunters' shields ran out, neither Edward nor the hunters had any way to defend themselves from the slime's onslaught. There was no way out.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the two slimes fire caustic blasts at George simultaneously. Edward had assumed the smaller one couldn't use that attack, but it seemed he was wrong.

The slime he was facing ended its caustic blasts and had switched to tackles instead. It seemed to only be able to fire five shots at a time.

George was nimbly dodging each of the two slime's caustic blasts, but suddenly he must have lost balance, as his knee hit the ground in front of the slime. He'd be right in harm's way if he didn't hurry and recover, but his reactions had suddenly slowed and it didn't seem like he'd be able to move right away.

He was an open target for the caustic blasts.

"George! AGH!" Edward cried out, when suddenly a powerful gust of wind blasted by him and he was forced to cover his face. In an instant, the wind had abated. Wondering what in the world had just happened, he scanned the area and could scarcely believe his eyes.

A new monster had appeared. Unlike the slime, it was larger than a human, and it was shaped more like a beast. It was behind George in an instant, and though its breath was ragged, it raised its front paw to attack.

George was so focused on the two droplets in front of him, he didn't notice the beast behind him.

The prince and the hunters could only despair at the sight in front of them.

This was no longer just a desperate situation. It was *hopeless*.

“George, behind you! I’m begging you, GET OUT OF THERE!” the prince wailed, but it was doubtful George would hear him in time.

Chapter 22: The White Bag

Just when they thought things couldn't get worse, the two slimes began firing both of their caustic blasts at George and Emma at the same time. It seemed the vinegar's effects had worn off for the second slime, and the third slime was making short work of all the hunters' shields. In the worst-case scenario, George and Emma could have drawn the slimes to them, giving everyone ample opportunity to wall off both the crisis point and slimes while the slimes feasted on their captured prey.

After all, once a slime had caught their prey, they would dine on them for over ten hours.

But now the prince had become one of their targets, and they couldn't use *him* as bait. Even if they did, the hunters couldn't rightly build a wall when they had their hands full protecting the prince. Put another way, the only reason Emma and George were still alive was because the prince was there. If the hunters had been following the emergency manual rules for this situation, Emma and George would have been sacrificed. Though all George could do was keep running, they had the prince to thank for their lives.

Just after dodging the two caustic blasts, George's hand slipped on some blood and he nearly lost his balance. He barely managed to keep from dropping Emma, but he landed awkwardly with his knee to the ground. The unexpected impact caused the spider on his head to fall, and he had no idea where it had gone. He knew the slimes still had a few shots left in them so he desperately tried to regain his balance, but his reaction time was dulled now that the spider was gone.

"George, behind you! I'm begging you, GET OUT OF THERE!" the prince shouted.

The crisis point and the slimes were both in front of him, so he hadn't been paying attention to his rear at all. George whipped around just as the creature placed its front paw on his back.

“Meow!”

“General Kongming?!” Indeed, it was the cat that *should* have been watching the manor back in Pallas. Emma’s beloved cat, Kongming, was gasping for breath and rested its paw on George’s back. It was a gentle move, as though she were thanking him for all his hard work. Yet even through his clothes, George could feel how much sweat had built up on Kongming’s paw pads.

“George! Don’t just stand there! RUN!”

George heard the prince calling to him from afar, but he didn’t have time to worry about that. From the cat’s labored breathing and the sweat, George came to an unbelievable realization. “D-Did you *run* here all the way from Pallas?!”

“Mrow!” Kongming tried to steady her breath as she responded. She worriedly sniffed Emma, and then...her breath was calm. She saw the slimes over George’s shoulder. Her fur stood on end and her pupils became nothing more than slits. As the slimes prepared to fire their caustic blasts once more, she hissed in a fearsome display. Her fury was so clear, one could practically hear her shout, “*YOU* did this to her, didn’t you?!”

Then she rushed forward too quickly to see and unleashed a powerful kitty bap, sending the caustic blast in a completely different direction. Though the slimes kept up their corrosive barrage, the force of the wind from Kongming’s kitty baps kept them at bay.

The prince and the hunters could scarcely believe their eyes, and they blinked rapidly trying to understand. The cats had hunted with George before, so they knew how strong they could be, but normally they went hunting with the pugnacious Guan. They’d seen Kongming lazily fight off monsters for fun before, but this... Kongming was a terror to behold when she was angry. The two slimes kept trying to fire their caustic blasts and tackle their targets, but Kongming effortlessly deflected it with the wind from her kitty baps.

Our cats are strong as hell, huh...?

George gently put Emma on the ground. If Kongming could defend them from the incoming attacks, he could finally do some first aid on Emma. As long as he could stop the bleeding, there was a chance Emma could be saved.

“George! Is that huge monster with you?!”

It took George a moment to figure out that the monster the prince was talking about was Kongming. He responded while stroking Kongming’s back. “You have nothing to worry about, Your Highness. This is one of our cats. She’s Emma’s favorite, General Kongming.”

Uh, since when were cats that big? The prince and all the hunters had the same thought. Yet the cat never lifted a paw to attack them, and it was clearly trying to protect them instead. *And since when were cats that STRONG?* They had all struggled so much against the three creatures, yet the cat was blasting all their attacks away with the wind from its cat baps alone.

Since they no longer had to worry about the slimes’ attacks, the prince and the hunters tried to approach George, but Kongming hissed and arched her back at them, causing the hunter at the front to fall on his behind in fear.

William had put some distance between himself and his siblings, but made his return with Kongming’s appearance. He held his hand out to help the hunter up with an apology. “I’m so sorry. I think Kongming’s just worried you might add to my sister’s injuries.”

It didn’t seem like anyone but family would be able to approach at this time. William borrowed a first aid kit from one of the hunters and brought it to Emma’s side.

“William! I thought I told you to get out of here!” George scolded, but now that Kongming had arrived, they really had nothing to worry about. William thought Emma needed first aid as quickly as possible, because there was a very real chance that she might die right then.

“General Kongming is protecting us, so let’s focus on Emma now!” William shouted.

George had been fully prepared to die just a moment ago, yet now he was wavering. Now he had to make sure that the siblings didn’t get fully wiped out. Just as George’s worries were piling up again, more gusts of wind blasted by him, nearly surrounding him. As they squinted in the harsh wind, the other three cats appeared around them.

“Guan! Liu! Zhang!” All three cats meowed in response. Then, the four large cats surrounded him on all sides. George looked all around him, then back to William. “All right, let’s help Emma now.” However there was still only so much they could do.



“We’ve got to stop the bleeding!” George said, pulling out a roll of gauze from the first aid kit, but William stopped him.

“No, we have to wash it first. I know most chemical burns don’t cause this much bleeding, but...the first thing we have to do is wash the blood and slime off with some water and check the wound from there.” William gathered water from the hunters, who’d all brought flasks of it with them as part of their equipment. Since the hunters were to use it for hydration or cleaning wounds, the water in their flasks had been boiled and sterilized. He poured the water on Emma’s cheek, and the outer layer of burned flesh tore away.

“Mrowr...” Kongming let the other three cats take care of the slimes while she cuddled up against Emma’s uninjured side. Her right side was stained red, and the inflammation left it hot to the touch. Yet her left side had grown pale and cool from the blood loss. Kongming rubbed up against her left side to warm as much as she could without touching the wound. She chirped with worry.

George and William carefully washed Emma’s wounds with the water. Half of the hunters who had been helping the prince went to fetch more before the siblings ran out. Each time the slimes tried to attack, the cats batted them away with wind alone.

Emma’s skin sloughed off with the water, the deeper layers red and inflamed, spreading radially into a deep, gaping wound. It was likely deepest where she’d taken a direct hit from the slime’s attack. There were several thin tears that seemed to jut out from the larger one. These were likely due to the jostling from George dodging the slimes’ attacks, causing the wound to open even farther. The injury must have damaged blood vessels, because it kept spurting out blood even while they tried to wash it away. Her body needed to be washed as well, and they used tweezers to pick out bits of fabric from Emma’s clothes that had stuck to the wound.

George untied the ribbon he’d used as a tourniquet earlier so he could wash the area he’d bitten through as well.

“George!” William showed the area he was working with to George, tweezers still in hand. There was a massive wound from Emma’s side to her stomach, bleeding incessantly. George’s expression darkened. His sister had been

suffering such a grievous injury, and all he'd been able to do was hop around trying to avoid the monsters that caused it. What was more, no matter how much they tried to wash it away, the blood wouldn't stop. And since the skin around the wound was sloughing off, they hesitated to put any gauze on it to try to stop the bleeding with pressure. There were salves and antiseptics in the first aid kit, but they were worried about using them when just water was further damaging the skin.

There was no accepted treatment for what to do after being struck with a slime's fluids. The beasts hardly ever appeared, and those who were attacked didn't live long. Not to mention, the slimes would then eat whatever body was left behind. The siblings tried using what they knew about regular and chemical burn treatment by using the water to cool the inflammation and wash the slime away, but based on how her skin was reacting to just that much, anything more felt like it was only going to make things worse.

"What are we going to do?" William whispered. Emma's skin was so much worse than they'd thought. If they tried to wrap the wound in gauze to stop the bleeding, they'd just be taking more and more skin with it every time they had to change the bandages. But if they didn't stop the bleeding, she wouldn't last. There were no blood transfusions or skin grafts in this world. All the flesh that had melted off was gone for good, and they had to worry about secondary infections too.

Emma was unconscious and unmoving. William placed his hand on the left side of her neck. Her breathing and a faint pulse were the only signals that she was still alive.

Just as the brothers were losing hope, Violet hopped onto William's hand.

"Agh! Violet, what are you doing here?!" Violet was too big to hold in one hand, so he used his other to support it. It seemed weird that the spider would get in the way of Emma's treatment, but...maybe there was something it was trying to tell him? William stared deep into its eight eyes, but had no idea what it was trying to communicate.

Oh, if Emma were awake, she'd be able to tell what Violet was saying... But just as William had the thought, Violet started spitting a sparkling, purple

webbing at Emma's wounds.

"What are you doing?!" George hurriedly tried to rip the webbing from Emma's injuries, but Kongming stopped him and meowed. "Hey! Wait! Agh!"

In the blink of an eye, Emma's wounds had been completely covered with the purple web. There was no way to get past Kongming's interference. Once Violet seemed satisfied, it hopped off of William's hand and cuddled up to Emma.

"It...stopped the bleeding with a *web*?" William had never heard of such a thing, but the constant flow of blood had completely stopped, curbed by the webbing. Violet had tenderly spit its webbing over the wound, somehow making a perfect fit with the injury and serving as a seal against blood loss without the need to apply pressure. He had no idea what kind of logic or principles were behind it, though. William gingerly touched the web bandage and found it was cooling the area as well.

A while ago, Emma had gone on a long tangent about how Violet was able to discern what webbing to use for different situations. William had only been half paying attention, but sure enough, the web Violet had used to tie up the poachers and the webbing it used to close Emma's wounds were different.

"I think we can trust Violet and Kongming to take care of her," George said, taking off his coat and placing it over Emma. There wasn't much more they could do for her now.

"We should wash your arms too, George," William suggested. Once George had removed his coat, they could see just how much blood had gotten all over him. William gently washed off what he could.

Since Emma's blood had some of the slime's caustic liquid in it, George's hands were quite battered as well. He'd been so anxious about the matter at hand, he hadn't even noticed it. But oh, how it hurt. Now that he'd noted it, his mouth was burning pretty badly too, so he rinsed it out with water as well.

They heard a hiss from Kongming and turned to find the prince had gotten closer. He was definitely taken aback by Kongming's threat, but not to the level that the previous hunter had been. Rather than falling on his behind, he just took a step back and kept his eyes on George and William.

“Why won’t you take Emma to safety? You’re done treating her, aren’t you?” the prince asked. He wanted her in a bed, not the ground. She should be seeing a real doctor, not just getting first aid.

While the siblings understood Edward’s concern, they knew they couldn’t. “We would if we could, but Emma’s still the slime’s target,” William replied. “We can’t take her away from here.”

“But now that those—uhm—cats?—are here, it should be safe, right?”

If it was simply a matter of getting her away or running from these things, then they wouldn’t have been in this mess. The hunters would have gotten the prince out of there in a heartbeat.

“If their target moves too far out of range, the slime will divide itself over and over to search a wider area. And if they still can’t find their target, they explode,” William explained.

The prince was visibly agonized. He’d initially thought of this monstrosity as nothing more than a little droplet. Yet it was undefeatable. There was no way to run. And it could even multiply. First aid wouldn’t be enough to help Emma. Even after all this, they were still stuck between a rock and a hard place.

How could I have been so stupid? I never knew ignorance could be so horrible. I can’t do a single thing for the girl I love. And even if, by some miracle, we manage to get out of this, Emma’s body and face... A tear of regret streamed down his face. The prince moaned in a low voice, “I just want to save her...”

Violet spewed more webbing onto George’s hands. It cooled the inflamed areas and he let out a sigh of relief. The prince spoke for all of them when he said he wanted to save Emma...but the siblings knew better than to hope.

“They don’t just split into twos or threes. Not even tens or twenties,” William explained. If a slime lost track of its prey, it could split into *hundreds of millions* of copies. It would split off and grow over and over, and this process would repeat until one of them found its prey. The boys and the hunters were struggling to handle three of them, but if the slimes split a million times over and then exploded in the end, they could destroy an entire country.

This was knowledge from long, long ago, so it must have been a tragedy that

had happened before. One that had been passed down from survivors of the ruined kingdom.

While the cats could keep the slimes' attacks at bay, they still couldn't defeat them. Physical attacks did nothing to stop them. Their only hope was the hydrochloric acid Emma had made in Pallas, though even the slime that had absorbed all that vinegar had resumed its normal movement again. And given the awful state of Emma's skin, it would likely take an enormous amount to neutralize the creatures. There were three slimes at this stage. Would that amount of hydrochloric acid be enough? And would it even work in the first place?

