

Author

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Thank you
for your
purchase!

vol. 9

PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

**I CAN GO BACK TO MY WORLD
WHENEVER I WANT!**

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Summary of the Previous Volume

“Could you be my husband, meow?” Kilpha asked me at the guild’s drinking hall one evening.

Needless to say, I hadn’t been expecting it *at all*. When I queried why she wanted me to be her husband, she clarified she only needed me to *pretend* to be her boyfriend-slash-fiancé in order to give her family some peace of mind. Kilpha was one of my dearest friends, so I agreed to her request without a second’s hesitation.

And so, the two of us—plus Aina and a number of our other friends who’d joined us for various reasons—departed for Kilpha’s hometown of Zudah Village, situated in the Dura Forest. This was set to be her first time back home in seven years, and at the time, I really thought we would simply go and pay our respects to Kilpha’s family, spend a couple of days in the cat-sìths’ village, then head back to Ninoritch. But all of a sudden, a cat-sìth claiming to be Kilpha’s fiancé showed up, and everything started going downhill. It turned out that Kilpha had been betrothed to this man since before she was even born, and breaking off their engagement was the main reason she had asked me to pretend to be her fiancé.

And if that wasn’t a big enough mess already, we also learned that conditions had worsened considerably for the beastfolk residing in the Dura Forest in the seven years since Kilpha had left. The forest was under the control of the city-state of Orvil, a bustling trading hub on the border of the Giruam Kingdom, and ever since the new king of Orvil ascended to the throne, the beastfolk had found themselves paying massive taxes as well as being heavily discriminated against. To make matters worse, a pack of ogres had moved into the forest, and without any money to feed themselves, the beastfolk wouldn’t have the strength to fight them off if the monsters attacked their villages.

“You just have to agree to become my wife. If you do, I promise I’ll keep on protecting Zudah Village,” Sajiri had said to Kilpha.

I could tell Kilpha was seriously considering taking him up on the offer, and I tried everything in my power to convince her against such a course of action, repeatedly assuring her that we'd find a way to save her village together. But in the end, she decided to move back to Zudah Village and marry Sajiri. With most of the forest's resources depleted, it was near on impossible for the cat-sìths to gather the food they needed by themselves any longer, and not only that, but all of the village's hunters had left to find work in Orvil, leaving the village pretty much defenseless. If the ogres were to attack again, it was unlikely any of the cat-sìths would survive. Kilpha had seen what hunger had done to the bearfolk with her own eyes. She had witnessed the destruction of the apefolk's village wrought by the ogres. Seeing the overwhelming grief and suffering endured by the beastfolk, she must have come to the conclusion that the safest way to save her own brethren from a similar fate was to bite the bullet and marry Sajiri.

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep our promise, Shiro, meow," were the last words she said to me. A stiff smile creased up her face, but it was obvious she was on the verge of tears.

"Bring it on," I murmured to myself, more enraged than I had ever been in my life. "Bring it on, Sajiri."

That louse was the reason she had been forced to make that face.

"If no one's going to help the beastfolk of Dura Forest, then I will," I promised myself. "I'll take Kilpha back, no matter what."

I would bring her back to Ninoritch without fail.

Chapter One: Returning to Orvil

“The longtails probably won’t chase us this far out.” Valeria set me down on my feet when she deemed we were far enough away to be safe. “How are you holding up, Shiro?” she asked, her tone tinged with concern.

Despite running for thirty minutes straight with me on her back, she wasn’t even the slightest bit out of breath, and even had the presence of mind to worry about how I was coping.

“Not so good, to be totally honest,” I said.

“Yeah, I can imagine. That scumbag Sajiri stole your fiancée from you, after all.”

A little over thirty minutes ago, Valeria and I had been chasing Kilpha through the forest to Zudah Village to see what situation she had sprinted headlong into, but when we got there, she informed me to my dismay that she had decided to settle down in her home village and marry Sajiri, who had just saved the place from an ogre raid. Needless to say, he was now a hero in the eyes of the other cat-sìths and they must have been overjoyed when they learned that the daughter of their chieftain had finally agreed to marry him. Then, I blundered in, the hume who wanted to take Kilpha away from them. It really was no wonder that in their eyes, I was simply an obstacle they needed to get rid of. Sensing the cat-sìths’ hostility toward me, Valeria decided our best option was to get the heck out of there, and despite me refusing to budge, she threw me over her shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes and sprinted out of the village. A few of the cat-sìths gave chase, but most likely only to ensure we wouldn’t come back since it hadn’t taken us long to lose them.

“Still, those longtails sure are stupid if they consider *you* their enemy,” Valeria said.

“I’m not blaming them for that. It really only highlights just how badly the humes from Orvil have been treating them this whole time.”

Valeria raised an eyebrow at this response. “Well, color me surprised. I didn’t think I’d ever hear a hume sticking up for longtails.”

“It’s not about race,” I said. “When people find themselves backed into a corner, they tend to cling onto whatever little hope they have left, and turn hostile against folk of the same race as their oppressors.”

Valeria hummed as she considered this.

“This time around, that ‘little hope’ is Sajiri, and I’m the big bad hume. That’s all there is to it,” I concluded.

I completely understood why Kilpha had decided to marry Sajiri. She wanted to ensure the cat-sìths wouldn’t die of hunger and that her village wouldn’t be destroyed in an ogre raid, and to prevent those two things from happening, securing help from Nahato Village was an absolute necessity. By sacrificing her dreams and freedom through her decision to marry Sajiri, she felt she could protect her brethren.

“A noble sacrifice. Unfortunately, *I’m* not nearly noble enough to let my friend be taken from me without a fight,” I muttered, my harsh tone surprising even myself.

Valeria must have sensed my anger, for she placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “If you need help getting Kilpha back, you can count on me,” she assured me.

“Miss Valeria...” I breathed.

“I still owe you for saving my village.”

“You owe me nothing, I promise. Anyway, for now...” I paused and gazed beyond the forest, in the direction of Orvil. “I’d like to be reunited with my other companions.”



The two of us made our way back to the apefolk’s village, where we found Duane and Celes waiting for us. We held a memorial service for all of the warriors who had died in the ogre raid, before discussing what we would do next. Since the apefolk’s village had been pretty much leveled in the raid,

Valeria decided she would take the survivors to Lugu, which meant we would be parting ways for the time being.

“Shiro, if you ever need my help, don’t hesitate to come and find me, you hear?” she said to me before leaving. I was incredibly grateful to her for her kindness.

After that, Duane, Celes, and I made our way back to the Fleeting Banquet, the inn in Orvil that I had reserved a good chunk of. Duane informed me he had booked out the rest of the establishment while I’d been busy wandering from beastfolk village to beastfolk village in the forest, which meant we had the run of the place, and sure enough, when I pushed open the main door, it wasn’t a receptionist who greeted me, but Aina.

“Mister Shiro, you’re back!” she squealed, throwing herself into my arms as soon as I crossed the threshold.

I could only assume she must have been spending most of her time in the inn’s dining hall, staring at the door and waiting for my return. Tears welled up in her eyes at the sight of me, which told me the poor thing must have been really worried that something had happened to me out in the forest.

“Yup, I’m back, Aina,” I said softly.

“Yeah, you really are,” she mumbled as she wiped away the tears, finally allowing herself to relax now that she knew I was alive and well.

“Welcome back, master,” Dramom said, joining us.

“Wewcome back, pa-pa,” Suama babbled happily.

It seemed the two of them had been hanging around and waiting for me on the first floor too. Just like Aina, they seemed glad I had returned in one piece.

“Hi, Dramom. It’s good to see you again. You too, Suama. Sorry for making you worry,” I said to the little dragon girl.

“Ai!” she squealed in response.

Aina glanced behind me and a confused look flashed across her face when she only saw Duane and Celes there. “Mister Shiro, isn’t Miss Kilpha with you?” she asked, clearly finding her absence odd.

I didn't say a word, but my expression must have betrayed me, for the little girl shot me a worried look. "Mister Shiro?" she repeated.

Since I wasn't replying to her question, she turned to Celes instead. "Miss Celes, isn't Miss Kilpha with you?" she asked.

The demon simply shook her head in silence.

"Mister Duane, what happened?" Aina probed.

"It seems like it's a long story. Miss Celes and I don't really know the details either," he replied, a troubled look on his face.

"I see..." the little girl muttered before looking up at me again. This time, though, she didn't utter a word. She automatically understood that it was a serious matter and waited for me to speak.

"Aina, is Shess up in your room?" I asked, deciding against telling her about Kilpha's situation for the time being.

"Um, Miss Shess and Miss Luza went for a walk," she said.

Shess had apparently claimed that she *knew* I would return safely. "You worry too much, Aina," she had said. "This is Amata we're talking about! He'll be just fine!"

But despite her words, it seemed the little princess had been restless, so Luza had suggested going for a walk to calm her nerves a little. A quick glance at the clock told me it was a little before five in the evening, which meant even though the sun wasn't starting to set just yet, it was almost time for all the alcohol-loving middle-aged men to knock off work, and they'd soon be roaming the streets, crawling from one tavern to the next. And be it in Japan or Ruffaltio, drunkards sure were a pain to deal with. Luza might not have been the brightest bulb in the box, but I was sure that even she would realize that it wasn't safe for Shess to be roaming around outside at that time of the evening. At least, I hoped she would.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Aina added, "I think Shess will be back soon, though. After all, big cities get dangerous at night, right?" It seemed we were on the same wavelength.

“Yup, they sure do. So unless Luza has lost sight of Shess, the two of them should be getting back any moment now,” I said.

“If you’re worried about Lady Shess’s well-being, would you like me to go look for her, Shiro?” Duane offered.

“Master, give me the order and I shall go find her right away,” Dramom also volunteered.

“You need not bother,” Celes said matter-of-factly. “The hume woman is quite strong. The girl will probably be fine.”

At that moment, the main door was flung open and in walked Shess and Luza.

“Aina, I have returned,” the little princess announced.

Nice timing, I thought. Shess’s footsteps sounded a little louder than usual, as if she were stomping.

“You won’t *believe* what I just saw, Aina!” she exclaimed. “This country is *awful*! They treat beastfolk like slaves here, and—Huh? Amata?” She froze. It seemed the little princess had finally become aware of my presence.