The prince didn't know any of that. And he didn't know that there was no way Emma, George, or the prince were getting out of there without defeating the slimes. Yet slimes *couldn't* be defeated. It was a miracle that the cats were even able to fend off their attacks.

Kongming softly licked Emma's left cheek, and Emma twitched ever so slightly awake.

"Nngh... M-Mom..." She must have regained consciousness. She was calling to her mother. And not Melsa, but Yoriko.

"Emma! Sis, hang in there!" William cried with all his might. Peering into those green eyes of hers, he could tell she was desperately trying to tell him something. George and William both leaned in as closely as they could to her.

"M-Mom... Mom... Z-Zl...urg... Zl..." Every time Emma opened her mouth, her face twisted in pain, but she kept trying. The two brothers did everything in their power to not miss a single quiet syllable. "Zm...osis... Sly... Sly... Sal..."

Her voice was so very quiet—with each fragmented word, it grew fainter.

"Sa...Sal..." Emma weakly squeezed William's hand with her own, desperately trying to tell him *something*.

"Emma, I don't understand... What are you trying to say?!" George was stroking Emma's head and desperately trying to parse her message, but her voice was so soft and he couldn't make sense of any of the fragmented words. Emma was in so much pain when she tried to talk. She was trying so hard, yet

all he could do was stroke her head comfortingly.

William was muttering to himself trying to figure out what it was Emma could have been trying to say.

Mom.

Zlurg.

Zmosis.

Sly.

Sal...

Wait... Could it be?!

“Wait, sis, are you serious? Is that really it?!” William stared wide-eyed at his sister, and Emma nodded.

“S-Sly... Kill... Sal...!”

William took off running back to the manor as soon as Emma finished speaking. “Hunters, hear me out! We need your help! We might have found a way to defeat the slimes!”



William ran straight for the manor’s kitchen. Emma had been fading in and out of consciousness, calling for her mother, but she was looking *right* at William.

The reason Emma had stayed behind with George in the first place despite having no combat training was because of the talents she’d demonstrated so consistently in the past month: her observation skills and ingenuity. They were betting it all on those talents.

No matter how much people studied or trained themselves or gained experience fighting, monsters were an ever-looming threat humans were only barely fending off. Every time something like a slime appeared, precious lives were lost. Emma’s absurd love of bugs trained her observation skills, and her lack of common sense gave her an innovative view of the world. Even throughout the process of making the monster karuta set, she’d already come

up with plenty of hypotheses. George thought it would be fun to try them out on his hunts, and about seventy percent yielded some practical results. In just the half month since they'd started making the karuta set, many of her hypotheses had been proven true and became an instructional booklet on defeating monsters.

That was why William knew; if his sister said it, it was bound to work.

"Mom... (Yoriko)"

"Zlurgzl... (Slugs)"

"Zmosis... (Osmosis)"

"Sly... (Slime)"

"Sal... (Salt)"

Any time their mother, Yoriko, saw a slug, she poured salt on it. Emma had to have been saying that they could defeat slimes the same way you killed a slug.

Probably.

To be honest, he didn't think salt would be enough to defeat something that had pushed them to the brink like the slimes had. Blunt damage didn't work, slicing them just made them multiply, and they'd explode if you tried to kill them with fire. The slimes of this world were invincible. Even if they managed to push one to the other side of the barrier, they'd wind up having to sacrifice at least one person as the slime's meal. It seemed impossible that something so strong could be taken out with a bit of salt. He would've had more faith if she'd said hydrochloric acid, but he would try anything Emma said. William couldn't disobey his big sister, after all.

William opened the door to the kitchen. They were only allowed to use the manor for hide-and-seek, and since Jadwiga was so insistent about her playtime, William had a pretty good idea about where everything was. Knowing exactly where to go, he descended the steps into the cellar.

The hunters looked anxious the moment they entered the kitchen. "So, um...what exactly are we looking for?"

"Salt! I need you to find some salt!" William commanded.

“Uh...salt?”

“Like...salty salt?”

The hunters looked even more concerned. To be honest, William was pretty worried himself, but he nodded confidently to hide his anxieties before starting his hunt.

He'd hoped they'd find it right away, but the pantry was spacious and filled to the brim. They *were* in a duchess's house, so it made sense. There were dry goods and oils and tea leaves lined up on all the shelves.

“Maybe it's over here?” one of the hunters shouted to William, pointing to an area with a bunch of multicolored paper bags in a row.

Why isn't anything labeled?!

In this kingdom, spices were divided into colored bags to make things easier to understand since the literacy rate among commoners wasn't very high. It was common knowledge that salt was kept in white bags and sugar was kept in blue. However, as neither William nor the hunters had ever set foot in a kitchen before, this system only made things more complicated.

“Uh... I guess we just start going through them!” William said, then opened up a red bag to find it filled with wheat flour. “This isn't it...”

One of the hunters opened a blue bag to find sugar. “This one's sweet.”

William opened a yellow bag and discovered hard wheat flour. “I don't even know how this is different from the last one.”

A hunter opened an orange bag. It was filled with starch. They were all trying to keep their impatience at bay and check each bag carefully, but they seemed to be finding everything *but* salt. Baking soda. Bread crumbs. Granulated sugar. White pepper. Black pepper. And of course, the last bag they opened was the white bag they needed.

“It's salty! WE'VE FOUND IT!”

“YEAAAAH!”

“Finally... Finally!”

None of them could believe it'd be the last bag on the shelf, so their celebration was tinged with exhaustion. Each bag had been ridiculously heavy, and they had to check every last one of them. Each of them picked up a massive bag of salt, all while groaning about why the heck there was so much of the damn stuff.

Sis... This is gonna work, right? We're gonna kill 'em, right? You swear? William whimpered to himself over the unexpected strain. Ignorance, once again, was leading to heartache. Regardless, he carried as much as he could outside to find a new crowd of people. He'd sworn everyone should have been evacuated. Suddenly, he heard voices calling him.

"William!" his father and uncle cried.

"Father!"

The crowd was made up of hunters from Pallas.

"Is everyone okay, William? Where's the crisis point? How big is it? What monsters are we facing?" Leonard fired off several questions in rapid succession. William's heart hurt seeing the concern on his father's face.

"Th-There are three slimes. The crisis point is about three centimeters," William answered.

All the hunters' expressions darkened once they heard what they were up against.

"Slimes?! And you've been fighting off three of them?!"

"Slimes aren't supposed to be in this area, are they?"

"And Emma... She was hit by one of their caustic blasts..."

The crowd's eyes widened at William's words. They fell silent in an instant. All of the Pallas hunters were exceptionally strong, and they'd had plenty of training in what to do in the event of a localized barrier crisis. They knew this was an emergency, but they'd thought it was something they'd be able to handle...until they heard *slimes* were involved. And given how exceptional they were, they knew just how horrifying slimes' caustic blasts could be.

"I'll take you to her!" William said anxiously, before turning to run. But then

Leonard picked both him *and* the bag of salt up with ease and took off. “Ack! Father!”

Arven and the other hunters chased after them in silence.

“William... Is Emma...?” Leonard asked, terrified to know the answer. The fact that a slime had attacked her meant she was its prey. It meant she couldn’t be saved. But before William could answer his father, they all saw the cats in the distance.

“Wh-Why are the cats here?! How did they get here? And George! You’re covered in blood!” Arven exclaimed, picking up speed upon seeing George kneeling beside the feline companions.

“It’s Emma’s blood! The cats ran all the way from Pallas and have been protecting us from the slimes’ attacks. It’s given us time to try and stop Emma’s bleeding,” William explained.

“So...she’s alive?” Leonard’s grip on William tightened. He pushed his way past the cats to get to his daughter. Half of her body was covered in something shimmering and purple, and her body was propped up against Kongming.

“Father!” George called.

“Sorry we’re late. Fill me in,” Leonard said, softly stroking Emma’s head as he spoke. He’d thought she was sleeping, but Emma opened her eyes upon feeling his hand on her head. His face relaxed into the picture of relief.

“There are three slimes. They’re after me, Emma, and Prince Edward. Emma’s right side was wounded by their caustic blasts. The cats have been protecting us from any further injury.”

“The *prince* is a target?!”

Guan bapped the air to blast away a slime and greeted Leonard with a sweet “Mrowr,” but nobody had any mind to respond after hearing the prince was one of the slime’s targets. That very prince was unable to get anywhere near Emma with the cats threatening him, so the Vallery hunters were protecting him from as close as he could get.

“So what did you go to get, William? How’s it going to help us beat these

things?” George asked, glancing over the bags William and the Vallery hunters had been carrying. Clearly, he had no idea that white bags contained salt either.

Leonard and Arven were both stunned. “‘Beat’? You’re going to defeat them?”

William then explained the plan he managed to piece out from Emma and showed them all the bag of salt he’d brought.

“Um. Salt?”

“These are *slimes*, not slugs!”

“We wouldn’t have suffered for so long if it were that easy!”

All the Pallas and Vallery hunters were decrying the solution until Leonard spoke up.

“Let’s give it a try. If that’s what Emma thinks, then it’s sure to be right!”

“My thoughts exactly!” Arven agreed without a moment’s hesitation.

The Pallas hunters initially thought nobody would fall for such an obvious fabrication, but then they all remembered: the lord of their land was a Grade A daughter doter, and his brother, Lord Arven, was completely niece-brained. A wave of exasperation washed over the hunters all at once. Apparently, even a deadlock like this wasn’t enough to curb such innate devotion.

“B-But you know how fast slimes can be! They’ll get away before we can get all this salt on them!” The Vallery hunters knew the difficulty of this plan after just carrying the bags themselves. While the slimes wouldn’t attack anyone who wasn’t marked as prey, they were still quite agile. They weren’t likely to sit still while getting salted.

“Hm? What’s the matter?” Emma tugged on Leonard’s sleeve. She glanced at Violet, then back up at him. “You’re going to let me borrow Violet?”

Emma gave a small nod. Leonard then took Violet, who had been snuggled up at Emma’s side, and placed it on his head with a grin.

“What the hell?”

“Look at the size of that spider! It’s huge!”

“Bwuh-huh?”

None of the hunters knew about Violet, and they were all in a tizzy trying to figure out where to even *start* with this new creature. They were in a total deadlock, and their lord had just taken the time to put a massive spider the likes of which they’d never seen on his head—and with a satisfied grin on his face, no less. Not only was this very much *not* a solution, but they were now all questioning his sanity to boot.

“Well, let’s start with the smaller one first!” With that, Leonard grabbed one of the large white bags of salt.

“W-Wait, Lord Leonard!”

Leonard disappeared in a flash. The hunters didn’t even have a second to stop him. The moment they thought he’d “disappeared,” they heard the sound of salt being poured at a distance.

“What in the WOR—?!”

But he was gone again. Before the hunters could even finish their sentence, Leonard was right in front of them again.

“WHA?!” The hunters all shouted again. Leonard ignored their shock and grabbed another bag of salt before disappearing once more. *Whoosh. Whoosh.* In less than ten seconds, all three slimes were covered in mountains of salt. The hunters were frozen stiff with their mouths agape.

“Wow. You’re really something, Violet!” Leonard gave a cool smile without even a trace of exhaustion.

“I think you’re the fastest out of all of us, father!” William called as he and George ran up to Leonard after he’d returned. “It looks like Violet’s speed boost works in proportion with each person’s natural physical capabilities!”

“Hmm... I’d say it’s not just their speed either. I think it’s *all* of their physical abilities.”

The hunters still stood shocked with their jaws on the ground.

Guan tilted his head with an adorable little meow. All three slimes had ceased their attacks. After being covered in salt, they started writhing and wriggling

about in apparent agony.

“Wait... The slimes are acting weird now!”

“This might actually work!”

At George and William’s words, the stunned soldiers all stiffly turned their heads to see for themselves...and could not contain their shock. Their jaws hadn’t closed since the whole ordeal began.

The slimes were squirming violently and it certainly looked like they were in pain. It was a sight nobody in this world had ever seen before. In just a few minutes, they stopped moving altogether, then they disappeared as though the salt had melted them entirely.

“Did...did that really kill them?”

“With just *salt*? *Salt* was all it took?”

“But those were *slimes*! But...the salt...”

“A-Are you...are you kidding me?”

The hunters seemed to have finally regained the usage of their mouths. One by one, they rubbed their eyes and furrowed their brows in utter disbelief.

Guan approached the pile of salt where the slimes had been and sniffed. “Mrowr?” Then he kicked the pile away with his front paw and found something caught on his claw. George and Leonard approached and were shocked at what they saw.

“Is that...cling film?” Leonard whispered.

“Hey, that’s what I thought it was too,” George said. The thin, transparent material looked pretty much exactly like the cling film that was commonplace in their previous world. The other two slimes were in the same clear, flimsy state. As full, hydrated slimes, they were too dangerous to touch without getting burned, but they seemed completely harmless now. What was more, they were actually stickier than the cling film from the Tanakas’ world. Not in their wildest imaginations could they have pictured these beasts that had been so deadly just moments ago as these floppy sheets.

“So like...if it’s that easy to defeat them, then they really *were* just regular ol’

slimes, huh?” George tilted his head. The slimes of this world had been so terrifying, so far removed from the ones they’d read about in their past lives. Yet once they learned how to defeat them, it was a bit anticlimactic. Apparently, they were actually small fry in this world too.

Just then, William came running toward them at top speed. “Emma says they might come back to life if they get enough moisture, so we should ball them up right now and put them back into the crisis point!”

“Ew, what? Freaky.” George hurriedly balled up the crumpled “slime film” and pushed it through the hole. Leonard scolded him, reminding him that one couldn’t let their guard down for an instant until the monster was gone for good. Just for good measure, they packed the hole of the crisis point with salt so they wouldn’t come back through it again. Since a hole in the barrier couldn’t be repaired without a mage, they would later have to make a defensive wall of bricks around it.