Her reaction caused a chuckle to escape my lips. “Welcome back, Shess and Luza.”

Shess quickly snapped out of her confusion. “You took *way* too long to get back here, Amata!” she berated before rushing over to me. “Aina and I were worried about you! We all were!”

“Yeah! You absolute moron, Amata!” Luza chided, joining in with the tongue-lashing. “Do you have any *idea* how much you made the pri—I mean, how much you made my lady worry?”

“Sorry,” was all I could utter by way of reply, and both Shess and Luza seemed taken aback by my solemn tone.

“Amata, did something happen? And where’s Kilpha? Didn’t she come back with you?” Shess asked.

“Is she upstairs? She must have headed up to her room already, right?” Luza speculated.

The two of them appeared to have finally noticed my total lack of enthusiasm, the troubled look on Aina's face, and Kilpha's absence, which explained the barrage of questions they were raining down upon me.

"Amata, you'd better answer me right this—" Shess started, but I raised my hand to get her to stop.

I looked at my companions in turn, then finally said, "There's something I need to talk to all of you about."

Chapter Two: What Happened in the Forest

We relocated to Shess and Aina's room because they had a large round table that could seat all of us and was perfect for lengthy discussions.

"Let's see..." I murmured. "Where should I start?"

We all sat down at the table, with Aina on my right, circling around through Shess, Luza, Duane, Celes, and Dramom, before reaching Suama on my left. For a while, no one said a word, because they were all waiting for me to tell them what had happened to Kilpha, but there was simply too much that I wanted to tell them to know where to start. There was everything I'd seen and heard in the forest, the group of ogres we'd defeated, and of course, Kilpha's decision to stay in her village. I hadn't really been in the Dura Forest all that long, but a whole lot had happened in that time.

"I'm not sure if I'll be able to describe what happened in the forest clearly enough, though," I mumbled.

I glanced at Aina and saw that the little girl was staring at me. From the look in her eyes, I could tell she was worried about Kilpha. *Guess I'll start there, then.*

"Okay, I'll tell you guys what happened to Kilpha first," I said, composing myself. "So it turned out that the reason she asked me to pretend to be her fiancé was because she didn't want to marry the man she had been betrothed to by her grandmother."

"*Betrothed?!'*" Shess exclaimed. "Kilpha?"

Being the Giruam Kingdom's first princess, the word "betrothed" must have struck a nerve with her.

"Shess, what does 'betrothed' mean?" Aina asked.

"You don't know? It's when you're engaged to someone whom you will marry in the future," her friend explained.

Aina gasped. "What? Miss Kilpha's getting *married?!'*"

“Wh-Why are you asking me? How would I know?” Shess replied.

“I wonder what kind of person her future husband is...” Aina mused aloud.

“Her ‘betrothed,’ not ‘future husband,’” Shess corrected. “And I assume he’s a cat-sith.”

The two girls chatted excitedly about Kilpha’s future partner until Aina suddenly seemed to remember something.

“Wait. Hold on a second. Mister Shiro, did you say Miss Kilpha doesn’t *want* to marry her ‘betrothed’?” she asked, peering at me with a perplexed look on her face.

“Yup, that’s what I said. Kilpha’s fiancé is—how should I put it?—a bit *rowdy*, let’s say. She despises him.”

When Kilpha initially left Zudah Village, she had promised her grandmother and the other cat-siths that she would find someone stronger than Sajiri to be her husband. But having known Sajiri her entire life, she knew he wouldn’t stand aside without a fight, meaning he would undoubtedly challenge Kilpha’s prospective husband to a duel, however impressively strong he looked. The problem with that was Sajiri was crazy strong himself and his abilities put him on a par with at least a gold-ranked adventurer, so it went without saying that beating him in a duel would be no easy task, even for the strongest of adventurers. That explained why Kilpha had come up with another plan, asking me—Ninoritch’s resident beanpole—to pretend to be her fiancé in the hopes that my noodle arms would deter Sajiri from fighting me. And as it turned out, it was a winning strategy.

“At first, Sajiri fully intended to fight me, pouncing on me without even giving me time to react. But when Kilpha told him I was a merchant, he lost all interest in me,” I recounted to my companions. Up until that point, everything had been going exactly according to Kilpha’s plan, but unfortunately, her triumph was short-lived. “We soon found out that the lives of the beastfolk in Dura Forest had changed *a lot* in the seven years since Kilpha left her village,” I explained.

When the new king of Orvil ascended to the throne, he implemented drastic policies that greatly affected the beastfolk. They found themselves subjected to higher taxes than humes and were barred from joining the city’s Adventurers’

Guild. Merchants refused to buy furs and pelts from beastfolk hunters unless they agreed to lower their prices considerably, but at the same time, charged exorbitant rates for the grain and medicine the beastfolk needed to survive the winter months.

“With the merchants forcing them to lower their prices, the beastfolk had to hunt more and more just to break even, but by doing that, they accidentally wiped out nearly the whole of the forest’s monster population, leaving them with nothing left to hunt.”

“What? Is that *true*? A forest completely running out of monsters is crazy!” Duane said, shaking his head as if he could hardly believe his ears. “At least, I’ve never heard of anything like that happening in Lord Bashure’s domain.”

“Neither have I,” Shess piped up. “How about you, Luza?”

“It’s never happened in my barony either.”

All three were adamant that nothing like that had ever happened in their territories—or in Duane’s case, in his lord’s territory. In Japan, you often heard about species going extinct due to overhunting, but it seemed in this world, it was largely unheard of (though I hoped the creatures of Dura Forest hadn’t disappeared for good).

“With no monsters left to hunt in the forest, the beastfolk lost their only method of earning money, and by extension, getting provisions,” I continued. “As a result, the hunters left to look for work in Orvil so they could support their families. It’s been about two years since then and they still haven’t returned.”

I recounted everything else I’d seen and learned in the forest to my companions: how impoverished and emaciated the beastfolk I had encountered had been; how the Lamentation of the Forest, the Dura Forest’s local disease, had ripped through the villages because the beastfolk were too poor to buy medicine to treat it; how the ogres had moved into the forest as if to rub salt into the beastfolk’s wounds; how Kilpha’s village relied solely on Nahato Village for its continued survival, and so on and so forth. The longer I spoke, the more depressed I grew, and the same was true of my companions. With each passing minute, their expressions grew more and more glum.

“In the end, Kilpha decided to stay in Zudah Village and...” It took a lot of

willpower for me to finish the sentence. "...marry Sajiri in order to protect her people."

My companions let out a collective gasp.

"And that's it. That's the gist of what happened," I said, letting out a sigh.

As I'd expected, the first person to show a reaction to my story was Aina. "Miss Kilpha..." she mewled as tears pooled in her eyes.

Shess was next to speak. "I can't believe it!" she exclaimed. "I *thought* it was strange that all of the tougher jobs in the city were being performed by beastfolk, but I get it now. And the colosseum... Don't even get me started on the colosseum! This place is *awful* to beastfolk! It's plain *wrong*!"

"Please compose yourself, my lady," Luza interjected, reaching a hand out toward Shess to try and pacify her, which got swatted away.

"How am I supposed to stay *calm* in these circumstances?" Shess fumed. "There might be beastfolk dying out there as we speak!" Her face was red with fury.

"Shess, did you see something out in the city?" I asked.

"I did. I saw *lots* of things," the princess said.

"Would you tell me about them?"

"I..." Shess started but seemed lost for words, so Luza picked up the baton.

"My lady and I took a stroll around the city while we were waiting for you to return, Amata, and what we saw was awful, to say the least."

According to Luza, Shess had been extremely restless since Duane and Celes had left the inn to search for me in the forest, so the swordswoman had suggested a walk for a change of pace. After all, there was plenty for tourists to do in Orvil. There were taverns where you could enjoy traditional dishes from surrounding nations while listening to minstrels singing famous tales of heroism, busy marketplaces bustling with merchants selling rare goods from all across the continent, which was the kind of sight you only found in trading hubs, and there was even a colosseum.

Now, it should be noted that Luza was Shess's personal guard, and she had

spent most of her life devoting herself to improving her swordsmanship in order to protect her lady, so the colosseum—Orvil’s most famous attraction—was a must-see for her. In all honesty, I personally found the idea of taking a nine-year-old to watch people fight each other *slightly* questionable (that sort of thing seemed a little too, uh, *stimulating* for kids), but Luza clearly didn’t see any problem with it, and she’d happily led Shess to the colosseum. With her heart beating hard in her chest from the excitement of being in an arena for the first time in her life, the swordswoman had wondered what kind of intense fighting she would get to witness. However, nothing could have possibly prepared her or the princess for the sight that had greeted them when they entered the colosseum.

“They make beastfolk fight each other to the death in that wretched place,” Shess spat.

My jaw hit the floor. “*What?! Are you serious?*”

The gladiator show Luza and Shess spectated had been in particularly poor taste, because not only had the organizers made two dogfolk fight each other to the death, but according to the announcer, the pair were brothers.

“That’s definitely *not* the kind of thing you should have let Shess watch,” I said, frowning.

“I-I know,” Luza stammered. “My lady tried to barge her way into the arena to stop the fight, so I had to quickly grab her and run out.”

Shess had apparently tried to climb over the fence surrounding the arena, all the while shouting over and over that the fight was canceled. Luza immediately went to stop her, and when she noticed a guard making his way toward them, she hoicked the little princess into her arms and made a mad dash for the exit.

“And it’s not just at the colosseum,” Luza continued. “When we were walking through the city, we noticed that all of the tougher jobs were being carried out by beastfolk. Stuff like transporting ridiculously heavy stones from one end of the city to another, or repairing the town walls without a safety rope. We were even told by a passerby that the beastfolk who couldn’t work anymore were tossed aside and left to fend for themselves in the slums.”

Luza’s tale was so horrifying, I found myself having to cover Suama’s ears

halfway through. *So that's how it is here, huh?* I reflected. All three of us had borne witness to the terrible conditions the beastfolk from Orvil lived in—me while out in the forest, and Shess and Luza in the city itself.

“I’ve made up my mind,” Shess announced, suddenly getting up from her seat.

“Shess?” Aina and I said in unison.