And so, the localized barrier crisis, the sort of cataclysm that brought whole countries to their doom, was brought to its end.

Chapter 23: Heaven

I woke up very suddenly, feeling like I'd had my best rest in a long time. I was still out of it and slowly moved my head to feel something fluffy and soft. Apparently, I'd fallen asleep using a big kitty as a pillow. When I looked to my right, I saw a black kitty snoring ever so quietly. To my left, I saw a white kitty purring while he slept. By my feet slept a large calico showing off its belly.

"Am I in heaven?" I asked. Then I heard a familiar meow. My beloved kitty's voice fully woke me up. "General Kongming...?"

I'd been using her as a pillow, and now she was licking my left cheek. It was scratchy and it tickled, forcing a laugh out of me. The other three cats had now awoken and were coming to lick me as well.

What's going on here?! They're all being such lovebugs! It's so cute! And I'm getting my fill of fluffy goodness to boot, so maybe this really is heaven.

I heard a sudden crash, and when I peeked out between the cats to see who it was, I found my personal maid, Martha, standing there trembling.

"Martha?" I called out since it seemed like she'd dropped something and I wanted to make sure she wasn't hurt, but she turned on her heel and ran before she answered. Normally, she'd never make such a commotion, but she was clearly in a hurry to leave.

"M-Master Leonard! Lady Melsa! It's Lady Emma! She's...!" Martha was screaming out there. Did I do something to make her mad at me?

The sunlight coming through the window was as bright as ever. Oh...maybe I overslept or something?

Then, my whole family came running into the room as noisily as Martha had. They *never* would have done that, normally. Was running in the halls a new fad or something?

"EMMA!" Leonard squeezed my left hand.

Oh jeez. The whole family's in tears.

"You're finally awake..." Melsa said, tearfully stroking my left cheek.

My brothers, George and William, were standing by the right side of my bed, looking at me with happy tears streaming down their faces.

"Um... Did I almost die or something?" I kinda sorta remembered beating the slimes, but everything after that was a blur.

"You had a high fever for three whole days after all that, and you wouldn't wake up even after it came down! Do you have any idea how worried we were?!" Wow. William made it sound like I'd slept for a *really* long time.

Oh right... I'd been so focused on the slimes, I'd been hit by one of their caustic blasts. Eesh. Not my finest moment.

I looked down at my right arm and found it wrapped in a sparkling purple thread. I tested a little movement and it didn't hurt, so I brought it up to feel my right cheek. Something that was definitely *not* my skin was there, and it was nice and cool to the touch.

"So, uh...what's gonna happen to these wounds?" All things considered, I was a girl. Of course I'd care about whether they would leave a mark, even if they were my own fault.

"Emma... The thing is..." Leonard wiped away his tears, but his brow was furrowed and his expression most grave.

Yikes. That bad, huh?

"We don't actually know."

That was...not the answer I expected.

"Every time we've called in a doctor, the cats would stop them from removing Violet's webbing, so we haven't been able to assess it." My father sounded apologetic, but I understood. There was no winning against cats.

So they wouldn't let anyone actually examine me, and nothing has changed since I got first aid back then. Which meant that General Kongming, Liu, Guan, and Zhang had been sleeping next to me and keeping anyone from touching me the whole time.

“Okay... Kongming, can I take this off?” I asked the kitty I’d been resting against.

“Mroooowr.”

“No? You want me to wait a little longer?”

“Mrowr.”

“Oh, okay. I’ve got to keep this on for another month, then, huh?”

“Mroooowr.”

“Oh, but I can still take baths! That’s good!”

“Mrowr!”

“Welp, you heard her. We can’t see what it’ll look like for another month.”

“How are you holding a whole conversation with the General?” William asked, absolutely befuddled.

Cat-speak was all about energy and flow. Okay, maybe I was just talking out of my hat. I just sorta understood. Besides, if I got it wrong, Kongming would have told me. Or...not told me.

“Anyway, you’ll let me know when it’s cool to take this off, right?” I just hoped I wasn’t too disfigured. As cool as it would be to pull a Mewshana and be like, “whatever lucky man becomes my husband shall see far worse than that,” I was pretty sure the only ones who would get the *Meowsicaä* reference in this world would be George and William. What was more, I was really wondering if my injuries didn’t hurt because of Violet’s web or because of nerve damage.

I guessed I wouldn’t know until we took the webbing off.

“Oh yeah! Where’s Uncle Arven?” I didn’t see my favorite uncle anywhere.

“He’s gone back to the royal academy. He was worried sick about you, but he was only supposed to stay here for about two months.”

I hadn’t meant to worry my uncle too. I felt bad I hadn’t been able to see him off... *Wait...*

“Didn’t he leave a bit early, then? It’s only been about a month,” I asked. The whole family gave me a pitying look...and it might’ve been just me, but I was

pretty sure the cats did too.

“Sis... Uncle Arven stayed the whole two months already. He even stayed an extra week because he was so worried about you,” William explained.

Wait...so did that mean...?

“You’ve been in a coma for an entire month, Emma.” Leonard squeezed my hand even tighter.

Melsa had been crying silently the whole time, but finally opened up. “We thought you would never wake up again... Do you have any idea how worried we were?”

“S-Sorry...” I was used to my mother being angry at me, but making her cry hurt in a way I didn’t know it could. I had no idea anyone could sleep that long. I guessed I really *had* been on the verge of death.

A whole month, huh? Come to think of it, I am pretty hungry. Wait, how’d I use the bathroom while I was sleeping, anyway?

Actually, maybe some things are better off unknown.

“Wait, then does that mean...I missed my birthday too?”

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” the whole family shouted.

Apparently, I had turned twelve while I was out cold. And I’d really been looking forward to eating my birthday cake too...

“Thanks, guys...but uh...what about the cake?” This would’ve been one of the worst screwups of my life. How could I have let myself lose a precious chance to eat cake? I wasn’t about to give up yet. I thought I’d try to negotiate, but...

“You’re to eat nothing but soup right now, young lady. You really think your weakened stomach can handle something so heavy?!” Mother shouted through her tears. I never thought I’d say it was nice to have her get mad at me again. But my hunger wouldn’t be satiated by soup alone.

“I could *really* go for some meat, though. Just kidding, ha ha... Unless?”

Finally, Melsa cracked a smile. *That* was the nicest feeling of all.

“I guess this little incident didn’t fix your voracious appetite...but it’s a good

thing you have an appetite. I'll fix some for you after the doctor's had a look at you, but for today at least, you'll need to make do with soup."

"Okay..." I sulked. My stomach was crying for meat—not just meat. I'd eat a whole cow if I could, but I dutifully listened to my mother instead. I had worried my whole family, after all. Thirty-five years plus twelve more and I was still such a screwup.

"Oh, don't give me that pout. I'll be baking you a delicious birthday cake once you're all better!"

I was so overjoyed at this, I was all smiles. I giggled and the whole family smiled back with relief.

I was alive. Here with my family once more.

That was the greatest birthday present of all.

Chapter 24: Determination

The view was completely different when we returned to the capital. The familiar streets were more and more damaged the closer we got to the castle, and the royal academy had been reduced to a mountain of rubble.

My Uncle Cain's attempted coup had left deep scars on the capital. I'd thought my father had sent us back to our home in the Vallery region because he had fallen out of love with my mother, but apparently he'd received warning that this might happen and had done whatever he could to combat it. He hadn't sent us on our way for a little romp back home, he had been evacuating us for our own safety. That became all too clear as I stood before the wreckage around the castle. My father had been trying to put as much distance as possible between me, the second-born prince, and the masterminds behind the coup.

"You mean...you don't hate me after all...?" my mother asked hesitantly. The king was so shocked, he immediately began professing how much he adored her, his voice booming even louder than usual and arms gesticulating wildly. It was embarrassing how he could just say these things without a care, as though he'd completely forgotten his children and his servants were *right there*. This went on until my mother was blushing deep red and bashfully whispered, "That's enough..."

While I was relieved to know that the king, my father, hadn't abandoned us after all, my heart was still heavy and full of anxiety. I should've been dying to come home. Not even seeing everyone excitedly coming together to rebuild our towns, or hearing about my father's gallantry during the coup was enough to move me. I knew my mother and tiny little sister felt the same way; their occasional heavy sighs were signs that their thoughts had returned to the events of that awful day.

We should've been thrilled by how much better we were being treated upon our return, but it had been over a month and we still hadn't received word that

Emma was awake. If we hadn't invited the Stewart siblings to our manor, Emma would have never ended up in such a state. Yet, no matter how much my mother apologized to Leonard, he wouldn't accept it.

"You did nothing wrong. My children understood the risks and decided to stay. In fact, if they hadn't been there, things would have gone far, far worse. When Emma wakes up, I want you to tell her how wonderfully she did. She'll be so glad to hear it," Leonard said with a smile, though his face was deathly pale. Count Stewart's love for his daughter was legendary, yet he didn't blame us in the slightest. In fact, he even *thanked* me for my impulsive action.

"Though I can't approve of your actions out there, it was because of you that my children are still alive. For that, I give you my utmost thanks." Leonard bowed his head deeply. As one who governed a border region, he had been prepared for the worst—his children had been as well.

How much had they suffered to talk about monsters or their priceless silk like it was nothing at all? They seemed so laid-back, but the land they lived on was excessively cruel, a place where monsters appeared regularly, bringing death in their wake. Yet all the country gave them in return was a measly tax break. The cost of hunters and their plethora of equipment all came straight from the landowners' pockets. So many of the rulers of these border regions fell into poverty entirely because our kingdom left them high and dry.

I couldn't help but find this whole coup ridiculous. A bunch of humans fighting each other over status. There was no threat of monsters here in the center of the barrier. We'd pushed that danger onto the border lands so we could live without a care in the world. Nobody even thought for a moment about how unfair that was.

I'd lived most of my life in the capital, so I hadn't known the slightest thing about monsters either. That was why I had underestimated them. That was why I had attacked without thinking. Even if that impulsive strike had wound up being what saved Emma and George in the end, it wasn't something to be proud of. Even if they didn't blame me for it, it was still a mistake I made.

Every day, I felt like I would be crushed by the weight of my worry.

What if Emma never woke up again?

The dresses she made for my mother were so lovely that people were calling her the most beautiful woman in all of high society once more. Even if there were plenty who still thought the extravagant garments were just the Stewarts' way of buttering her up to get to me, my mother was *stunning*. The word "boorish" never passed their lips again. She was no longer obsessed with the idea of reclaiming her beauty; her looks now came paired with full confidence.

It was all thanks to Emma. Yet I couldn't do anything for her in return.

Even after her injury, monsters would still appear on the border.

Why were we wasting time with power struggles or political intrigue or trying to show off who was better? There were so many more important things we needed to focus our energy on.

I decided that I had to work harder to learn more about my country and about monsters. But starting from scratch, with almost no knowledge, meant I would be a lot busier in the coming days. I would study as hard as I could so the next time I saw Emma, I could face her without shame. And the next time, I would be able to protect her.

Emma...please wake up. Please get better soon.

And you'd better prepare yourself.

I'll make myself a man worthy of you, and I'm going to sweep you off your feet.

Chapter 25: Scars

Emma had been recovering quite nicely since she'd awoken. She was able to enjoy her food, and though walking was a bit difficult at first, she now could move around with no problem. She still wasn't allowed to remove Violet's web, but it had started to get a bit itchy. Every time she subconsciously went to scratch at it, General Kongming would paw at her to stop.

"Kongming... Don't you think it's almost..."

"Mrowr. (Nuh-uh.)"

The General hadn't left her side for a single moment. Whether Emma was eating, sleeping, or even in the bathroom, the loyal cat was always by her side. Apparently, Kongming had been so worried that now she was even more protective than Leonard and more strict than Melsa. Since she'd even accompany Emma into the dreaded bath, Kongming's fur was extra fluffy and soft—whether she intended it or not. Emma couldn't get enough of the General's softness.

Emma had been told to get plenty of bed rest, so Joshua came to visit her nearly every day. Kongming initially didn't want to let Joshua near her, but after Joshua's countless visits, she'd learned to just sit quietly next to Emma.

Her family was constantly asking about her injuries and walking on eggshells around her, so she appreciated that Joshua would talk to her like nothing had changed. Not to mention, all the fancy treats he would bring were always so tasty.

"Lady Emma, I've brought some pastries from the capital today. Oh, and your favorite tea as well."

Though it did feel a bit like he was baiting a wild animal with food.

According to Joshua, things at the capital were so stable that one wouldn't even imagine it had so recently undergone a coup. The king fighting on the front lines during the coup had left a great impression on the citizens, and his

good reputation greatly increased.

“I must mention, the dresses you designed for Lady Rose are being received quite well too!”

Emma was glad she’d worked so hard to complete them. She giggled, making Joshua smile in turn.

“You’re such an angel, Lady Emma...” Joshua whispered, but Emma couldn’t hear it.

“Have you been to the capital? What’s school like there?” Once their Uncle Arven graduated from the royal academy, the Stewarts would let him take over Pallas while the whole family went to the capital so the siblings could attend school. There were dorms at the academy, so it would have made sense to just send the kids on their own, but Leonard didn’t want to be apart from Emma, so it was decided that the whole family would go together.

That promise was how they had convinced Arven to go to the royal academy all those years ago, once the family had finally escaped poverty. Unlike Leonard, Arven had a good head on his shoulders and was qualified to move on to even higher education after graduation, but he had initially elected to return to Pallas to help with the newly booming family business.

It was Leonard’s dearest wish to make sure Arven could go to college. To wave off his brother’s concerns, he promised that he’d be taking his children to the capital once they were old enough to attend school, so he and Arven could take turns on the border. But he never thought he’d have to follow through on this promise. With the help of their exceptional hunters and the silk business booming, that excuse was now a shocking reality.