“My lady?” Luza inquired.

Shess clenched her little fists. “I am going to make a complaint directly to the king and tell him that he shouldn’t be treating beastfolk this way!”

Her words were totally outrageous, but the look in her eye showed she was dead serious about it.

“P-Princess?” Luza squeaked, goggling at Shess. She clearly couldn’t believe her ears either. “Y-You cannot do that, princess! You can’t! You absolutely *can’t!*”



“Don’t try to stop me, Luza. I *will* go and talk to him, and I really mean it this time!” Shess declared.

“You can’t, princess! You really—You really *can’t*!” Luza exclaimed, tears pooling in her eyes.

Judging by the fact that she had unconsciously switched back to calling Shess by her real title instead of just “my lady,” it was obvious how distraught she was, and I frankly couldn’t blame her. Shess had basically announced that she was planning to head off and insult the king of a neighboring nation. Luza knew that if she didn’t stop her, she might end up losing her position as Shess’s personal guard. Hell, for something that big with all of its potential ramifications, it wouldn’t even surprise me if Shess lost her own title because of it.

“I’m begging you, princess! Please, please, *please* don’t go! Please!” Luza sobbed. She was full-on bawling by this point, not caring in the slightest that the rest of us were in the room.

“Lady Shess, could I please ask you to reconsider?” Duane piped up. Naturally, being the gentleman he was, he didn’t forget to offer his handkerchief to Luza, so she could wipe away her tears.

Celes had been silent up to this point, but she offered her own thoughts at this juncture too. “Contain yourself, Shessfelia,” she said, admonishing the little girl. “If you act recklessly, you will put Luza’s position in jeopardy. If you truly care about her, you will abandon your course of action.”

Well, would you look at that? Celes is being sensible for once! I had to admit, I was a little bit moved by just how far she had come.

“B-But I—” Shess started to argue, but Celes wasn’t having any of it.

“Keep quiet and listen.”

A moment later, an unsettling smile was curling the demon’s lips upward. *Uh-oh*, I thought. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

“You can stay here. All Shiro has to do is give the order and I will bring you the king’s head. That should solve all of our problems, should it not?” She turned to

me. “What do you think, Shiro? Will you give the order?”

I just stood there in total shock for a few moments. I had already figured out that Celes was going to say something totally outrageous, but never in a million years would I have guessed that she would actually suggest *killing* the King of Orvil. *Also, why should I be the one to decide whether he lives or not?! I* protested in my head.

“Now, come on, Celes, don’t you think that’s a little *too*—” I started, but Dramom interrupted me.

“You are as witless as ever, demon,” she sneered, shaking her head. “Even if you kill this nation’s king, what guarantee is there that the next one will be any better?”

“Y-Yeah, Dramom’s right!” I agreed. “Even if you did go and kill the king, that might not solve our problems.”

Celes let out an unimpressed sound. “Well, what say you, then, Immortal Dragon? Do you have a solution?”

Dramom nodded confidently. “Of course. Master’s issue is that the humes of this city are treating the beastfolk badly. As such, it is quite simple.”

She stood up, a radiant smile splashed across her face. *This doesn’t bode well either, does it?*

“I shall destroy the city in its entirety.”

Her statement left everyone in the room speechless. Shess, Luza, and Duane seemed particularly flabbergasted, since they didn’t know Dramom as well as the rest of us.

“Uh, D-Dramom?” I said.

She either didn’t hear me or didn’t care what I had to say because she blithely continued talking. “I will not let anyone get away with causing grief for my master. Even if I had a god as my opponent, I would find a way to punish them.”

“Um, Miss Dramom?” Aina said, trying to get her attention, but it was to no avail.

“And so, I shall kill all of the humes living in this city and purify it so that my

master never has to worry again.”

“Ma-ma?” Suama chirruped, but even she couldn’t interrupt Dramom’s speech.

“Naturally, I shall also exterminate the cat-sith who wishes to take Kilpha as his wife, as well as anyone else who dares to stand in my way. I will annihilate everything that has ever caused my master to worry!”

The more she talked about killing, destroying, and extermination, the more excited she seemed to get. Her cheeks had gone red and she looked like she was itching to make a start on carrying out her proposal.

“Luza! Stop her!” Shess ordered.

“P-P-Princess?!” Luza squeaked. “Don’t be unreasonable! This is a dragon we’re talking about here! There’s no way I can stop her!”

“In that case, you do it, Duane!” the little princess commanded.

Duane faltered momentarily before a resigned look appeared on his face. “Understood. If it is your wish, my lady, I shall risk my life to stop Miss—”

“You can’t do that, Mister Duane,” Aina interrupted. “You’ll die.”

Dramom declaring she would destroy a city or eliminate someone for my sake was pretty much a daily occurrence by this point, but everyone in the room had nonetheless started to panic. Duane, in particular, seemed ready to sacrifice himself in order to stop her.

“Master, if you give me the order, I shall obliterate the darkness that enshrouds this nation,” Dramom stated, flashing me a brilliant smile. “So what do you say, master? Should I carry out my plan?” she asked. She looked like a kid the night before a school trip.

My answer was immediate. “Nope.”

Why did she look so excited by the idea of destroying a country (okay, a city-state, but it was still technically a country) in the first place, anyway?

“You won’t be doing any destroying today,” I added.

“None at all?” she said.

“None at all,” I confirmed.

Her face dropped. “I understand,” she mumbled dejectedly as she returned to her seat, shoulders slumped. Crisis averted.

“Celes. Dramom. We’re looking for a solution that *doesn’t* involve violence. You got that?” I said pointedly.

“I suppose I do not have a choice. I will bear it in mind,” Celes said.

“Understood, master,” Dramom murmured.

With the King of Orvil and the city itself now out of danger, I turned to Shess. “Don’t you go and do anything rash either, Shess,” I said.

My comment seemed to visibly upset the little princess. “Why shouldn’t I?!” she huffed, her cheeks puffed out in anger.

She wasn’t about to give up, was she? She had recently started acting in a way that was more befitting of her title, but witnessing how badly the beastfolk were treated in this nation had made her so angry, all reason had been thrown out of the window. Not that I blamed her for that or anything. It had upset me too.

“I’ve told you before, haven’t I? You’re the princess of the Giruam Kingdom. If you go complaining to the king about the way beastfolk are treated here, it will be taken as an official statement.”

“I understand that, but—” the young girl tried to argue, but I promptly cut her off.

“No, I don’t think you do,” I said, shaking my head left and right. I felt a pang of guilt in my chest for scolding a nine-year-old, but you had to be strict with children sometimes for their own good.

“Now, listen closely,” I said sternly. “If you go yelling at the king, it might sour the relationship between the Giruam Kingdom and Orvil. This would, in turn, have a negative impact on the trade agreement between the two nations, which might cause a number of people to lose their jobs. Worst-case scenario, it might even escalate into a war, and more people would end up dying than if you hadn’t done anything.”

The little princess gasped. It seemed I had successfully gotten my message across without the need to go into vast amounts of detail. Rolf had once told me that it wasn't rare in this world for two nations to go to war because one king had been rude to another, and that royalty should be mindful of what they say because of this. Shess was a smart kid, though, meaning she immediately understood that if a war did break out between Orvil and the Giruam Kingdom, Orvil would most definitely be sending beastfolk to the front lines. The little girl hung her head, prompting Aina to start gently rubbing her back.

"You have to remember that you're not just Shess. You are Shessfelia Shussel Giruam, the first princess of the Giruam Kingdom, and as such, you have to show some self-restraint," I said.

Shess was the kind of kid who rushed headlong into things once her mind was made up, so "self-restraint" wasn't a concept she was overly familiar with. But as Princess of the Giruam Kingdom, she couldn't let her feelings get the better of her.

"What should we do, then?" she asked in a small voice, her shoulders shaking.

"Shess..." Aina breathed, a pained look on her face in sympathy with her friend.

"Should we just pretend we don't see how much the beastfolk are suffering here? If we do that, we—we won't be any better than the humes of this nation!"

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She was angry at herself, because despite being a princess, she couldn't do anything to alleviate the suffering of the beastfolk. In fact, it was exactly *because* of her title that she couldn't help them.

"What about you, Amata?" she asked.

"Me?"

"It's all because of the way this nation treats its beastfolk that—that Kilpha is staying in her village. Are you all right with just sitting back and doing nothing to help them?" She stared at me intently, her cheeks wet with tears.

Holding her gaze, I said, "I have no intention of abandoning them."

“Amata...”

“I’ll save them all: the beastfolk living in the forest, the ones treated like slaves in Orvil, and of course, Kilpha. That’s why I came back here.” I paused and looked at my companions one by one. “I need your help.”

Aina was the first to react. “I’ll help you, Mister Shiro!” She eagerly raised her hand. “I’ll do anything if it means Miss Kilpha can come back with us!” she declared with a serious look on her little face.

Celes was next to speak. “My body is yours to do with as you will, Shiro. Use it however you desire.”

“It is both mine and Suama’s pleasure to make your wishes come true, master. Do you not agree, Suama?” Dramom said.

“Ai!” the little dragon girl squealed, and copying Aina’s mannerisms, she started breathing excitedly through her nose. Unfortunately, she did so with a little *too* much force, sending snot dribbling down her face. As I watched Dramom silently wiping it away with a napkin, I couldn’t help thinking that she looked very maternal in that moment.

“Do you have a plan, Amata?” Shess asked.

“Of course,” I replied.

“W-Well, you should’ve said so sooner!” she huffed.

I apologized with a chuckle, then studied my companions’ faces once more. When I was sure they were all looking at me, I shared my plan with them.

“All I need to do is open a company in Orvil and our problems will be solved.”

Chapter Three: The Next Step

“You want to open a *company* in Orvil? Are you serious, Shiro?” Duane said, his eyes widening.

“Dead serious. I’m well aware that the fundamental reason for the beastfolk’s struggles lies in the policies of the new king, but what has *really* sealed their fate is how the merchants have been treating them over these past few years.” I paused and raised a finger in the air. “The merchants’ refusal to buy pelts from beastfolk hunters at a fair price is what started this whole debacle. If they hadn’t started pushing down the hunters’ prices and hiking up the price of grain and medicine, the beastfolk wouldn’t be in such dire straits.”

Valeria had told me a bit more about how it had all started and I related these details to my companions. Apparently, the beastfolk hunters residing in the Dura Forest were all masters of their craft, and as such, their furs and pelts had very little in the way of imperfections, meaning they always fetched a high price. As a bustling trading hub, Orvil boasted countless merchants selling furs, but the ones brought to market by the beastfolk were always the most sought-after.

However, when the new king came to power, everything changed. Without warning, the merchants started lowering their offers for the beastfolk’s furs, even though demand for them remained high. Valeria and her brethren decided to go to different merchants and companies instead, but all of them offered the same ridiculously low prices. This made Valeria deeply suspicious, because it was obvious the merchants were colluding, but with no other choice available to them, the beastfolk began hunting more and more to make up for the shortfall in income. Then when the forest ran out of monsters to hunt, many of the hunters moved to Orvil in their desperation to find work so they could support their families.

“However, judging from what Luza said earlier, it seems the beastfolk aren’t being compensated fairly for their labor here. In fact, it’s possible they’re not

getting any salary at all,” I said.

Luza nodded. “That’s quite likely. I didn’t manage to ask directly, but when we were over at the cargo transportation site—”

“There was a man with a whip,” Shess interrupted, her tone heavily tinged with frustration. “He said beastfolk were great, since he didn’t have to pay them much.”

Shess and Luza had seen the man—likely the transportation site’s supervisor—relentlessly whipping a young apeboy who was all skin and bone. Luza also told us that the two dogfolk they had seen fighting each other in the colosseum appeared completely unused to wielding swords, indicating that the beastfolk were risking their lives purely for the entertainment of Orvil’s hume population.

“They have no other way of making money, so they’re forced to endure awful working conditions or even fight in the colosseum,” I summed up. “That’s why —”

“Oh, I get it!” Aina interrupted, bringing her fist down onto the palm of her hand. “That’s why you want to open a shop here, Mister Shiro!”

Out of all my companions, Aina was the person I’d known longest, so it came as no surprise that she had figured out my plan without me needing to spell it out.

“Exactly. You’re so smart, Aina,” I said, praising the little girl. She chuckled, pleased with herself.

“I don’t get it!” Shess whined. “Aina, explain Amata’s plan to me.”

“Um, so Mister Shiro wants to open up a shop here and hire beastfolk so he can make sure they’re getting paid properly. Right?” the little girl said, glancing at me for confirmation.

On hearing this, Duane seemed to also connect the dots. “Oh, so *that’s* your plan, Shiro!”

Shess, on the other hand, still looked every bit as confused as before, with her head tilted to one side and a frown on her face.

“S-S-Sir Duane, wh-wh-wh-what do you mean?” Luza said. She was so nervous

about talking directly to Duane, she had gone stiff and stumbled over her words.

You okay, Luza? Your voice seems more high-pitched than usual.

“Well, Miss Luza, I believe Shiro’s plan is to hire beastfolk to work in his store so that he can ensure they are paid a fair wage, at the same time as selling them any provisions they need for a reasonable price. When we were out in the forest, he told me he also had medicine the beastfolk could use in his wares, so that should help them out too.”

A flushed Luza gazed at Duane in awe as she listened to his explanation.

“If Shiro treats the beastfolk like they should be treated—that is to say, as regular people—they won’t need to sell the fruits of their labor to those other—no, I believe I should put it more bluntly.” Duane paused briefly, then continued. “The beastfolk won’t need to sell the fruits of their labor to those vile, vicious merchants nor toil for exploitative companies anymore. Right, Shiro?”

“Bingo. If I hire the beastfolk and pay them a fair wage—let’s say, something along the lines of the average salary in Mazela—they’d still have enough money left over after paying their taxes to buy grain, medicine, and other daily necessities.”

Luza reflected on this for a few moments. “Hold on a second, Amata. If you suddenly offer the beastfolk a higher salary, won’t that spell huge losses for the merchants who have been using them as free labor up until now?”

“Yup.”

“Aren’t you scared they might resort to, um, *extreme* measures in response? Your status as the Giruam Kingdom’s royal purveyor won’t be of any help to you here. Her Majesty’s influence doesn’t extend this far,” Luza pointed out.

I nodded. “I’m fully aware the merchants might try to come for me. Worst-case scenario, they might even hire assassins to rid them of the annoying newcomer who’s stealing all their manpower. But...” I paused and smiled knowingly at Celes and Dramom. “I just so happen to have been blessed with some insanely strong companions. You could easily deal with one or two—hell,

probably even a couple hundred—assassins for us, right, Celes and Dramom?”

Celes scoffed. “Assassins, you say? A mere two hundred would not satisfy me. Multiplying that number by tenfold would make it more worthwhile.”

“Tenfold? Is that all? Not that I expected any more from you, demon,” Dramom said, chuckling. “I could wipe out more than a thousand times that figure in just a single attack.”

“I see you have already forgotten Shiro’s warning to you earlier, idiotic dragon,” Celes retorted. “Do you intend to destroy the *whole* city?”

“Oh, not at all. It was merely a figure of speech. Is that too difficult a concept for you to grasp, demon?”

Sparks were flying between the pair as they stared down one another, but I paid them zero attention and turned back to Luza. “Well, there you have it, Luza. Those other merchants can send as many assassins as they like after me, because these two will deal with them for us. And since there is no need for me to worry about my own safety at all, that means I can focus all of my energy on solving the problem at hand.”

Luza nodded her understanding. “So that’s why you seem so confident. And I suppose it’s true that nothing beats having a dragon as a bodyguard.”

“I can see you’ve thought this through, Shiro,” Duane said. “Well, if your safety is ensured...” He paused for emphasis. “Then let’s do everything in our power to save the beastfolk!”

From side-on, Duane looked just like the hero of an epic tale as he said this, and Luza could only stare at him like a maiden who had fallen head over heels in love.

“Thank you, Duane,” I said.

He shook his head. “No, I should be the one thanking you, Shiro. Thank you for letting me be a part of such a noble cause.”

I couldn’t understand why he was thanking me all of a sudden, so I could only reply with a dumbfounded “Huh?”

“You don’t understand? Okay, let me explain it to you,” Duane said with a

little chuckle. “You’re just like those heroes you hear about in legends, Shiro. I’m—no, *we’re* all very glad that we get to help you with your plan.”

My other companions all nodded in agreement, and we began setting out how I would open a shop in Orvil.

“By the way, Shiro,” Duane piped up at some point during our brainstorming session to get my attention.

“Yes?”

“I am aware that Ms. Dramom is the Immortal Dragon, but...” He paused and glanced at Celes. “Who *is* Miss Celes? She has wings, so at first, I figured she must be a wingedfolk, but it doesn’t appear that she is...” He brought a hand up to his chin and hummed, deep in thought.

Oh, right. I hadn’t told him Celes’s true identity. Only a few of the more high-ranking adventurers from the Fairy’s Blessing knew she was a demon.

“If I tell you, could you keep it a secret?” I asked gravely.

“Of course,” he said, his expression as solemn as mine.

Like the rest of my companions, Duane had volunteered to help me in my quest to save the beastfolk, and as he was as gallant as he was handsome, I was in no doubt that if anyone told him a secret, he would take it with him to his grave.

“You see, Celes is actually...”

“Yes? What is she?” he prompted.

“She’s a devil,” I confessed.

Duane’s face froze. “Huh?” he managed to utter.

“Celes is actually a devil,” I repeated.

“And by ‘devil,’ you mean one of the demon tribes?”

“Yep.”

He froze again, as did Shess and Luza, who had been eavesdropping on our conversation. They’d clearly had no idea they were sitting at the same table as a demon.

“Shiro,” Duane said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I don’t really want to believe it, but...” He paused as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. “Would Miss Celes’s real name be ‘Celesdia,’ by any chance?”

“Yeah, it is. How did you know that? Did I tell you at some point?” I asked in surprise.

Duane gasped so hard, I thought he might *actually* fall off his chair. *Damn, handsome guys even look handsome when they’re in shock, huh?* I mused.

“Y-You’re telling me we’ve been walking around with one of the Big Four all this time?!” he asked.

“The Big Four?” I echoed. The term was a new one for me.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know,” he said, astounded. “You’ve never heard of Celesdia the ‘Barbarous Devil’? One of the demon king’s four lieutenants, also known as the Big Four?”

“The demon king’s four lieutenants?” I repeated. “And you’re saying Celes is one of them?”

My gaze wandered over to Celes, who was bickering with Dramom in the corner (no surprises there). I’d known she was crazy strong, but I’d never expected her to be one of the demon king’s four lieutenants. Whatever that meant. It certainly *sounded* exciting. My inner child was jumping for joy.

“Uh, Duane?”

“Y-Yeah?” he replied.

“Can we just, uh...”

“Yeah?”

“Can we just kinda pretend this conversation never happened?”

“Say no more. The matter of Miss Celes’s true identity isn’t something a provincial knight like myself can cope with alone.”

The two of us decided to pretend that Duane had never asked me about Celes.

“Still... First, the Immortal Dragon, and now, Celesdia of the Big Four,” he said, still sounding somewhat in disbelief. “Shiro, just who in the world *are* you?”

I laughed awkwardly. “I’m just your run-of-the-mill merchant, honest.”

Chapter Four: Information Gathering

The next day arrived. Having unanimously agreed that opening a store in Orvil was the best idea we could come up with to help the beastfolk's lot in life, it was time to kick the plan into action. The first step was to gather information. In this world, the rules for opening up a store varied not only from nation to nation, but also from city to city. For instance, in Ninoritch, you only needed to fill out an application form and pay a fee, while you could only do business in Mazela if you belonged to a merchant guild, even though both towns were in the same fiefdom. So what were the rules for opening up a store in Orvil? To get an answer to that question, Aina and I were heading to a place where we could find out.

"Mister Shiro, is this the merchants' tavern?"

"Yup, looks like it."

A "merchants' tavern" was basically the spot where all the merchants in the city gathered for a drink. There was always at least one in every big city, and as the name suggested, all the patrons of the tavern were merchants. It was said that if you wanted information on anything to do with trade—from the price of wheat to the economic situation in neighboring nations—your best bet was to locate the nearest merchants' tavern. It was also where most traveling merchants conducted their business transactions.