In their previous life, the Tanaka children had had difficulty finding work in their extremely rural area, so they’d left home as soon as they were able. In this new life, Leonard was so happy they’d be able to spend more time together as a family.

“The capital? Well, the castle is in the center of it, and all the school facilities are surrounding it. All of the students are aristocrats of varying statuses, so it might be a bit of a culture shock. There is an abundance of school subjects meticulously divided into varying difficulties, so I imagine you’ll quite enjoy that.

However, you'll also have to attend more evening and tea parties," Joshua explained.

Considering the siblings were able to live however they pleased in Pallas, Joshua thought they'd likely find actual high society to be a bit restrictive. And considering how many men her age were flocking to her at the tea party, he was a bit worried that she'd be going to school surrounded by even more of those vultures. George and William were *no* help at all. Not to mention, Leonard and Melsa had fallen in love there as well. Emma might've loved bugs, but Joshua wasn't about to let all those roaches at school swarm her like at the tea party again.

"Wow, you really know it all, don't you, Joshua?" Clueless of all Joshua's concerns, Emma blissfully listened to all of Joshua's long-winded explanations.

As a merchant, he was fantastic at gathering information. A good merchant would use that information to his financial advantage, but Joshua was just focusing all that energy and knowledge on Emma. If Emma took an interest in something, he'd learn everything there was to know about it and be certain the gifts he brought her were relevant. After all, a merchant needed to be able to respond to his customers' demands. Therefore, Joshua would do whatever it took to make Emma trust *him* over others.

"Even if I didn't know it, I'd find it out for you, Lady Emma," he said, effortlessly radiating an aura of selflessness. George and William had told Joshua that the second-born prince had fallen in love with Emma, so he'd started to get antsy. He'd tried gathering information on the prince, but couldn't find anything damning in his appearance or personality. He knew his feelings for Emma were stronger than anyone else's, but his rival was the *prince*. There was nothing he could do against that kind of authority.

"B-By the way, have you gotten any letters from Prince Edward?" he hesitated to ask.

Emma had received letters from both Rose *and* the prince. They were handwritten and packed to the brim with celebration for her recovery. Honestly, they were so heartfelt, it made Emma feel a little bad for having worried them.

Emma grinned without a care in the world. “Oh, that’s right! Lady Rose has the most beautiful and adorable handwriting! And her letters smell soooo nice!”

Whether she knew how Joshua felt or not, she’d talked about Rose’s letter instead of the prince’s. For the time being, it seemed she was more interested in Rose than the prince—Joshua could breathe a small sigh of relief.

After a quiet knock at the door, George and William entered the room, the latter carrying a large box. They’d apparently finished their business that day and came to check on Emma.

“We’re home! Wait, you’re here *again*, Joshua?” William had just finished caring for Emma’s bugs. He gave Joshua a look of utter exasperation.

“Joshua... Don’t you have a job to worry about?” George had just gotten back from a monster hunt. His expression matched William’s.

George had heard Joshua’s father had put Joshua in charge of three stores, and the profits from those stores would serve as his allowance. If he managed those stores well, he’d get another store to take care of each birthday. The young merchant was frequently whisked away on long trips to procure goods. Joshua was now fourteen years old and the owner of multiple stores, so one could only assume he was extremely busy.

Emma felt a bit guilty after George’s reminder. “Oh, Joshua... Thank you for always coming to visit me, even when you have so much on your plate. Please don’t push yourself, okay? I’m getting much better already.” She’d grown a bit too used to depending on Joshua. He was bringing her all the snacks and conversations she’d wanted while recuperating. Considering he was utilizing all his marketing know-how for her, it wasn’t exactly a surprise he was such good company.

“Way to spoil everything, Lord George...” Joshua grumbled under his breath. “Lady Emma, I’m here because I *want* to be here! I’m not even remotely pushing myself. Truly, you have nothing to worry about. It’s been no trouble at all! In fact, I’d be here every day, if I could!” he exclaimed, handing her some candies that were popular in the capital.

After the siblings had come to him asking about cats, he’d had to leave on a

six-week journey to gather goods. When he'd returned, he heard that the Stewart family now had four massive cats, they'd met the second-born prince at a tea party, there had been a localized barrier crisis in the Vallery region, and Emma was now gravely injured... It had just been one thing after another while he'd been away.

I can't protect you if I'm not here. Besides, I'm also on pest control.

In Joshua's mind, Emma was always number one on his priority list. He was quite used to hiring help, so his stores were doing just fine. He could easily make time for Emma by sacrificing a bit of sleep here and there.

"You say that, but you've got bags under your eyes, Joshua. Do you want to take a nap with me?" Emma gazed at Joshua with clear worry, tracing the bags under his eyes with her free hand. Her bed was certainly wide enough for the two of them.

"Siiiiiis..." William groaned. There's no way she's not doing this on purpose...

"Come on, Emma..." George moaned. You're not going to do this to every boy you meet at school, are you? It's too late for Joshua, but maybe it's my job to protect the rest. Egad, we've still got a year to go and I'm already worried about school...

From his seat, Joshua collapsed to the ground like his knees had given out and crouched over, shaking and offering his gratitude to the heavens above.

"HNNNGH! She's so perfect... God above, blessed be! Thank you for sending me such a perfect angel!"

Emma just beamed as she watched over him, rolling the candy he'd given her around in her mouth. She assumed Joshua was highly religious and was required to pray at certain times.

William gave Joshua a pitying look and handed Emma the large box he'd been carrying. "I was sure to be discreet so Martha wouldn't find out."

Inside the box, Violet waited for her. Since Emma wasn't allowed to leave her room, William would bring Violet to her secretly each day so Martha wouldn't see it. Kongming, who had been sleeping alongside Emma on her bed, meowed a greeting to Violet, and Violet skittered up on top of her head. The cat and

spider had become quite good friends.

“Ah, is this Violet? It really is a beautiful purple, just like you said!” Joshua beamed, having finished his prayer (or, returned to his senses). Emma had said Violet was “a bit big,” but in reality, it was actually *far* larger than Joshua could have imagined. He was truthfully quite surprised, but he didn’t let it show.

Emma was just happy to hear someone praise Violet. “Isn’t she just the cutest?” It was everything Joshua could do to resist the urge to tell Emma that *she* was the cutest (while collapsing into prayers once more).

“Mroooowr? Mrowr?” Kongming seemed to be having some kind of conversation with Violet. It was absolutely adorable. “Mrrrrrowr meow meow?” She looked to Emma, then went back to her discussion. *They’re the cutest pets ever!* Emma thought. She watched them contentedly for a while, until Kongming turned to her.

“Mrowr!” she said.

“Huh? I can take this off now?” The boys didn’t know how any of this was being communicated, but Emma was pointing at the webbing on her wounds when she asked.

“Mrowr!” Apparently, she had permission now. With that, Emma reached up to remove the webbing from her right cheek, but her hand was smacked away. This time it was William.

“Sis, you can’t just take it off all willy-nilly!” he scolded.

Here Emma thought it would’ve been fine now that she’d gotten permission, but apparently there was more to it.

“Look, just wait until I get mother and father.” George sighed and left. Everyone around Emma was so much more worried about her injuries than she was. George and William had seen how bad they had been before the webbing, so they were especially concerned.

“Lady Emma, allow me to call one of my family’s best doctors. Can you wait until she’s here to remove it?” Joshua asked. It was hard for Emma to refuse when Joshua was begging her with such concern in his eyes.

She was shocked by the worry in Joshua's expression. "But it doesn't even hurt anymore..."

"Even still, we don't know what might come of all this. We should be prepared for anything...for all of our sakes," Joshua said, glancing at William, who was hanging his head. He patted William's head and went to call for the doctor.

Emma only had herself to blame for her injuries, so she'd already prepared herself for the worst. Or maybe she'd just given up on hoping for the best. At this point, she was just grateful to Violet that she no longer felt that searing pain.

Kongming carefully watched the room, then curled herself around Emma. Emma had started to get a bit nervous, but Kongming's warm and fluffy body helped put her at ease again.

"Thank you, Kongming..." She decided she'd bury herself in Kongming's fluffy body until all the "preparations" Joshua had mentioned were finished.



"Emma... Emma..." Emma's father, Leonard, was gently shaking her awake. She'd apparently fallen asleep with Kongming wrapped around her.

"Are we ready now?" Emma sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Leonard, Melsa, George, William, and Joshua were all surrounding her bed with nervous expressions. A woman in all white was sitting right next to her. "Are you the doctor?"

The woman, who had chestnut-brown hair and looked older than her mother, nodded. "Yes. My name is Elia. I'm a skin doctor, so you can rest easy and let me do all the work."

Elia was the doctor Joshua had hurriedly called from the capital for Emma. She'd already examined Emma while she was still in her coma, so everyone else in the room had already met her.

"We leave her in your capable hands, Doctor Elia." The family bowed their heads. They swallowed nervously and watched as Elia brought her hand up to Emma's right cheek and began peeling away. Violet's web came free quite

easily.

Leonard's expression darkened. Melsa couldn't bear to look at the wounds and buried her face in Leonard's chest. Meanwhile, George and William seemed shockingly relieved. Joshua never let his smile fade for a moment.

Emma was a bit worried by the varied reactions from her family. Elia handed her a mirror. Even though she'd *thought* she'd resigned herself to her fate, her pulse still quickened as the moment she could finally see herself drew nearer. With a determined huff, she finally took the hand mirror and saw her reflection.

Shockingly, the outer layer of skin had been beautifully restored. George and William said that it had been so badly damaged, even pouring water on it caused more of it to melt away, yet there weren't any keloid scars or tautness in her skin. It was perfectly soft, and she wasn't bleeding either.

However...

In the area on her where the wound had been the deepest—where she had likely taken a direct hit from the slime's caustic blast—there was a scar in the shape of the injury, bursting out into fine lines. Yet they seemed to have taken the color of Violet's web, and the purple scars decorated her arm and side as well.

After Elia examined Emma, she told Emma's parents that no further treatment was necessary. "While she does have some scarring, this is the best result we could have asked for based on the depth and extent of the injuries. I was worried the skin would tear when I removed the spider web, but as you can see, the skin has regenerated beautifully. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to call this a medical miracle," Elia quietly explained as matter-of-factly as she could, hoping to make the teary-eyed Melsa feel better.

"But...the scarring is permanent?" Melsa couldn't stop herself from asking.

"I'm sorry to say, but...yes."

Emma was staring at herself in the mirror. She hadn't said a word, and was just examining the scars that were deeply etched upon her skin.

Leonard gave Emma a big hug. "Don't you worry a bit, Emma. Even with the scars, you're just as adorable as ever."

“You don’t have any keloid scars *or* tautness, Emma! After seeing how bad that slime got you, we’ve got a *lot* to thank Violet for!” George beamed encouragingly.

“Yeah, sis! You’ve healed up beautifully!” William exclaimed.

The two brothers had seen up close just how bad the wound had been, so they were both trying to emphasize her miraculous recovery to cheer her up, but Emma was just quietly looking over her scars.

“You know...I think they look pretty cool.” Joshua hadn’t said anything until that moment. The whole family was ready to chastise him for his insensitive comment, but Emma whipped her head to face him. Her eyes were practically glittering.

“Uh...”

“Emma?”

The family and Elia were all taken aback by her unexpected reaction.

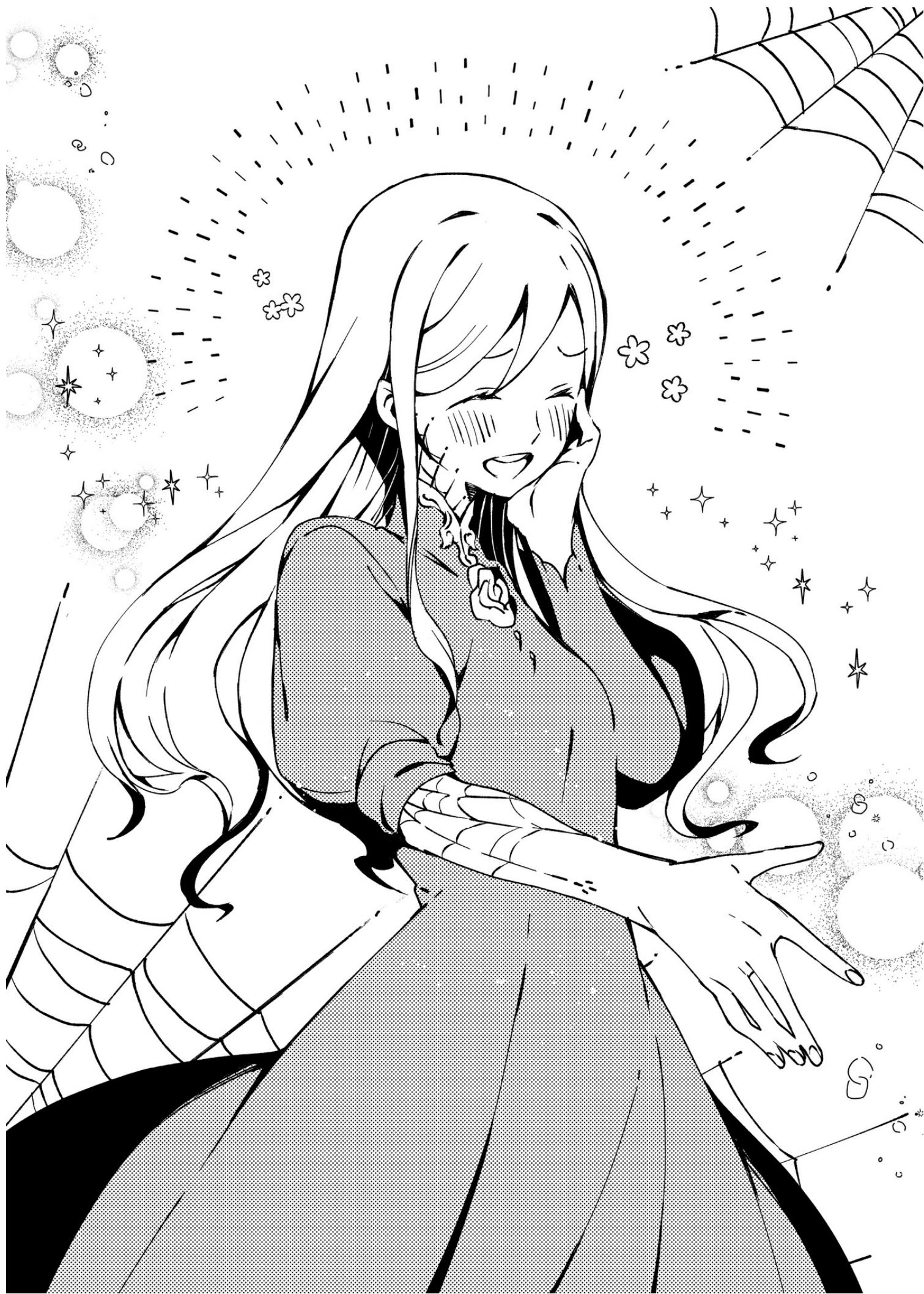
“You think so too, Joshua?” Emma smiled as she looked at herself in the mirror again.