However, not all the information you could pick up at a merchants' tavern was necessarily *good* information. While it was entirely possible to stumble across some nuggets of genuine insight, plenty of falsehoods and rumors often got mixed in, and you just had to decide for yourself who to believe. All in all, it was places like this that really put your skills as a merchant to the test. I was still a relative newcomer to this world, but over the course of the past few months, I'd accumulated quite a bit of experience, and I felt confident that I could distinguish truth from lie. And to be honest, all I wanted to do was learn how to open up a store in this city, so I probably wasn't going to encounter all that

many lies in search of the answer. Even so, I needed to keep my wits about me.

A sign with the words “The Golden Feast” emblazoned on it hung over the door of the tavern, and it seemed a fitting name for this greed-tainted place, where people who had dedicated their lives to the pursuit of money gathered.

“So this is the merchants’ tavern, huh?” I muttered.

I was reminded of my trip to Mazela. Back in those days, I hadn’t known about the existence of merchants’ taverns, and had stupidly tried to join a merchant guild by simply pleading my case. Unsurprisingly, I was shooed out of every single one, with one of the guildmasters even tipping water over my head. If I’d known about merchants’ taverns at the time, perhaps my fate would have been different, though that series of rejections led to me meeting Zidan, so everything had turned out all right in the end.

I glanced down at Aina. It was only the two of us today, because I frankly didn’t feel like I could bring anyone else with me. We couldn’t trust that Shess wouldn’t do something rash if she saw any beastfolk being mistreated in the street, so we’d left her at the inn with Luza. Dramom (and Suama) were with them, so there was no need to worry about anyone attacking the little princess while we were gone. As for Duane and Celes, they’d said they were going for a stroll around the city to try to see what more they could learn about living conditions for the beastfolk in Orvil.

“Should we go in, Aina?” I said.

“Y-Yeah.” The little girl seemed a bit nervous about going into a tavern, though I totally got it. After all, these sorts of places weren’t really meant for children.

Sensing her fear, I held out my hand. “Here.”

“Thanks,” she said, grabbing it and squeezing tightly.

“Well then. Let’s go in,” I said as I pushed open the door.



The tavern was big and busy, which was to be expected of a merchants’ tavern in a huge trading hub like Orvil.

“The harvest in Baiet was poor this year. Looks like the price of grain is gonna go shooting up.”

“A traveling merchant, you say? Where are you from?”

“Could you give it to me for 46 silver coins? Please, I’m begging you!”

“I heard Merlux has locked down its borders and is preparing to go to war with Aerys. Sounds like the perfect business opportunity, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, fairy mead’s being sold in the Giruam Kingdom. Don’t tell me you didn’t know?”

All around the tavern, merchants were sitting at tables, exchanging news and gossip. They didn’t even pause when we came in, which I found surprising, because if this had been the drinking hall of an Adventurers’ Guild, everyone would have immediately fallen silent as soon as two strangers walked in, and the veteran adventurers would have glared at us to boot. So even the atmosphere of drinking establishments changed depending on the profession of its clientele, huh?

“What should we do, Mister Shiro?” Aina asked as she peered about the place. She was still clinging to my arm, overwhelmed by the hubbub of the tavern, and I could tell that the poor thing was as tense as a bowstring.

“Let’s see...” I scanned the room. “Should we sit over there?” I suggested, pointing to two seats at the bar.

“O-Okay.”

We took our seats, and an instant later, the barkeep came over to greet us. “Welcome to our establishment,” he said, shooting us a smile. “What can I get you?”

I could tell from his clothes that he took very good care of his appearance. Even his mustache seemed like it had been meticulously groomed. Once again, this was far removed from the Fairy’s Blessing drinking hall experience, where it was easy to tell at a glance that the owner was a former adventurer.

“I’ll have some wine, and she can have milk. Cow or goat, whichever you have,” I said, placing our order.

“Of course. Wine for you, young sir, and milk for the little lady. Please hold on a moment.” He set two tankards down in front of us, then filled one up with wine and the other with milk. “Thanks for waiting. Here are your drinks.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Thank you, mister,” Aina said politely.

I took a silver Giruam coin out of my coin pouch and placed it down on the bar, as was the custom in this world.

“A silver Giruam coin? Give me a moment while I get you some change,” the barkeep said, but I stopped him before he could turn away.

“Oh, you can keep the change. In exchange, could we ask you a few questions about commerce in this town?”

“Is this your first time in Orvil, young sir?”

“Yes. We arrived just a couple of days ago.”

“I see. Well, please feel free to ask me anything. If I know the answer, it’ll be my pleasure to help you out.”

Thanks to the generous tip I’d given him, the barkeep seemed extremely amenable to answering my questions. He was probably used to this sort of thing.

“Well, you see, I run a small business in the Giruam Kingdom, and I’ve been thinking of opening up a store here in Orvil,” I started.

“Is that so?” the barkeep said.

“Yes. I’ll get straight to the point if that’s all right with you. What would I have to do to open a store here?”

“Well...”

The barkeep’s expression clouded over slightly. *Looks like opening up a store in Orvil won’t be as easy as it was in Ninoritch.*

“To be completely honest with you, I don’t recommend setting up your own business in Orvil,” he said.

“Might I inquire as to why you say that?”

The barkeep glanced around the room and leaned over the bar. “As I assume you’re already aware, Orvil’s economy was built on commerce,” he told us, his voice barely above a whisper. “And because of that, large store owners have more power than most nobles here.”

“Merchants are more powerful than *nobles*?” I said, taken aback.

“I suppose it’s something that’s inherent to a city-state like this, but yes,” the barkeeper confirmed. “As you can imagine, these wealthy merchants refuse to let their profits be eaten into by ‘outsiders,’ so any foreigner wanting to open up their own store in the city must have the backing of a preexisting company. Basically, you have to get their permission if you want to start doing business here.”

The barkeep proceeded to give us more details on Orvil’s rather unique situation. To sum up, there were fifteen big-shot merchants in the city and any foreigner wanting to open up a store in Orvil had to get a referral from at least three of them before they could even start the process. If they somehow cleared this monumental hurdle and managed to start their own business, they were still then forced to hand over a whopping *sixty percent* of their store’s profits to the merchants who had endorsed them. It was a total rip-off, even by the standards of this world.

Not only that, a while ago, these big-shot merchants had formed what they called the “Merchant League,” before coming up with rules that every merchant in Orvil must obey, including set selling prices for certain items. *Is it possible that these guys forced the other business owners to stomp the beastfolk’s prices down?* I wondered.

Moreover, anyone caught breaking the rules would quickly find themselves kicked out of the Merchant League and banned from ever doing business in Orvil again. In short, if I wanted to open up a shop in this city, I’d have to get referrals from three of these big-shot merchants, while agreeing to let them rip me off for more than half of my profits. I couldn’t imagine these conditions being accepted by anyone, and it seemed to me that Orvil’s ridiculously powerful merchants had no intention of letting outsiders do business in their city in the first place. Between this piece of information and the way they treated beastfolk, these big-shot merchants were starting to reek of corruption

and greed.

“You’re allowed to do business with other merchants, but the second you want to sell anything to regular folk...” the barkeep started.

“...I’d need to go through that whole process you just mentioned,” I said, finishing his sentence. “Is that right?”

“Exactly so.”

I’d already had an inkling that opening up a business in Orvil wouldn’t be an easy task, but I hadn’t expected the hurdle to be *this* high. As I ruminated on this information in silence, trying to find a path forward, Aina decided to ask a question. “Mister, isn’t there any other way to open a shop in Orvil?”

“Another way? Well, there *is*, but it’s even more unlikely than the way I just told you about.”

“Really? Oh, please tell us what it is!” the little girl pleaded, looking up at the man with a serious expression on her face as her grip tightened on her tankard of milk.

Huh? So there is another way?

“Well, if you really want to know, little lady, the other way is to get the king’s permission directly,” the barkeep said gently.

“You have to ask the king of this nation?” the little girl asked.

“Yes. The king is the most powerful person in the land, so if you have his permission to open up your store, you don’t need any merchants backing you up.”

He paused for a brief moment, then continued. “But it’s extremely hard to get the king to grant you an audience. You’d need to be nobility or an established merchant. Foreigners like yourselves wouldn’t even be allowed to set foot in the royal palace.”

So that’s why he hadn’t thought to mention this option before.

“So if I can get the king’s permission, I’ll be able to open up a store in Orvil, regardless of what the other merchants might say?” I asked.

The barkeep nodded. “Yes, it would *technically* be possible. But I haven’t heard of the king giving his backing to any merchant in the past several years.”

Well, it looked like I’d been checkmated before I could even make my opening move. From my experience of trying to join a merchant guild in Mazela, I’d already had an idea that I would need the permission of some big shot to open up my store, but I hadn’t anticipated that the big shot in this situation would be the actual king himself. Then again, Orvil was a city-state, so I supposed it made some sort of sense.

“So just to check I’m on the same page, exactly *how* difficult would it be for a merchant with no ties at all to Orvil to get an audience with the king?”

“Like I said, it’d be impossible,” the barkeep said. “Even the purveyor to some foreign duke that once requested to see the king got turned away at the palace gates. Or so I heard.”

“Seriously? Even though he was a purveyor to a *duke*?” I said, dumbfounded.

“Yup. Although I couldn’t tell you if the king made that decision by himself or if he was influenced by the merchants.”

In nobility terms, duke was the second highest rank after king, so if that guy was shooed away by the palace guards, it was highly likely I wouldn’t be let in either. No matter how I looked at it, it seemed practically impossible for me to secure an audience with the king, so I arrived at the conclusion that my only real option was to attempt to butter up some of the city’s big-shot merchants so they would endorse me, and just stomach paying them their stupidly high cut.

I drained the wine from my tankard and slapped another silver coin down on the bar. “Another, please. Plus, could you tell me a bit about the big-shot merchants in this city? Like, the kind of people they are, what their interests are, stuff like that. Oh, and if you know anything about their relationships with the other merchants and what kind of wares they usually stock, that’d be a huge help too.”