“I do. They look quite fetching on you, like a spider web.”

The family had to admit that that massive spot with all its interconnecting lines did indeed look a bit like a spider web. Rather, now that he mentioned it, it was all they could see.

“Does that mean...?” William hesitated.

“Yeah! I love it! These scars are great!” Emma said with a full-faced grin.



The Tanakas' lives had been turned upside down by their sudden reincarnation in another world. They weren't the types who could easily fit in with aristocratic life. It was a bit of a difficult adjustment, what with the monsters and the tea parties and the like, but they'd been able to reunite with their beloved cats. They'd hoped that they could live their lives in peace from here on out, but there would be plenty of obstacles in their future—some that simply happened, some they caused, some they merely got caught up in. These busy days just kept on coming for the Tanakas.

Chapter 26: The Merchant and the Poor Aristocrats

Pallas was a new region.

The bordering regions of the kingdom lived under the looming threat of monsters. The south of the kingdom had no ocean to protect them, and the area where monsters could appear was quite wide. The three owners of these lands, the Passott, Lengrend, and Stewart families, did whatever they could to protect their respective territories.

About six years prior, the Passott region had suffered a major economic collapse, and Lengrend's only son and heir had been killed by monsters, so both regions fell at the same time. Though the center regions had a surplus of eligible aristocrats to take over, not a single one of them wanted the trouble that came with a border region.

As for the Stewart region, the lord of the land had recently succumbed to injuries from a monster hunt, so his son had only just taken over. Having nobody to take over regions with such frequent monster appearances would have been a major problem for everyone in the kingdom, so ultimately the two regions had been put under command of Count Stewart by the king's orders.

Joshua had first met the Stewarts around that time. He couldn't understand why his father, who had been doing business in a region close to the capital, would suddenly move to the newly combined and renamed Pallas region.

The one thing he hated doing the most while helping with his father's work was doing courtesy calls. "Listen to me, Joshua. No matter *what* they say, you need to just sit back and take it," his father would always insist.

These people only ever cared about their outward appearance; their personalities were rotten to the core. All of the aristocrats Joshua had met were similarly condescending. He had no idea how they got off being so pompous.

"I know, father," Joshua grumbled. He knew they would be talked down to because of their job again today, and he could only sulk. Worst of all, the

Stewart family had children around his own age. The last region he had visited with aristocrats his age, they ruined his favorite clothes, saying a commoner didn't deserve such a nice outfit.

"We have to gain the lord's favor if we're going to do business in Pallas." Apparently, Joshua's father was rather nervous about doing business in this new land himself. Even as a border land, Pallas was massive. They *had* to make sure that the Stewart family saw them favorably.

The Stewart family had looked after this border region for generations, yet of all the aristocratic manors Joshua had visited, theirs was far and away the plainest he'd ever seen. Though the yard was quite large, he didn't see a single gaudy decoration as they were guided through the manor.

Most aristocrats would have abruptly canceled on them (prior arrangements be damned) or they would have made the merchants wait for hours on end, but Joshua and his father were guided right to the reception room the moment they arrived.

"I'm honored to make your acquaintance. My name is Daniel Rothschild." Daniel bowed his head deeply. Aristocrats were all about decorum, and they'd be put off the moment they felt one was bowing at too high an angle, so the merchant was always certain to bow as deeply as he could, never raising his head until the moment the aristocrat said it was acceptable to raise it.

"Oh, that's quite the formal greeting! Raise your head. I apologize for the mess. Please, have a seat over here," the Stewart family patriarch said.

When they raised their heads, they found the reception room was covered in white fabric. Everywhere but the sofa the count offered them to sit on was buried in fine lace and high-quality silk. And in the midst of all of it...

There was an angel.

Her hair shimmered gold, her eyes a lovely green, and she had such a gentle and sweet face. Her simple dress matched her eyes and suited her perfectly.

"The quality of this fabric is quite impressive," Joshua's father remarked to the count. It was plain to see that this fabric was better quality than any silk Daniel had sold before. Joshua was guided to the sofa, but he was transfixed by

the angel before him.

“Well, we have our silkworms to thank for that. I welcome you to Pallas. I am the lord of these lands, Leonard Stewart.” With a practiced movement, the count shook Daniel’s hand, then looked to Joshua for an introduction.

“This is my son, Joshua,” Daniel said.

The count’s locks were a more vibrant blond than the angel’s and he had purple eyes. He grinned and shook Joshua’s hand as well. It was the first time an aristocrat had ever wanted to shake *his* hand. Though Daniel didn’t show it, he was surprised.

“And how old are you, Joshua?”

“He’ll be eight this year,” Daniel spoke in Joshua’s stead.

“Goodness, but look at what a grown-up you are already. You’re just a year younger than my son, George.” So saying this, the count called his children over by name. Two boys poked their heads out from the mass of white fabric.

Emma... So her name is Emma... The angel raised her head, pushed her way through the fabric and plopped herself on her father’s knee.

“This is my eldest, George. He’s nine years old.” The young boy, George, gave a broad grin and gave a short greeting.

“My youngest, William, is three years old.” William did the same, as though he was copying his older brother.

“And this little angel here is Emma. She’s almost six years old.” The count stroked the angel’s head. Apparently, Joshua had been right to call her an angel. “They don’t have anyone their own age to play with around here. I’d love it if you could be friends with them, Joshua.”

The (understandably, given that he lived on the border) muscular count bowed his head slightly to Joshua. Even if he was doing it for his children, the thought that such a man would bow his head to a commoner like him was...odd. He was a strange aristocrat. The very first Joshua had encountered who *wasn’t* a pompous jerk.

Joshua then realized the angel was staring at him. He was well aware of his

freckles. Other aristocrats, to whom appearance was everything, had made fun of him and told him how disgusting they were, despite the fact that Joshua knew some of them were covering up their *own* freckles with layers of caked-on makeup. Regardless, ever since he was old enough to understand what people were saying, Joshua's freckles were the number one thing he was self-conscious about.

If I'd know such a beautiful angel was going to be here, I would've tried to cover them up or something. More than anything, he wanted the angel before him to like him. Though if she'd wound up rebuking him, it might've awakened something in him too.

The angel hurriedly approached Joshua. She was looking so closely at his face, he thought she must have been trying to get a better look at his freckles. Unlike Joshua, her delicate, pale skin didn't have a freckle in sight. The angel was looking right at him, and her face was so close...

"Mmmwah!"

Suddenly, Joshua felt a soft touch right on his nose.

"WHA?!" both Joshua and the count exclaimed in shock.

"Joshua. When I said I wanted you to be *friends*, I meant *only* friends." Leonard's voice was deep and threatening, but Joshua didn't have the presence of mind to respond. His face had gone completely beet red.

Emma had kissed him right where those freckles he'd hated so much were most noticeable, and the impact it had on him was intense. The angel giggled, and god, what a smile she had.

"Your freckles look like a swarm of barkflies. It's so lovely!" That smile was one he'd later understand as the one she made whenever she was looking at insects. With this simple act, what had once been a sore spot for him became his best feature. The angel blessed him with her compliment. He was so overjoyed, he thought he might just ascend. How lucky was he to have been born with freckles!

"Did you hear me, Joshua? I said you can *only* be friends," Leonard repeated in a low voice to really drive home his point, then he took Emma's hand to

guide her back to his knee.

Unfortunately, it was too late. Joshua wanted to be more than friends, and it was all he wanted.

With a click, the door opened and an imposing, distinguished beauty entered the room carrying a tea set. She brewed up a fragrant tea with elegance and poise. That delicious smell was enough to help calm both the count and Joshua down again. Once everyone had received their tea, the count introduced the beauty before them.

“This is my wife, Melsa. Melsa, Daniel here has paid us a visit because he’s interested in doing business in Pallas.”

If memory served the Rothschilds, the count’s wife was quite renowned in the capital for her genius and talent. Having someone like that serving tea like a common maid finally broke Daniel’s ever-perfect poker face.

“I-It is such an honor to have tea brewed by someone of your stature, Lady Melsa!”

Melsa chuckled at Daniel’s loss of composure. “We had a massive influx of horned hares the other day, so all of our servants are busy processing their pelts. I can’t say if the tea will be good or not, but you’re welcome to have some.”

Horned hares always appeared in herds. The count then explained that they had to skin them as quickly as possible, so they needed all the help they could get.

“We’re thinking of putting them on the market next week, so maybe you could buy some of them up and see what you get. They don’t tend to sell well here in Pallas because of our warm climate, but I bet you could earn a bit more by selling them up north,” Leonard mused.

“A *bit*”? Horned hare pelts were massively popular in the capital, and on the rare occasion they appeared, it wasn’t unusual for sloppy hunters to ruin the pelts. The fact that the Stewarts had hunted enough to merit all of their servants processing them meant they’d be making a *massive* sum of money.

“If I may ask, how much do you usually sell a pelt for?” The merchant’s eyes

were sparkling with anticipation. The Rothschild Company sold anything and everything, and they'd even secured routes of maintaining business outside the kingdom as well.

"Hrm... Well, since we got so many this time, I was thinking about two silver?"

Both Joshua and his father gasped. Was he out of his mind? That was *far* too cheap. Did this man have even a lick of marketing sense? Even Joshua, who hadn't had any experience helping with sales, could tell that was completely off. They'd never seen the price for horned hare pelts, no matter how poor quality, cost less than twenty silver on the merchant price alone.

"Count Stewart. I'll buy them for twenty silver apiece if you'll allow me to take them all off your hands." Daniel was leaping at the chance to make this much money this early in their relationship. Buying them in bulk would increase the scope of his business as well.

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that. My little brother and I took down about a hundred or so, so why don't I just give them to you as a token of gratitude?" Count Stewart said, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

How bad at business is this guy?!

All the white fabric strewn about the room looked like it could fetch a high price as well, yet neither Joshua nor Daniel had any idea that the Stewart family was involved in silk production before today.

"Erm... If I may ask, what are you planning to do with all this fabric?" Daniel asked hesitantly.

"Oh, right! Sorry about the mess. One of our maids is getting married, so we're making a dress for her. We haven't had a lot of time, though, so it's been pretty rough," Leonard replied.

You're hand making her a wedding dress?!

Most importantly, the Stewarts could easily purchase a dozen wedding dresses in the capital if they just sold the fabric in front of them. Not to mention, that fine, delicate lace was the kind of quality the king's concubine herself would wear. As Daniel followed the lace along the floor with his eyes, he found it ended in the count's hands.

“Like I said, we really just haven’t had any time.” Leonard’s hands were working the lace as fast as they could go. He was stitching that lace with utmost precision and delicacy.

What, is he a craftsman now too?!

Now that he was paying closer attention, Joshua now saw that the three-year-old William was meticulously sewing glittering, white beads along the fabric, George was making artificial flowers that looked incredibly realistic, the angel was adorable—er, rather, she was showing her father intricate lace patterns she’d designed.

“Ah... We can handle clothes as well, so how about we take the fabric off your hands too?” Daniel suggested, watching the count hard at work. It was plain on Daniel’s face that he’d be happy just to sell the lace they’d already finished.

“Well, it’s just...you see, we’re quite broke. We have to make all of our clothes and our servant’s clothes by hand. We’ve had to sell off most of our possessions in the manor as well,” the count responded sheepishly, though his hands never stopped.

Yeah. This guy has no idea what he’s doing. He might be the worst businessman in the world.

There were mountains of things he could have been selling at sky-high prices right in front of him. Someone should have told him already...unless everyone in this land was similarly terrible with money. There was no way, though, right?

“Count Stewart... Would you allow me to take on the management of this land’s local specialties?” Certainly, one part of him was thrilled at the possible profits before him, but the other part of him simply couldn’t stand by and watch this. The man’s talent for making lace alone could have made him enough money to purchase multiple houses. He was dying to know how in the world someone like this managed to be so poor.

“What? Would you do that for us?” The count agreed to the proposal with just two questions. Given how easy that was, Daniel was certain the man must have had people taking advantage of him constantly. He honestly wondered how someone like him could manage being the lord of a land. Even Joshua was acutely aware of how bizarre it all was, so naturally Daniel was even more so.

I have to do something. I can't just let this pass, Daniel thought to himself.

And so, Joshua's father brought the numerous top-quality goods Pallas had to offer into the limelight. The Stewart family had been selling whatever material possessions they'd inherited to keep the local economy afloat, but Joshua's father had turned their finances around just as they'd been on the brink of selling the manor itself.

A few years later, Emma would make incredible improvements to their already high-quality silk, and Pallas would become the most prosperous region in the land. Daniel and Count Stewart became regular drinking buddies and got along quite well.