“You plan on currying favor with Orvil’s merchants?” the barkeep said, slightly taken aback. “I’d better not say this too loudly, but I wouldn’t even attempt it if I were you.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t seem to have any other choice if I want to reach my goal,” I admitted.

“That so?” the barkeep said, then heaved a sigh. “Fine then. I’ll tell you everything I know,” he said before proceeding to do just that.

Chapter Five: Sharing the Information

Having gotten all the information we needed, Aina and I headed back to the inn, with Duane and Celes returning not long after us. Like on the previous day, we all gathered in Aina and Shess's room and shared the info we had gleaned.

"I'll go first," I said once everyone had taken their seats around the table. "Aina and I found the nearest merchants' tavern and asked the barkeep a bunch of questions."

I gave my companions a brief rundown of what Aina and I had learned that day, such as how I would need the permission of either the city's big-shot merchants or the king himself in order to open up a store in Orvil. But the chances of me actually landing an audience with the king seemed slim to none, which meant I'd have no choice but to go with the other option. However, if I were to go down *that* route, it would mean letting the city's merchants decide my pricing and obeying all of their rules, because if I didn't, I'd be forced to close down my shop.

"So in short, you can't really open a store here," Luza summarized when I'd finished.

"Pretty much. With a lot of effort, I could probably have my own shop, but there's not really much point if I can't even set the prices of my wares. If I have to stick to the Merchant League's rules, I'll never be able to help the beastfolk."

"Th-Then, what are we supposed to *do*?!" Shess yelled, slamming her fists down on the table in frustration.

"Princess, mind your manners," Luza scolded her gently, but the little princess wasn't in a receptive mood.

"Shut up, Luza! I'm talking to Amata."

Luza gasped, but replied, "Understood. I won't say another word." Her princess's orders were absolute, after all.

"Calm down, Shess," I said to the little girl.

“But—” she started to protest, but I was having none of it.

“Now, listen. It’s true that as things stand, we’ll find it very hard to help the beastfolk. But all hope isn’t lost yet.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, you see, I’ve gathered quite a bit of information about this city’s most influential merchants...”

I went on to relate the *second* part of our conversation with the barkeep to my friends. From what he had told me, the big-shot merchants in this city were a slippery bunch, to say the least. They all pretended to get along well with each other on the outside, but behind the scenes, they were constantly trying to one-up their fellow merchants and cause their rivals to go bust so their own firms could make more profits. For that reason, this group was extremely unpopular among the city’s “regular” merchants—or so the barkeep had made clear to me through a series of thinly veiled complaints. It was at that moment I’d realized there really was no way for people to keep anything private in this world.

“It’s only natural for merchants to want to make greater profits than their competitors,” I continued. “However, I believe this presents an opening I can exploit.”

Since I could travel between this world and my own via grandma’s house, there were a heap of goods only I had access to. So what if I were to use the exclusive selling rights to these items as bait to force these big-shot merchants to choose between their unity and rules, and the promise of a monopoly? Merchants were a greedy sort, so if I were to dangle the opportunity to make huge profits in front of them, I was certain they would bite. And thanks to the barkeep, I knew what products each of the big-shot merchants specialized in and what their interests were, and since the things I could get in Japan would be much better than anything they could get their hands on in this world, I was positive I could make them shift their allegiances.

“I see. The exclusive selling rights to some of your wares, huh? Well, I’m not a merchant, and even *I’d* be interested in that,” Duane remarked when I had finished explaining my plan.

I was pretty proud of myself for coming up with something that got Duane’s

seal of approval. After all, not only was he a knight and consequently very cognizant of the ways of this world, he was also the type of man who exuded common sense, so his giving my plan a thumbs-up was all I needed to know about how viable it was.

Speaking of Duane, it was his turn to tell us what he and Celes had found out. “We also learned some things,” he said, everyone’s attention shifting to him. “Miss Celes and I took a stroll around the slums. We saw a lot of beastfolk there, and it seemed like they’d all lost the will to live.”

I hadn’t expected Duane to start by relating his and Celes’s experiences over in the slums. Couldn’t he have at least eased us in before diving into such a grim topic? Would Aina and Shess be okay listening to accounts of the beastfolk’s suffering in the slums? I glanced across at the girls to gauge their reactions: Shess had a serious look on her face, while Aina was breathing heavily through her nose, as if mentally preparing herself for what she was about to hear. The pair were staring intently at Duane, waiting for him to continue. Kids in this world sure were courageous, weren’t they? It appeared I’d been worried for no reason.

“So you went all the way to the slums, huh?” I asked Duane.

“That’s where we ended up while investigating how beastfolk live in the city,” he explained.

It was generally true that the slums were the sketchiest area in any town, since they were where all the thugs and criminals with bounties on their heads tended to hole up, plus underground guilds often had their bases of operation there.

Duane must have sensed my concerns, because he quickly sought to reassure me that they had come to no harm while exploring the slums. “We were just fine, Shiro. I have confidence in my swordsmanship. And besides...” He paused and glanced at Celes, a grin spreading across his face. “I had Miss Celes with me. A number of ruffians tried to pick fights with us, but she dealt with them in no time.”

“Wow. Is that true, Celes?” I asked the demon, who quickly averted her eyes.

“They were the ones who started it. I merely accepted their challenge and

responded, like any warrior would. I did nothing wrong,” she said defensively.

“Hm? What do you mean you ‘did nothing wrong’?”

“I-I...” she stammered, starting to panic.

Duane jumped in and answered my question for her. “Miss Celes went, uh, a little *overboard*, let’s say. I struggled to hold her back.”

I nodded. “Ah. I see. So that’s what happened.”

I could picture the scene all too easily: Celes getting a bit rough with some thugs who had charged toward her, as Duane scrambled to stop her before things could get totally out of hand.

“I-I did nothing wrong. Nothing at all! They should not have attacked me when they knew they were that weak. They are the ones to blame, not me,” Celes insisted.

“My, oh my. How unseemly of you to shift the blame onto the other party,” Dramom piped up. “Do you hear that, Suama? You must not become like this demon. Do you understand?”

“Ai,” Suama chirruped, nodding.

Oh, great. Now Dramom’s decided to stick her nose in. I turned to Duane again and urged him to continue with his tale so that we wouldn’t stray *too* from the topic at hand. “So yeah, anyway, could you tell us a bit about the beastfolk you saw living in the slums, Duane?”

“Of course,” he said. “The first thing I noticed was how many there were there.”

Duane proceeded to tell us all about what he and Celes had witnessed in the slums. As soon as he got there, he started handing out some provisions he had prepared beforehand to any beastfolk he came across, and using it as an opportunity to ask them about their living conditions. From what they’d told him, it sounded like all the beastfolk who came to Orvil looking for work eventually ended up in the slums, and the only jobs that would hire beastfolk involved heavy labor. The pay was abysmal, however, and their employers didn’t even bother feeding them properly. Most days, all they got was some

watery soup with barely anything in it, and a chunk of hard, moldy bread.

“Even criminal slaves eat better than that,” Duane sighed, shaking his head.

But it was worse still for the beastfolk who fought in the colosseum. All of them had signed a three-year contract and the deal was if they participated in duels regularly in that time, not only would they get paid a ton of money when the contract was up, but every time they won, their employers would send provisions to their villages. However, from what the bearfolk’s head warrior, Valeria, had told me, they hadn’t received food from Orvil once, meaning the beastfolk risking their lives in the colosseum had all been lied to. On top of that, anyone refusing to fight would quickly find themselves in a Collar of Domination—a magic item that had been outlawed in most nations—and forced to take part in duels against their will.

“How horrible,” Aina whispered, tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.

Shess, on the other hand, still had the same serious look on her face as before, almost as if she had become so outraged, she couldn’t even feel anger anymore, though I noticed blood trickling down from her fists that appeared to be clenched so tightly, her nails had broken the skin. I made a mental note to get Dramom to heal her later.

“May I continue, Shiro?” Duane asked.

“Please do.”

The beastfolk who fell ill due to malnutrition and couldn’t work anymore got thrown in the slums, as did the ones who were fired for defying their employers. There were also beastfolk there who had been badly injured in the colosseum and were subsequently unable to fight. But despite being jobless—and in most cases, unable to even find another occupation—these beastfolk weren’t allowed to leave the city and return to the forest, and the few still able to work often got picked up by underground guilds, where their meager earnings went toward feeding their brethren. According to Duane, quite a number of the beastfolk in the slums were simply resigned to death and waiting for it to claim them.

“That was what Miss Celes and I learned from our visit to the slums,” Duane concluded.

None of us said a word. The beastfolk's living conditions were even worse than we had been anticipating and we were all at a total loss for words. But a high-pitched voice soon broke the silence.

"I refuse to be patient any longer!" Shess declared, getting up from her chair with a resolute expression on her face and a burning determination in her eyes. "Amata, I... I will go speak with the King of Orvil!"

She had said the exact same thing the day before, repeating something she'd said when we'd first arrived in Orvil, which meant she hadn't done one three-sixty, but *two* over the course of two days, and was right back at where she'd started. *Is she gonna say she wants to go complain to the king again?*

"You can't do that, princess—" Luza began admonishing the little girl, but Shess didn't let her finish.

"Shut up, Luza!" And just like the previous day, Luza gasped but obeyed and zipped it.

I took up the baton and started lecturing the little princess. "Shess, we already had this conversation yesterday. You might be the princess of the Giruam Kingdom, but you absolutely *cannot* go complaining to the king directly about the way they—"

"What are you talking about, Amata?" she interrupted. "I have no intention of complaining to the king."

"—treat the beastfolk here." I paused, dumbfounded. "Wait, you don't?" I asked.

"Nope," she confirmed, a cheeky smile curling the little princess's lips upward. "I want to introduce you to him so that you can open up your shop in Orvil."

Okay, I hadn't been expecting *that*.

Chapter Six: The Fourth King of Orvil

“If I come with you, they will surely let you see the king, won’t they?” Shess had said.

From what the barkeep of the Golden Feast had told us, the king had turned away the purveyor to a foreign duke when he requested an audience, and it was likely the same would happen to me. Unless I was accompanied by, let’s say, the princess of a neighboring kingdom. Orvil and the Giruam Kingdom were on friendly terms, so there was no way the king would refuse to see her. Or at least, that was Shess’s theory. Like all of Shess’s ideas, it was kind of crazy, but to my great surprise, this one actually worked.