"Joshua, your sales this year have been fantastic. Which store do you want to manage for your next birthday?" Joshua's father was looking over the stores' ledgers. Naturally, Joshua only had one answer:

"I'd like to return the three stores you've left in my hands. In exchange, I would like to take over the branch in the capital."

"You can't be serious." Joshua's father was flabbergasted. The store in the capital was the only one in the entire Rothschild Company that was in the red due to the firstborn prince's decision to boycott it. Daniel even received regular reports of the store receiving direct harassment. It was a store with a myriad of problems. Even still...

"Lady Emma will be moving to the capital next year. You have nothing to worry about, father. I'm not going to let the second-born prince outdo me," Joshua said with a mischievous grin he *never* would have let Emma see.

His heart couldn't take Emma being hurt while he was completely oblivious again. Even if he had *multiple* hearts, it would still be too much. The one heart he did have, he'd given to Emma long, long ago. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her.

"I'd like to attend school as well, so I think it's high time we bought a royal title," Joshua continued. With enough money, one could buy a title as high as baron—the key point being *with enough money*. That much money wasn't easy to come by.

But for Emma’s sake, Joshua was always willing to go all out.

Chapter 27: To the Capital

“Lady Emma, the latest model is finally complete. I’m sure *this time*, it will be to your liking.” Joshua’s pride as a merchant was on the line as he presented the Stewarts with the family-sized carriage they’d need to travel to the capital. They’d asked his company to procure them a carriage that could withstand the long, fifteen-day journey. While they were satisfied with the carriage that would carry the five Stewarts, the problem was the specialized carriages for Emma’s insects and the four cats’ kitty carriage.

The Stewarts were planning on continuing their silkworm research in the capital, so extra care had to be taken to make sure the insects arrived safely. They made the wheels from the hide of a hippopotamal (a monster similar to a hippopotamus) to reduce shaking and absorb impacts, to great success. The carriage was even constructed in such a way that once they reached the capital, they could simply remove the wheels and it would work as an insect hut.

For the cats, he’d attempted to use the hippopotamal wheels and covered the inside with horned hare pelts, but they didn’t seem all too thrilled.

“You don’t want to get in, General?” Emma asked. The inside of the carriage looked so comfortable, but each cat gave it a sniff and immediately turned their nose up at it.

“Mrrowr... Mrow!”

“The fluffiness will make it too hot?”

“Mrowr.”

“Mrooowr... Mrow!”

“It doesn’t fit just right?”

“Mrowr.”

“Mrooowr... Mrow!”

“Huh? The door’s too big and that makes it...boring...?”

“Mrowr.”

Joshua had commissioned three prototypes by this point, only to have the cats turn them down one after another, sending him home with his tail between his legs. This new carriage was his fourth attempt, and it had been fully transformed into what looked like a plain, square box with wheels. There were no windows and the entrance was so narrow, it was hard to believe that the cats could even get through it. Since the horned hare pelts they’d gotten for the previous iteration were from the winter, he’d had them switched out for ones hunted in the summer.

“All right, Kongming! Try going in...or not!”

Kongming took a sniff, and even put her neck into the carriage...but still didn’t get in.

“Why won’t she get in? We changed the hides, we made it smaller, and we even made the door as narrow as possible.” Joshua was at his wits’ end just thinking about having to talk to the designers again.

“Mrrowrr... Mrow!”

“I am so sorry, Joshua, but...Kongming says she doesn’t like the smell,” Emma interpreted apologetically.

“Aaaaagh... The *smell*?”

“Mrowr!”

Joshua stuck his head into Kitty Carriage Mk. IV to check the smell himself, but couldn’t detect anything weird with his human nose.

“How do we deal with that...? I thought horned hare would be fine since the cats would be familiar with it, and the frame is wood... Maybe it’s the iron in the nails? But they’re the same nails that are used in regular furniture... I know Kongming sleeps with Emma every night... Wish that were me... Er, I mean...”

As Joshua muttered to himself, George returned from his hunt.

“Joshua! We got a bunch of hippopotamals today, so you should probably head to the market right away!”

Hippopotamals were very popular for their meat, so the competition was

high. Traditionally, people would throw away everything but the meat, but Emma casually suggested using their hides for tires during one of their monster karuta games and the family all decided to try it out. Ever since they'd regained their memories as the Tanakas, they'd felt uncomfortable riding in carriages. They'd been steadily constructing more paved roads in the Pallas region for the past few years, but they'd heard the roads to the capital weren't all in good shape.

Despite the hippopotamal's tough skin, it had surprising elasticity. The skin on its back was durable enough to deflect even the toughest sword. It was going to be a huge pain to deal with manufacturing a tire with it, so they volunteered Joshua to figure out all the hard stuff, like how to process the skins and how to affix them to the tires and the like. With Emma's spur-of-the-moment ideas and the Rothschild Company's powers combined, Pallas was generating more and more specialty products every year.

"Your hippopotamal hide idea was truly remarkable, Lady Emma! Why, I could hardly feel the road, even when it was unpaved! You've really outdone yourself with this one!" Joshua's father was equally thrilled by the idea, as aristocrats were the main buyers of carriages. Even if the new tires raised the carriage's price a little bit, they'd still sell quite easily. The only problem was that hippopotamals didn't exactly appear very often. At best, they'd appear about once a month, and once they were taken to market, people would start processing them for meat right away. And since the rest of the body was largely considered disposable, they tended to just hack at it with a saw without consideration for the quality of the disposable parts. If they cut the hide too small, it would be particularly tough to find parts large enough for the wheels. Therefore, Joshua would need to rush to the market to procure the skins before the butchers started slicing to ensure they could get them cut just the right way for the wheels.

"Thank you for letting me know, Lord George! Depending on the size of the hippopotamals, we may be able to fit your family's carriage with hippopotamal wheels as well. Lady Emma, I will be momentarily excusing myself. I promise I will be back, so please discuss what the cats would like in my absence." With that, Joshua took in the Rothschild Company's carriage he'd ridden in on.

“Seems he’s got his hands full again, huh?” George remarked.

“Have Guan and the other kitties come back yet, George? Joshua brought another kitty carriage for us, so I’d like to ask what they think about it,” Emma asked.

“Please don’t talk to the cats in front of people when we get to the capital, Emma...” There really weren’t that many people who were immune to Emma’s weirdness the way Joshua and the Stewarts were. George felt like they would be releasing a wild animal into a school full of proper lords and ladies, and that anxiety only grew the closer they got to the moving date.

“Oh, dear brother of mine. Don’t you remember? I had the most stable life out of all of us back in our old world. I *know* not to misbehave. Seriously, you *must* quit worrying so much!” Emma acted as though his worries were unfounded, but the emblematic scars on her right cheek didn’t exactly make George feel better.

“Riiight. Anyway, this feels more like a cat *freightliner* than a kitty carriage. There’s no windows or decorations. It just looks like a box,” George mused.

After countless interviews with the cats, they’d designed the carriage to look like a cardboard box. George poked his head into the kitty carriage-slash-freightliner.

“Sure is dark without any windows... Wait, does the top open up?” Once inside, one could slide the roof to the side to let the sun in.

Horned hares had white fur in the winter, but since they’d switched the pelts out for their summer coats, the inside was now brown and tan. Aristocrats tended to want the highest quality of everything, so they leaned toward the horned hares’ long, fluffy winter coats. However, since Pallas had a more temperate climate, its residents tended to use their summer coats. Since it was almost spring, the sun felt nice and warm. George laid down inside the kitty freightliner.

“Oh, wow. You could easily take a nap in here...” He yawned.

“*You* could easily sleep *anywhere*, Geo— Oh wow! Forget kitty carriage, this is more like the Catcoach from *My Neighbor Calico*!” The horned hares’ brown fur

made it look even more like the bus of legends; one every cat lover had dreamed of riding one day. Emma hopped in with an “alley-oop,” sounding more like an old lady than the child she was, and flopped down next to George. “Wow...it really *does* feel nice in here. Even the summer coat is nice and warm.”

“Y’know, I think I might want to ride to the capital in the Catcoach instead.”

“Me too...”

The two of them lazed about on the furs, getting their fill of fluffy goodness. Before they knew it, they’d both fallen asleep. William, who had just finished helping their mother with her chores, poked his head into the carriage.

“Man, first you guys make *me* do all the chores for mom, and now I find you like...wait, is this the Catcoach?” William whined, but soon he crawled in and laid down next to Emma too. “Whoa... This might be the comfiest thing ever!” The sunlight was so nice and warm, and the furs so soft and fluffy, William found himself dozing off as well.

“I haven’t seen you all since I got back. So *this* is where you all were!” Leonard, who had returned home from hunting with George, poked his head into the carriage as well. “Is this...the Catcoach?”

“I was wondering where you all had wandered off to!” Melsa, who had just finished compiling all the paperwork regarding the region’s finances, also poked her head into the carriage. “W-Wait, isn’t this the Catcoach?”

Just like that, the whole family fell fast asleep inside the Catcoach. General Kongming was watching over them and grooming herself when Liu, Guan, and Zhang met up with her after their hunt.

“Meeeow!”

“Meow meow?”

“Mrow!”

“Mrrow?”

“Mrah!”

“Mrrrrrowr!”

They heard Emma sneeze. They'd mentioned that the furs and sunlight were nice and warm, but maybe since she didn't have fur, it was still a bit cold for Emma to be napping like that. Kongming decided to get into the carriage too, only to discover that the strange smell was gone. Instead, it was filled with the scents of the sun, Emma, George, William, Leonard, and Melsa. The space was covered in her beloved family's fragrance...the shorter fur was nice and soft on her paw pads... *This isn't so bad...* Kongming thought. *Taking a nap in the yard with Emma and her family... Yes, this will do quite nicely!*

Kongming hopped into the carriage and forced herself into the space between Emma and George.

"Mmn... You're so warm, General..." Emma said in her half-awake state as she snuggled up close. Seeing how cozy they looked, the other cats joined one by one, with Guan sleeping next to George, Liu between William and Emma, and Zhang plopped himself down right on top of Leonard, who had fallen asleep between William and Melsa.

"Oof, Zhang... You're *really* heavy..." In their previous life, Zhang's favorite spot had always been right on top of Kazushi.

The cats all purred in satisfaction. Inside the carriage, all four cats and the Stewart family slept cuddled up together, looking happier than they'd ever been before.



"Erm... So what happened here exactly?" Joshua had rushed to the market as quickly as he could to safely procure hippopotamal skins and returned to a bizarre scene. The cats had made such a stink about how much they disliked the carriage, but now they were all sleeping peacefully inside. And it wasn't just the cats either. The whole Stewart family was sleeping comfortably as well.

"Um... Should I take this to mean the kitty carriage is all done, then?" The only answer Joshua received was the Stewarts breathing peacefully in their sleep.



One month later, the kitty carriage set out with both the cats and the Stewart family inside. In the end, they decided that the family would ride in the same

carriage as their cats and Joshua would use the carriage they'd procured for the family by himself.

"Urrrgh... I was looking forward to spending fifteen days in a carriage with Lady Emma too..." Joshua choked back his tears as he read through the paperwork for the store he'd been put in charge of in the capital.

The carriage with the four cats and five Stewarts was a bit over capacity, and it was being pulled not by horses, but by a single donkey. That single donkey had a cloth on the top of its head to keep the harsh rays of the sun at bay, and under that cloth was Violet. As such, word spread from those who were shocked to see the massive carriage being pulled by such a tiny donkey.

Before they headed out, Leonard grinned and started the Stewart family's new ritual.

"All right, we're all here, right? **Stewart family role call! Countdown!**"

"**Three!**" Leonard saluted.

"**Two!**" Melsa saluted.

"**One!**" George saluted.

"**LIFTOFF!**" Emma and William said, thrusting their fists into the air. The cats all meowed in unison, lifting their paws in the air to mimic the two youngest siblings.

The family all began laughing as always. It had been a year since they'd recovered the memories of their past lives. Though they didn't have any specialized knowledge or hacks to make it through the world, and they couldn't find rhyme or reason for their being there, the Tanakas were still enjoying their lives in this new world to the fullest.

As long as they were together and happy, they could take on the world.

And after a fifteen-day journey...their life in the capital would begin.

Side Story: Unholy Allies

“Lady Rose, we really must be going...” Even by carriage, it took several hours to get to the Pallas region. Yet Rose was still sipping her tea without a care in the world. Her butler was loath to just sit by, so he fearfully tried to persuade her, but she didn’t show any sign of budging.

The king had sent her on her way, so Rose was now just living it up in her home in the Vallery region. Her father hoped she could at least keep her capriciousness at bay while she was home, but those wishes fell on deaf ears. Her current nasty habit was to conceal her position and show up to tea parties just to see the shock on the hosts’ and guests’ faces like some kind of tea party terrorizer. It was an extraordinarily rare thing to see royalty in a land so far away from the capital. Having the king’s concubine show up with the black-haired prince and princess while the guests were caught unaware was nothing short of diabolical. Rose acted like she was enjoying herself thoroughly, though her eyes were completely devoid of joy as she laughed. To her personal maid, Meg, her laugh seemed more like a cry for help.

“She never used to laugh like that...” The butler sighed sadly. He’d been working at the Vallery estate since Rose was very young and her discontent was clearly weighing on him. Was it truly this painful to marry into the royal family?

Meg was a new hire among the dozen or so maids assigned to the king’s concubine, and she had been sent from the capital to the Vallery region along with her seniors. She was the daughter of a viscount, so she’d gotten an education and had been married once before. Unfortunately, she divorced and her family disowned her, but she was lucky enough to find work at the castle, which eventually brought her to the Vallery region.

“Lady Rose...” Meg knew that deep down, her beautiful mistress was a kindly, hardworking, and earnest woman. One winter, Rose had seen how dry and cracked Meg’s hands had gotten and gave her a hand cream that must have certainly cost her a small fortune.