“Shiro, we’re almost at the royal palace. Are you ready?” Duane asked as we rode up to Orvil’s royal palace in a fancy carriage emblazoned with the flag of the Giruam Kingdom.

“Y-Yeah,” I said uncertainly. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Please ensure you’re all prepared for this meeting with His Majesty too, Your Highness,” Duane said to Shess.

“I-I am!” the little princess replied.

Let’s rewind a little, shall we? After a rather heated discussion, we ended up agreeing to Shess’s suggestion of letting her take me to meet the king. As soon as we had worked out the details of the plan, Dramom flew both her and Luza home so that the little princess could return to Orvil not as Shess, but as Her Highness, Princess Shessfelicia of the Giruam Kingdom. When Aina and I asked her how in the world she had managed to convince her family to let her come here as an official emissary of the Giruam Kingdom, Luza told us with a smug grin that just before the two of them had returned to the capital, the King of Orvil had sent out letters to the royal families of all the neighboring nations, inviting them to the upcoming tournament to be held at the colosseum. Of course, Shess’s parents had received one too, and they happened to be in the middle of discussing who they would send to Orvil when Shess strode in

through the palace doors. Her parents told her about the letter and she immediately volunteered to go watch the tournament as the Giruam Kingdom's emissary. *Talk about good timing!* I marveled.

And so, here we were: Shess—or rather, Princess Shessfelia of the Giruam Kingdom—was on her way to Orvil's royal palace, escorted by her knights, Luza and Duane, and accompanied by Aina (who was pretending to be Shess's handmaiden), and me (official purveyor to the Giruam royal family). On a side note, Team Nonhumans—or in other words, Celes, Dramom, and Suama—had stayed behind at the inn. I had repeatedly told Celes and Dramom not to get into any fights while we were away, so I was fairly sure things should be fine. Or at least I *hoped* they would be.

"I can't believe I'm actually about to meet the King of Orvil," I murmured, my body gently rocking side to side due to the movement of the carriage. As one might expect of a vehicle belonging to a royal family, the carriage was quite spacious, and there was still room to spare, even with all five of us inside it.

"Princess, you appear to be sweating quite a lot. Are you all right?" Luza said.

"I-I-I'm fine!" the little princess stammered in response.

"Are you *sure* you're okay, Shess?" Aina said, a concerned look on her face.

"I-I-I-I told you I'm fine!" Shess insisted.

This was her first time being sent to another kingdom as an emissary and a single glance was all you needed to see how incredibly nervous she was about it. Of course, she probably wouldn't have been this tense if she had only come here to watch the tournament. But the little princess had something much more important to do. It was no exaggeration to say that the lives of all of Orvil's beastfolk rested on her shoulders, which likely explained why her face was so pale and why beads of sweat lined her forehead.

"Shess, you don't have to be so nervous," I said gently.

"I-I'm not nervous!" she snapped at me.

"Really?"

"Really!"

“Really, really?” Aina jumped in.

Shess hesitated for a few seconds, then said in a small voice, “All right, I guess I *am* a little nervous.” She’d been putting on a brave face, but she just couldn’t bring herself to outright lie to her best friend’s face.

“Listen up, Shess,” I said, ready to impart some wisdom.

“What?”

“I know that all you’re thinking about is how you’re going to save the beastfolk, but I want to remind you that you don’t have to bear this burden alone. Okay?”

The little princess let out a quiet gasp.

“We’re all friends here, Shess,” I continued. “You can share all of your worries and struggles with us.”

“Amata’s right, princess,” Luza interjected. “Your burdens are my burdens!”

“Amata. Luza,” Shess breathed.

“Besides, all you need to do is introduce me to the King of Orvil. I’m the one doing the negotiating.” I slapped my chest confidently as if to say “*Leave it to me!*” and beamed reassuringly at the young girl. “You’re not alone in this, Shess. Okay?”

The little princess nodded. “Okay.”

“Thanks, Amata,” Luza said.

“You’re very welcome,” I said, then glanced out the window. “Oh, it looks like we’re here.”

The carriage ground to a halt and the coachman opened the door for us. As we stepped out, we were greeted by the sight of rather a lot of knights standing in rows in the palace courtyard. They were all here to welcome Shess. It was the kind of thing you could only witness in a fantasy world. *Incredible. So this is what it feels like to be royalty in Ruffaltio, huh?*

Once we had all alighted from the carriage, a knight with a feather in his helmet approached us. “Welcome to Orvil, Princess Shessfelia Shussel Giruam,”

he said.



I was expecting the knight to lead us to the throne room, where I would have to go down on one knee and pay my respects to the king, but instead, our group was taken to a drawing room.

“His Majesty is on his way,” the knight informed us.

Will we be meeting the king here? I wondered. *I thought we’d be taken to the throne room. I guess it might be because Shess is also royalty herself.*

I glanced around the drawing room and saw two plush-looking sofas facing each other with a coffee table in between.

“Um, should we just take a seat for the time being?” I said to no one in particular.

“We can’t, Shiro,” Duane informed me. “It would be *incredibly* rude for us to sit in the presence of a king. Only Her Highness is allowed.”

So Shess is the only one who can sit, while the rest of us have to stand, even though we’re her retinue, huh? The little princess took a seat on one of the plush sofas and we all lined up behind her. After a few minutes of waiting, a low and somewhat austere-sounding voice appeared to address us from the other side of the door.

“Sorry to have kept you.”

An instant later, a group of men entered the room with a middle-aged man at their center. At first, I thought this man must be the king, but after eyeing him up and down, I noticed he wasn’t wearing a crown. *He’s standing right at the heart of the group, but he’s not the king?* I mused, staring at him in bewilderment.

As if replying to the question I had posed internally, the man introduced himself. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Princess Shessfelia. I am the prime minister of Orvil, Magath Onir. And this...”

He stepped to one side and a chubby—*ahem*, I mean a *solidly built* boy appeared from behind him. Like, an actual child. He looked to be around the

same age as Aina and Shess. I hadn't noticed his presence initially because he had been behind the prime minister.

Speaking of which, isn't it rude to stand with one's back to a king? I mused. *Even I know that, and I'm a newcomer to this world. Though the prime minister doesn't seem to care, so maybe it's fine here?*

"May I present His Majesty, the King of Orvil," the prime minister announced with a grand theatrical gesture in the direction of the *solidly built* boy.

"I am Orvil IV," the young king declared with a nod. "But there is no need for all these formalities. Please make yourselves comfortable."



Shess introduced herself too, and the king took a seat on the sofa opposite, with his prime minister, Mr. Magath, opting to sit beside him. I found this a little curious since Duane had told me that only royalty was allowed to sit in the presence of a king, but I guessed maybe the prime minister was an exception to that rule. Instead of reclining on the sofa like you might expect someone of his girth to do, Orvil IV sat up rod-straight, as if trying to exude as much dignity as possible.

"P-P-P-Princess of the Giruam Kingdom," he addressed Shess nervously. "Y-You have my thanks for accepting my invitation."

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty," Shess replied, also looking as tense as a bowstring.

It turned out that the king was only ten, making him just one year older than Shess and Aina. Needless to say, I hadn't expected him to be quite this young. If I was remembering correctly, the new king had ascended to the throne five years back, which meant he must have been only five at the time. And although he might have had five years of experience as king under his belt, at the end of the day, he was still a ten-year-old boy, and from the way he was speaking, it was obvious he was trying *really* hard to act the part.

"The Giruam Kingdom is an important neighbor to us," the young king continued. "I-I-I sincerely hope our two nations will continue to foster a strong and amicable relationship in the future."

“What a delightful coincidence! I was just thinking the very same thing!” Shess replied stiffly. She clearly wasn’t used to speaking in this way, and it sounded like she was reading from a script. It was painfully obvious that both kids were bundles of nerves.

“We seldom have visitors to the royal palace, so I am pleased you came,” Orvil IV continued.

“I am deeply grateful for your hospitality, Your Majesty,” Shess replied.

I knew this was an official meeting between a king and the princess of a neighboring nation and all, but to me, it just looked like two little kids trying way too hard to sound like adults. As I watched the pair of them, a question popped into my head. Was this boy *really* responsible for the oppression the beastfolk faced in Orvil? Kilpha’s grandmother and Valeria had been adamant that everything was his fault, because the beastfolk had only started to suffer when the new king ascended to the throne.

“Still, it is quite the coincidence that you were chosen to visit our nation as an emissary given that we are nearly the same age. It seems almost as if fate has had a hand in this meeting.”

Even so, to me, this boy simply looked like a kid who was trying really, *really* hard to act the part of king. On top of that, his porcelain white skin and not-inconsiderable body mass made me wonder if he had ever left the royal palace. But just as I was pondering it over, the young king said something that came completely out of left field.

“Ah, but n-no one told me the Giruam Kingdom’s princess was such a beauty.”

Uh-oh. It appeared the conversation had taken a wrong turn. Taking a good look at the young king, I noticed a faint dusting of pink on his cheeks as he stared intently at Shess with what I was a hundred percent sure was infatuation. Did he have a crush on her? *Hold on a minute. He just called Shess “a beauty” right out of the blue, didn’t he? That’s not good.*

“What?” Shess spat.

Yup, there it is. Her true nature’s coming out. I started inwardly panicking, but all of a sudden, Luza cleared her throat loudly.

“My apologies,” she said, but her intervention had been a successful one. It had given Shess enough time to realize with a jolt that her mask had started to slip, and she quickly pulled herself together.

“Y-You flatter me, Your Majesty,” she mumbled, fidgeting bashfully in her seat.

She still sounded robotic, but her acting was top-notch, at least. Orvil IV’s gaze grew even more passionate, his face now beet red.

“M-May I ask you a question, Princess Shessfelia?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Um, please r-rest assured that it is nothing too serious,” the young king said as a preface to his question, before taking in a big breath. Judging by how nervous he was, it was pretty obvious that whatever he wanted to ask, it was, in fact, quite serious. I was positive everyone in the room thought the same.

“Princess Shessfelia, a-a-a-are you engaged?” he stammered.

“*What?!*” Shess exclaimed again, her composure slipping once more.