“You’ll wind up damaging my skin with hands that rough.” Some might have taken Rose’s words as harsh criticism, but Meg always caught her mistress’s pleased smile when she saw how smooth Meg’s skin became after using that lotion.

Maybe Rose always wore that gentle, kind smile before she married into the royal family. Meg was just a maid, so she couldn’t protect her. She couldn’t save her. All she could do was pray that someone would help her one day.

Please...someone...anyone...rescue my Lady Rose.



Perhaps God was real after all. One day, Rose came home from a tea party seeming more at peace than she ever had before.

“I heard Count Stewart’s a real hunk of a man, and he’s rich to boot. I bet she was cozying up *real* nice with him.” All of Meg’s fellow maids were concocting the worst gossip.

Could an affair be what saves my lady? Meg thought.

“The tea smells so delightful, and the cookies are delectable. Thank you very much.”

Rose’s expression grew even gentler once the Stewart children began coming to the Vallery region to visit. Any time Meg refilled their tea, the kids would smile and thank her, regardless of her low status. She was shocked at first, but they said it so casually. Even if she said they didn’t need to be so polite with her, they kept at it.

For the Stewart family’s first visit, the staff had called jewelers and the like over so they could be prepared for whatever the Stewart siblings wanted to do when they arrived, but the Stewarts’ desires were far different from what other aristocrats wanted. Instead, they wanted to play whatever Jadwiga wanted—hide-and-seek, tag, house, and all other sorts of games. Even Rose got roped into their playtime, and it seemed like she was truly enjoying herself when she played. Seeing the two of them so at ease—a sight the servants had never seen in the capital—made the whole Vallery household seem brighter. The change was so miraculous that the servants wouldn’t have been surprised

to find out the three siblings were actually mages.

“You look as beautiful as ever, Lady Rose.” Meg praised Rose as she always did once she finished doing her hair.

Rose beamed a full-faced smile in return. “Hee hee. Thank you.” Until just a few weeks ago, she would’ve just snorted in response. This turnaround felt almost unreal. Yet despite Rose’s apparent joy, the change in the atmosphere seemed to have the opposite effect on all the maids who’d arrived with Meg, who all seemed to grow more annoyed each day.

“Lady Rose, don’t you think it’s high time we call a jeweler? Or maybe a dressmaker?” Apparently one of those maids couldn’t stand it anymore and decided to speak up. Rose had brought plenty of clothing and jewelry with her from the capital, and her father had plenty available for her so she wouldn’t feel stifled when she returned after being away for so long. She really had no reason to want for anything. Before she met the Stewarts, she might have called a merchant or two over just to stifle her constant irritation, but her happy expression these days should have signaled to the other maids that she had no need for dressmakers or the like any longer.

Rose tilted her head in confusion. “Why would I? Father already has enough jewelry and dresses for me to be content.”

That should have been the end of the conversation, but the maid surprisingly didn’t let up.

“Well, normally, you call them over a lot more often, don’t you?”

“I do? Hee hee... You know, that reminds me. The other day, little Emma told me that I didn’t even *need* jewelry.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She said it was because I shone more brilliantly than any gemstone! Isn’t she just adorable?”

“Uh-huh.”

Rose was having such a good time speaking with her, but the maid only gave her half-hearted responses; her brazen rudeness was shocking. Apparently, the

Vallery family butler was thinking the same thing as Meg, as he cleared his throat with a glare to rebuke her.

What in the world was happening? Rose was notorious for her difficult personality in the capital, so people weren't exactly lining up to be her maid. That was why Meg had been able to find work with her despite being divorced. Yet all of the other maids who were her seniors seemed to have been there *much* longer than her. But for some reason, they all seemed quite displeased that Rose was now in such good spirits, it was like she was a completely different person from the woman they'd known in the capital.

"Oh, that's right! Meg, the Stewarts will be coming by tomorrow too!" It seemed Rose was unbothered by the other maid's rude behavior as she blissfully called out to Meg.

"Yes, I'm aware. I will take care of the refreshments. What would you like me to prepare for tomorrow?"

"Hmm... I think cookies would be nice, but chocolate sounds nice as well. I believe George said he liked financiers too."

"Then I'll prepare all three options so you all can enjoy yourselves to the fullest."

"Hee hee. I just know Emma will be so pleased." Rose smiled so merrily, Meg was certain the next day was going to be a wonderful time. She never suspected something so very horrible was on the horizon.



"Lady Rose, why don't we have a picnic today? The scenery on the hill behind the manor is quite lovely, and it's very spacious, so you can run around as much as you'd like!"

"Oh, what a lovely idea! What say you, Lady Rose? I say we should!"

The next day, all the maids suggested Rose have a picnic, even the one who'd been so rude to her the day before. They all did their best to explain just how great of an idea a picnic would be.

"But don't you think it's a little bit cold out?" Rose answered, a bit befuddled

by her maids' sudden change in behavior.

"W-Well, we'll bring a quilt and lots of lap blankets! We'll make them match so they'll be nice and fancy... O-Oh, and we could have warm soup and cocoa too!"

"There's a little gazebo out there as well, so maybe we could put some cloth up to keep the wind at bay."

"But you know the Stewarts will be here any moment now. Would we be able to do all that in time?" Rose worried.

"Erm... We can have the Stewarts wait here for a little bit and prepare it as quickly as possible! In fact, would you be able to help us, Lady Rose? I think you would know better than anyone how to make the quilts look the fanciest."

"You really think so?" Rose latched onto that compliment right away.

"Oh, I do! It just won't look fancy enough without your help, Lady Rose. Why, if it were up to me, even the most beautiful quilts would wind up looking like utter trash!"

"I-I don't think that's true, but...well, perhaps we should choose some warm-colored quilts to make the cold seem a little less biting," Rose suggested.

"Oh, I knew you'd know what to do! Let's get started at once, Lady Rose! You too, Meg!"

Normally, Meg's senior maids would be utterly miserable on a day the Stewart family came to visit, but today they seemed rather motivated. It should have been a good thing, but Meg couldn't help but have a bad feeling about it. Either way, she followed Rose as she happily picked out quilts, then they made their way to the top of the hill behind the manor.

"I'll go greet the Stewarts at the door. Please let me know once you're all done here!" The maid smiled, and Meg wondered if she only imagined the sinister glint in the maid's eye.

"Let's get started, Meg. I want to make this picnic so lovely, the Stewarts won't believe their eyes!"

Reluctant though she was, Meg followed closely after Rose.

On the way up the hill, Rose spotted a carriage parked in front of the manor. “Oh dear, are our guests already here? That doesn’t look like the Stewarts’ carriage, though...” It was flashy enough that one could tell it was *definitely* not the carriage the Stewart siblings usually traveled in.

“Marquess Vallery is out today too... Perhaps it’s something urgent?” That bad feeling was gnawing at the back of Meg’s mind. “I think I’ll go see—”

Though Meg had stopped in her tracks, one of the senior maids hurried her along. “No need, Meg. It’s not like the manor is empty. We can have the servants see to our guest. *We* have a much more pressing matter at hand, as Lady Rose needs her picnic looking as flashy and fashionable as possible.”

I swear I’ve seen the crest on that carriage before... I couldn’t quite make it out at this distance, but I swear... I know I’ve seen it...

“Meeeg! Hurry up! Emma will be here any moment now!” Lady Rose and Jadwiga were merrily making their way up the hill, hand in hand. Meg couldn’t possibly ruin such a lovely moment between the two. Not when only days prior, such a scene would have been unthinkable. Meg shook her head to try to forget the strange carriage and followed after her mistress.



“So good of you to come again, Lord Carne.” The senior maids who had remained in the manor welcomed the gaudily dressed man. Messengers would regularly come to the Vallery region to check on Rose. They generally would bring personal letters from the king—but Rose never received them.

The maids knew that the more Rose felt the king was snubbing her, the more often she would try to soothe herself by buying out all the dresses and jewelry she could. As a result, when the maids placed the orders, they would tack on the dresses and accessories *they* wanted. The more often she’d shop, the easier it was for them to slip their choices in, so as soon as they’d heard she was going to the Vallery region, they volunteered right away.

But ever since that tea party with the Stewart family, she’d stopped shopping outright. It wasn’t just with dresses and jewelry either. She’d even stopped buying little accessories like ribbons, handkerchiefs, and bags as well. The maids had reached their limit, wondering why they’d wasted their time coming out to

such a backwoods dump if she was going to ruin their fun.

That was when they received a letter from the royal family. The messenger this time would be the second son of Marquess Lombart, Carne Lombart. This news gave the maids a *wicked* idea.

Carne Lombart. A twenty-three-year-old man who just graduated from the academy with exceptional grades. As he was not the heir to the marquess's business, he instead managed to find work at the castle—a position that was *extremely* competitive. Among the upper crust, Carne was well regarded and seen as the cream of the crop. But the maids and servants had a *far* different impression. While he was able to keep up appearances in front of the aristocrats and the servants who cleaned the castle, the maids had ample opportunities to see his true colors shining through when he thought no one could see.

“Ah, well, Lady Rose did ask for me to hurry. She truly can be such a handful.”

The maids would always be the ones who intercepted the king's messengers without consulting Rose, writing back whatever suited their needs. They did whatever they could to prevent the messengers from ever meeting her, and naturally they were certain to say the response came from Rose herself.

“Yes, about that... I'm so sorry, but Lady Rose is currently out at the moment. We told her the Stewart family's children would be here any moment, but we couldn't stop her.” Truthfully, she was just on the hill at the back of the manor, but the maids effortlessly piled on the lies.

The moment he heard the maid mention the Stewart family's children, Carne's ears perked up. “The Stewart family, you say? If I recall, their oldest was fifteen, and the other two are eleven and nine, correct?”

The maids knew true and well where Carne's interests lay, so they were unfazed by the fact that this man knew the ages of a count's children, whom he had no connection with whatsoever.

Carne made a vulgar laugh he never would have let slip in front of other aristocrats and gleefully announced his plans to the maids. “I'll look after the younger two. Be sure you bring them my way when they get here.”



As Meg was laying out the quilts on top of the hill, she caught a glimpse of George approaching.

Wait, was Lord George the only one coming today? Oh, but we're still setting up! What on earth are the other maids doing? Just as Meg's thoughts began to get the best of her, a strong wind blew past. It caught on the quilt and knocked Meg off-balance, but George was quick to catch her.

"Are you all right?" George asked. His arms were so muscular, it was hard to believe he was only fifteen. Meg's heart skipped a beat.

"Thank you so very much! Um, if I may ask, what brings you here, Lord George?"

"The maids told me you might need a man to help out around here. Emma and William are still back at the manor. Oh, and I kept the picnic a secret from them, of course. I really can't thank you enough for going so far out of your way for us." George bowed his head in thanks. Once again, George proved the Stewarts weren't like any other aristocrats out there.

"Oh, is George here already?!"

"It's Lord Geooorge!"

Rose and Jadwiga both took notice of George at once.

"Lady Rose, thank you for inviting us so often. Emma and William are waiting back at the mansion, so you can leave all the heavy lifting to me," George offered. "By the way, there's a carriage out front with a crest I've never seen before. Did you have other guests coming today?"

"Not that I know of, but it should be fine. We do have people who can take care of them in the manor, so I'm sure they'll come call for me if they need me. We're right here, after all. More importantly, come help me out over here," Rose said, waving George over. Though Meg was worried as well, they ignored these anxieties and continued preparing the picnic together, blissfully unaware of the incident brewing in the manor right at that moment.



Back in the manor, Emma and William were guided into a parlor with Carne Lombart. There were plenty of parlors in the Vallery manor, but this was the only one without any windows. Rose and Jadwiga were nowhere in sight. There was just a man in gaudy clothes sitting alone in there.

Just as Emma was wondering why the maids went out of their way to separate them from George and bring them here, the man stood and began to speak with a lecherous grin plastered on his face.

“Hello there! I’m Carne Lombart. You two sure are adorable, aren’t you? Wh- Why don’t we have a little fun together while we wait for Lady Rose? Mwee hee hee!” Carne began to stroke William’s cheek, hardly able to contain himself. He caressed the boy’s cheek, down to his shoulder, to his upper arm... The man wouldn’t take his hands off of William, and they were drifting ever lower, yet William seemed frozen.

“The Lombart family does *very* important work in the capital. If you play nice with me, I can make all your dreams come true. Mwee hee hee!” Carne moved to stroke Emma instead...but she slapped his hand away the second he reached for her.

“Ow! Mwee hee hee, Emma, you really shouldn’t play so rough! Who knows what would happen to your father if anyone found out you hurt me?” Carne rubbed his hand where Emma struck him and pointed to his armband, signifying that he was a messenger for the king himself. He reached out to touch Emma again and she slapped him away again, paying no heed to his warning.

“Nasty-ass pedoscum should rot in hell,” Emma muttered under her breath.

“Hmm? Did you say something? You’re a bad little girl, aren’t you, Emma? You don’t want to upset me, do you?” Carne grinned, staring Emma down. The rumors about Emma’s loveliness were true, but she didn’t seem timid at all. Rather, she was staring (glaring?) right at him.

To be honest, it was starting to bore him.

On the other hand, the youngest Stewart child was quite the sight as well, and he was trembling all over. Carne preferred the more docile types, so he approached William again.

“But William, you’re a sweet little thing. Mwee hee hee... You’ll come have some fun with me, won’t you?”

Carne wasn’t about to let this once in a lifetime chance escape him. He’d dreamed of a situation like this for as long as he could remember. At the same time, he’d been struggling to figure out how to keep such thoughts at bay since the moment he’d realized where his fantasies led.

His friends had introduced him to countless beautiful women, but they did nothing for him. Their fake smiles were so frightening, and having to date such strong-willed women was frankly exhausting for him. He wanted someone more honest. Someone purer of heart and spirit. And before he knew it, he’d begun to focus entirely on small children.

The capital was teeming with other aristocrats, so it was far too risky to be leering at children there. But in this remote territory, he could easily quash any problems that arose. After all, he was the *king’s messenger*. He had authority granted to him by the king and, luckily for him, the maids were even helping him out. And right before his eyes was William, who was just as cute as his ideal fantasy. He was obedient, timid, and oh so young. Carne was *extremely* saddened that William happened to be a boy, but he felt like a young boy would suit his needs just fine too. Especially with that adorable face of his...?

William was trembling, but there was something off in his expression. It wasn’t fear... No, it was more like...he was looking at a long-lost friend...? Or was it...pity?

His older sister was radiating pure hatred, like she was staring at the scum of the earth. Yet William’s gaze was kind and pitying. Almost all of the children Carne had interacted with before had looked at him with fear...but something was strange about these two.

“We’re...the same...” William choked out. His eyes were watering.

“We’re...what now?” Carne was most confused and doubted his ears over what William had just said.

“I never thought I’d meet a kindred spirit in a place like this! But Lord Carne, you can’t do this! If you cross this line, you’ll tarnish the name of every other lolicon!”

“Huh? What does that...William?” Carne lowered himself to William’s eye level, and the boy placed a hand on his shoulder while shaking his head.

“You can’t go into the realm of 3D, my brother. 3D is the no-go zone. Kids, especially little girls, are so pure and righteous and beautiful. They’re *sacred*. Why would you go and tarnish them with your own hand?!” Carne had no idea what William was going on about, but he seemed very, very serious.

“Wh-What does 3D mean...?”

“I get you, Lord Carne. I understand you *all too well*! Little girls are so pure, and innocent, and adorable. They don’t have a mean bone in their body. They’re so open-minded that they’d even let an unwashed old man with unkempt hair into their lives! And their tiny bod— UGWAH!” William, who had been talking just moments ago, was now on the floor. The “pure, innocent, adorable, beautiful, little girl without a mean bone in her body” in the room had just kicked William straight to the ground.

“Rot in hell, pedoscum.”

William groaned and pulled himself back up, rubbing his neck where Emma had kicked him. “A-As you can see... Ow, ow, ow... Some 3D girls can’t call themselves *any* of those thi— AGHAA!” William was kicked back down right as he’d just gotten back up.

“Emma, you’re going to kill him! Look, he might die from that!” Carne tried to help William up from where he was convulsing on the floor. He was genuinely frightened by how different this girl was from the little girls he’d always dreamed of.

This isn’t...what little girls...are supposed to be like!

“You degenerate freak of nature,” Emma practically spit, looking like she was staring at rotting garbage. These were *not* the words of an innocent little girl.

“EEEEEEK!”

This is all wrong! Little girls are supposed to be honest! Timid! Demure! And...and they would never look at me with such utter scorn and disgust! Little girls aren’t supposed to be so terrifying!

“Not all girls are demure and defenseless... Yet we lolicons are far too fragile to look that truth in the eye! In fact, we aren’t able to handle it! My sister’s barbaric nature is *nothing* in the face of that knowledge!” William stood shakily as he gave his impassioned speech, his body covered in bruises.

These siblings were terrible to each other, weren’t they?

“W-William... What do you suggest we do, then...?” Carne was staring at William to avoid Emma’s cold glare.

Even though William was using strange words he couldn’t understand, Carne knew the boy saw exactly what was plaguing the older man’s mind. He’d never met anyone who understood his nature so well in his life. After all, if anyone in high society found out, he would have been shunned forever. He’d hidden it. He’d forced himself to suppress it and tried his best to fit in. Yet after all that effort...even the little girls of his imagination would betray his idealistic expectations.

There was nothing left for him. He could never love. If little girls could be the way that William said they were, then it would be enough to break him.

“Lord Carne. Come with me... Let me show you a world of imagination,” William responded with a look of utter magnanimity.

“Whatever, Willy Nyanka,” Emma spat.

William ignored Emma’s barbed comment, fishing out a single piece of paper from his pocket and handing it to Carne, who was still desperately trying to figure out what was going on.

“This is my greatest treasure, and I’m giving it to you now, Lord Carne. This is a one-of-a-kind sacred artifact, one that can save people like us,” William said.

A sacred artifact?! Carne reached his trembling hand up to take the paper from William, as though his very life depended on it. The moment he unfolded the paper, he understood. This was it. This was what he’d always longed for. His very body, mind, and soul cried out in joy.

“Wh-What in the world *is* this?” Carne asked.

“It’s Card Catpurr Pawkura.”

“Sh-She’s beautiful...” On the paper was a young girl dressed in a pink outfit never before seen in this world. She had a bashful smile, and it was like her large eyes saw into Carne’s soul. She was the embodiment of purity. She was more adorable than anything he’d ever seen in real life, or even his wildest dreams and ideals. She was perfection.

“And just so you know...she says ‘hoeh’ when she’s befuddled.”

“‘Hoeh’...?”

“That’s right. Hoeh.”

Carne swallowed loudly. *My gracious... A little girl...saying ‘hoeh’ when she’s befuddled? It’s too damn good! What is this magic?! How in the world?! It’s just a picture on a piece of paper of a lovely little girl in a style I’d never seen before...yet my heart is burning with love! And you’re telling me she says ‘hoeh’ to boot?!*

“Our only consolation is in the 2D realm. You have no idea how much I suffered to get this picture commissioned...” William could barely speak for fear of his tears spilling over. He’d fully resolved himself to give his greatest treasure to the only kindred spirit he’d ever met in this world, even if it tore him apart inside.

“Ew, you’ve been carrying that with you everywhere, Peyta?” Emma was taken aback and more than a little grossed out. William’s treasure, his one and only sacred relic, was actually a picture that Emma drew. This miraculous image was born by combining the artistic skill Emma had been honing with insect sketches since she was young and Minato’s memory from their past life. When Peyta/William realized he could bring one of his 2D girls into this world with him, he begged his sister to grant his wish, with tears in his eyes. And thus, his beloved Pawkura was his once more.

“My only regret... My one and only regret is that I couldn’t get a picture of a Fleacure too...!” William doubled over in despair—one even worse than the despair Carne felt only moments before.

“Dude, I *told* you I don’t know any Fleacures!”

Time could be so very cruel. The only people who really knew much about

Fleacures in Minato's generation were little kids or adult superfans, and Minato wasn't either.

"My sister is the only one in this world who can draw a picture like this. There are so many other little girls like Pawkura in my mind—mostly Fleacures—and it just destroys me that I can't share them with you..." William cried.

"Y-You're the one who drew this, Emma?" Carne's heart felt like it was going to beat out of his chest. The girl in the picture was the very picture of purity. This paper girl was even more impeccable than he had ever imagined. She was the answer to all those ambiguous desires he'd chased after for all these years. There was only one of these drawings in the whole world, and William was willing to give it to Carne...

"Emma, please draw another Pawkura! I can't steal something so sacred from a fellow man of culture!" Though now that Carne had it, he couldn't possibly let it go. Even still, he felt terrible for William's sacrifice. The boy was the only person in the whole world who could ever understand him. And Carne understood *his* feelings all too well.

"Please, sis! Please draw another one!"

"We're begging you, Emma!"

William and Carne both got down on their hands and knees to beg Emma for another drawing. They could feel her disgusted gaze bearing down on the back of their heads, but they were desperate...desperate for just one more of her sacred pictures.



At the top of the hill, the picnic preparations were finally reaching their conclusion with George's assistance. The warm-colored quilts, blankets, and cloth to keep the wind at bay inside the gazebo had Rose and Jadwiga both nodding with full approval.

"Meeeg? Could you go fetch Lady Emma and Lord William?" one of the maids asked Meg with a nasty grin, and Meg took off toward the manor.

Now that Meg was able to get a good look at the flashy crest that was adorning the carriage at front, she felt her blood run cold.

That's the Lombart family crest... Why would a Lombart be here, when their property is so close to the capital? Marquess Lombart's heir had a job that made it difficult to work away from the capital for very long...so the person in that carriage must be...Lord Carne!

Carne had a reputation for being an outstanding young man among the aristocrats of high society, but Meg was a maid. She knew the truth. She knew the way Carne looked at children was *wrong*. She knew you couldn't leave children alone with him, especially any who were under fifteen. The lower ranked servants and maids had ample opportunity to see his true nature, and the rumors were spreading slowly but surely.

Emma and William were in danger.

Carne was going to try to use the very children who had saved Rose for his own wicked desires.

How long had it been since the carriage arrived? How long had it been since George arrived? And what if, judging by her senior maids' expressions, they had deliberately offered Emma and William up to Carne because they were so young and beautiful?

I knew something was wrong. How could they do something so terrible?! Please, please say the children are safe!

She was so frantic, it was difficult for her legs to keep up. When she finally reached the guest parlor, she heard Emma's voice loud and clear as she opened the door.

"All right, we're saying it one more time to make sure it gets drilled into your skulls. What are little girls?"

Meg couldn't believe her eyes. Emma was lazily sitting on a chair, with Carne and William standing fully upright before her.

"L-Little girls are what the heart yearns for from afar! Precious gems to long for in one's lonesome! You do not look at them, touch them, or even speak to them!" the two of them barked. They were in even more perfect unison than one might see during a knight's training session. When they said not to look, they covered their eyes. When they said not to touch, they crossed their arms

into an X. When they said not to speak, they covered their mouths. Other than those movements, they stood perfectly straight and still.

“You break your vows, I tear this to shreds,” Emma said, waving a piece of paper before them.

“Please, no! Anything but that!” they wailed.

William accepted the paper, holding it over his head like he was worshipping it. He and Carne were practically praying in reverence over it.

“I-I never thought I’d get to see Pawkura in her school uniform again...” William sniffled.

“The pink outfit was so cute, but this one is just as magnificent...”

At a closer look, Meg realized the two of them were crying. *What in the world could have happened in such a short time?*

Apparently, Meg’s deepest fear hadn’t come to pass, but she couldn’t understand the outcome before her.

“P-Pardon me, but...our preparations are complete, so...” Meg announced hesitantly, making Emma rise.

“Thank you for coming to get us! Oh, I’m so excited to get to see Lady Rose! I can’t wait!” As Emma turned around, she was back to the innocent little girl she’d always known.

“Ahem. Then I believe I should make my way home,” Carne said, giddily leaving the room.

As he was leaving, Emma gave him a final warning. “Don’t you dare forget our promise, Lord Carne.”

“Lady Emma, I swear to the heavens above that I will keep it.” With a nod, Carne then woke his carriage driver and left the Vallery region. He’d entirely forgotten to pass on both the king’s message and his letter.

Carne Lombart, who had been destined to become the serial killer responsible for the deaths of countless young girls in the capital, now walked a new path because of this simple meeting. Instead, he became a patron who freely spent his income on numerous painters in the capital, thus becoming a leading figure

whose name would go down in history for his support of the arts in the kingdom.



After the dust had settled on the coup attempt in the capital and the localized barrier crisis in the Vallery region was resolved, the king asked his concubine a curious question.

“Rose, I sent you so many letters... What did you think of them?”

“What letters could you be talking about, my lord?”

“All the letters I sent you while you were in Vallery, of course!”

“I received no letters while I was there...”

“Ah, I see. You must still be angry with me for sending you away without explanation.”

“No, not at all. You were worried for our safety. I couldn’t be angry about that. But I mean it when I say that I never received any personal letters from you while I was back home.”

“But how could that be? Who wouldn’t deliver a letter from the king?”

This wasn’t just one or two letters. This was every single one of the letters the king had sent. There was no way *all* of them could have gone missing. What were his messengers and her servants even *doing*?

“Your Majesty, is something the matter? You look angry.”

“No, not at all.” The king evaded the question, thinking that his suspicions might upset Rose.

“Then, what was in those letters, Your Majesty?”

“I love you.”

“What?”

“I was writing to tell you how much I love you.”

“Oh, Your Majesty... ♥”

After this, the king ordered an investigation behind closed doors and all of

Meg's senior maids' wicked deeds were exposed. They were punished in secret to protect Rose's feelings. As a result, Rose's ever-loyal maid, Meg, was promoted to head maid at a shockingly early age.

Afterword

Hello everyone. It's nice to meet you. My name is Choco. I can't thank you enough for choosing to read my book, *The Tanaka Family Reincarnates*. It was made by a cat lover about cat lovers for cat lovers. When it was first picked up on the light novel publishing site *Shosetsu ni Narou*, I had so many people reaching out to me that it felt unreal. And now it's been picked up for actual novelization. I was so thrilled, my heart rate was through the roof and I could barely catch my breath for a whole month. (I'm totally fine.)

All of this is thanks to all of my readers who have supported me all this time. I'd like to especially thank my readers from when this was a web novel. As the story really began to come into its own, so many people reached out to me through typo reports and kudos to let me know about my mistakes. The Tanaka family's airheadedness definitely came from my own experiences.

I'd also like to use this space to thank kaworu for drawing the best illustrations ever for the Tanaka family. The second I got to see the character designs, I couldn't stop myself from screaming "STYLISH!" in English and everything.

And I'd also like to thank all of the people in charge who taught me everything I needed to know for my first work. (I originally wrote it on my cell phone, so it had to be done on the computer once it was novelized *sweatdrop*)

I hope you'll all keep reading along from here on out! Thank you for all your support!

Choco

The Tanaka Family Reincarnates

Choco ill.: kaworu







Together again at last.

MEOW!

I wanted to
see you again so badly.
I knew it was impossible,
yet I wanted it more
than anything.

**YOU'VE
GOTTEN
SO BIG!**

Cat: Kongming

One of the Tanakas' cats who died long before the family reincarnated. For some reason, she's a massive nekomata now. She reincarnated in this new world to be with her family—and Emma—once more.



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The Tanaka Family Reincarnates: Volume 1

by Choco

Translated by Sasha Schiller Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

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