Thankfully, the king hadn’t noticed her outburst. He placed both of his hands on the coffee table and leaned forward, breathing erratically through his nose as he brought his face close to Shess’s.

“I-I-If you don’t have a fiancé, might I—”

“Your Majesty, we do not have the luxury of deviating from today’s schedule. I suggest keeping any discussion on that particular topic for another time,” the prime minister interrupted.

Orvil IV gets scolded by the prime minister. It’s a critical hit!

“R-Right. Yes, you have a point, Magath,” the king said with a nod before sitting back on the sofa again and correcting his posture, his embarrassment evident on his face.

It looked as though the prime minister’s reprimand had helped him regain his composure after making him realize how embarrassing his conduct was.

“His Majesty seems to be a little tired, so I shall continue the conversation on his behalf,” the prime minister declared. “Princess Shessfelia, we once again

wish to express how deeply grateful we are that you came all the way to our humble nation from the Giruam Kingdom. Now, allow me to share with you some details about the upcoming combat tournament, which is the pride and joy of Orvil.”

The prime minister talked and talked and talked. Blah blah, the alliance between the two nations, blah blah, commerce, blah blah, tax yields, blah blah, the combat tournament. He spoke as if he were his nation’s representative, while the *actual* ruler beside him could do nothing more than nod along and throw in the occasional interjection.

“And all of that is to say, our nation has become the prosperous trade city it is today largely thanks to our relationships with our surrounding nations, including the Giruam Kingdom. We are extremely glad to have you here with us today, Princess Shessfelicia. Our nation welcomes you with open arms.”

The young king nodded excitedly. “Yes, indeed. I also extend the warmest of welcomes to you, Princess Shessfelicia.”

“Thank you most kindly,” Shess managed to utter in spite of her nervousness and exhaustion at playing the role of a refined princess while the prime minister droned on and on. The others—including Aina—seemed fine, but as for myself, I was starting to reach my limit after standing stiff and upright for so long. Besides, it wasn’t like we’d come here to listen to the prime minister ramble on for hours.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Shess said, gently bringing her fist down on her palm as if she’d just remembered something. “There is someone I wish to introduce to you, Your Majesty.”

“Someone you wish to introduce to me?” the young king said. “And who might that be?”

“Amata.”

“Yes, Highness,” I said, coming around from behind the sofa Shess was sitting on, then dropping to one knee and bowing my head to Orvil IV. *Looks like my turn has finally arrived.*

“Who is this man, Princess Shessfelicia?” Orvil IV asked.

“His name is Amata. He is my royal purveyor.”

“Your royal purveyor?”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. My name is Amata and I am a merchant,” I said, still down on one knee.

“This is not the throne room,” the king reminded me. “There is no need for such formalities here. You may stand.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I said, and did as I was told.

“Your Majesty, Amata offers a selection of most intriguing and unique wares for sale,” Shess told the king.

“Does he now? What sort of wares?” came the reply.

“Items unlike anything that has been seen before in the world,” the little princess said.

“Is that so?” the young king said, his gaze shifting to me. Shess’s words seemed to have aroused his curiosity.

“Your Majesty, might I request permission to speak?” I asked.

“I shall allow it,” he replied.

“Thank you very much. Allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Shiro Amata, royal purveyor to Her Highness, Princess Shessfelia, and Her Majesty, Queen Anielka of the Giruam Kingdom.”

And just like we had discussed in our briefing session, Aina in her maid’s dress trotted over to me and removed the lid of the wooden box she was holding in her arms. I plunged my hand into the box and retrieved one of the items from within.

“Here are just a few examples of the wares I have to offer,” I declared, then I took several more items out of the box and lined them up on the coffee table.

Chapter Seven: Showing My Worth as a Merchant

“Oooh!” Orvil IV and the prime minister marveled in unison, their eyes widening and their attention fully on the items I’d lined up on the coffee table.

“Amata, was it? Wh-What are these here?” the prime minister asked me. “They seem to be glass vessels of some variety...”

“These are drinking receptacles from my homeland. We call them kiriko glasses,” I explained.

“Kiriko glasses?” the prime minister queried.

Kiriko was the Japanese word for “cut glass” but it was also the term used to describe any product that was made using the same technique. Cut glass was essentially made by first polishing up the glass, then using special machines to cut grooves into the surface, creating beautiful patterns. The two most well-known techniques were Edo kiriko and Satsuma kiriko, and products made using them were considered by some to be as beautiful as precious stones. I’d brought a few different designs of kiriko drinking glasses to show to the king, including a dark blue one with geometric patterns, a red one with flowers engraved onto it, and a pink one with cherry blossoms that looked like they’d been scattered by the wind. They were all as breathtaking as precious stones—if not more so—and both the prime minister and the young king couldn’t take their eyes off them.

All righty. Everything’s going according to plan so far. Our primary goal for this meeting was to secure a business license, and for that, I would have to prove my worth as a merchant to the king. I had to somehow convince him that a new shop in Orvil owned by me would allow him to get his hands on rare goods he had never even seen before, and to do so, I had carefully put together a selection of exquisite items that would leave him and the prime minister totally awestruck. The kiriko glasses were only the first of many treasures I had brought along to wow them.

“Have you heard of ‘cut glass’?” I asked the pair. “Kiriko is a type of cut glass

technique from my homeland.”

I paused and studied their expressions. The boy’s eyes were sparkling with excitement (No surprises there. He *was* ten, after all), while the prime minister could only stare at the glasses on the table in shock and amazement.



“These drinking glasses you are presently admiring were skillfully crafted by artisans from my homeland, using secret methods and techniques, and I’d argue they are no less beautiful than the majority of precious gems.”

“What?!” the prime minister exclaimed. “These are *cut glass*?! I have a cut glass vessel crafted by a famous artisan from Tolmeki in my residence, but...” He paused and loudly gulped down the saliva that had pooled in his mouth. “It is not nearly as impressive as these specimens. Your cut glass pieces are every bit as beautiful as any jewel. No, even jewels cannot compare to this beauty!”

“Thank you for your kind words. It is the honor of a lifetime to have my wares lauded by a person as esteemed as the prime minister of a nation as prosperous as Orvil.”

I could see the prime minister fidgeting, his eyes flitting between me and the glasses on the coffee table.

“Please feel free to pick them up and take a closer look. I only let those who understand their true value handle them, and you strike me as someone who does.”

“Y-You think so?” the prime minister stammered as he reached out a hand toward the coffee table and picked up one of the glasses. “Incredible,” he marveled as he inspected it. “Can glass truly be this thin? And look at how clear it is! Even polished crystal is not *this* transparent.” He seemed totally enraptured by the glasses. *Looks like his buying impulses have successfully been triggered by my wares.*

“May I touch them as well?” the king asked me.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” I replied. “Please go right ahead.”

The boy picked up a glass and hummed to himself as he inspected it. “It is indeed beautiful,” he murmured, before glancing at Shess. “Ah, b-but nowhere *near* as beautiful as yourself, Princess Shessfelia.”

“What?” Once again, the little princess almost let her mask slip, but thankfully, Luza was once again on hand to save the day, clearing her throat loudly to draw Shess’s attention to her faux pas.

“Th-Thank you for the compliment, Your Majesty,” Shess forced herself to say to cover up her mistake.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Aina starting to fidget anxiously, but the attention of the king and the prime minister was still firmly on the glasses.

“Who would have guessed the Giruam Kingdom would have a merchant of your caliber? It truly is an impressive nation. Wouldn’t you agree, Your Majesty?” the prime minister said.

“Indeed so,” the young king agreed. “As is most befitting of the beautiful Princess Shessfelis’s royal merchant, the wares you have on offer are nothing short of exquisite.”

This seemed like the perfect moment for a sales pitch, so I decided to strike while the iron was hot. “In addition to this kiriko glassware, I offer a wide array of products designed for convenience. Take these single-use pocket heaters, for instance,” I said, producing a pair. “They help to keep you warm on cold days without the need to start a fire. As the name suggests, they are only to be used once, but with winter approaching, I believe they will quickly become a must-have for everyone. Here, try touching them.” I handed the pocket heaters to the prime minister and the king. “See? They’re warm, aren’t they?”

The pair held the pocket heaters between their hands and hummed appreciatively.

“Now, I don’t know about you, but I absolutely *hate* it at night when I can’t see anything. Thankfully, I have these handy-dandy lanterns that will light the way without the need for fire or magic. They have been crafted to resemble the moon, making them look rather charming, if I do say so myself. You can use them for practical purposes or simply display them around your home.”

“Ooh!” the king and the prime minister marveled in unison, their interest piqued.

“Next, I present to you a magic item: the instant camera. This little gem captures whatever you are seeing through this lens here, then instantly creates a lifelike rendition of it, preserving every detail of the scene perfectly.”

“Oooh!” the king and the prime minister exclaimed, their excitement growing

with each new item I presented to them.

“And have you ever found yourself thinking, ‘Oh, if only I could listen to the singing of this amazing songstress for the rest of my life’? Well, have I got just the thing for you! This is a voice recorder. It’s very easy to use. All you do is press this button—oh, that’s this little protuberance right here—and it’ll record anything you want, from someone singing, to the voice of your friend or lover. Then you can hear them again whenever you want.”

“Ooooooh!” the pair vocalized once more.

“But what if you’re feeling a bit greedy and want to record your loved one’s voice *and* their appearance at the same time? Fear not! This video camera will grant your wish. All you have to do is press this button, then do *this*, and there you go! Can you see Her Highness, Princess Shessfelia in the viewfinder here? Well, just save the video and you can look at her forever!”

“Ooooooooooh!” they both exclaimed in unison, their voices reaching their loudest pitch yet.

After asking around beforehand, I knew that cut glass was a thing in this world, so I’d decided to ease them in gently with the kiriko glass, before moving on to my more unusual items, and saving the best for last with the voice recorder and the video camera. The king and the prime minister had the words “*I want this!*” written on their faces when I showed them the instant cameras, and by the time I unveiled the video camera, that had upgraded to “*I really want this!*” The desire to possess these items was especially obvious on the face of the young king.

“S-S-So with that ‘voice recorder,’ I could listen to Princess Shessfelia’s voice whenever I wished?” he muttered to himself. “Oh, but if I possessed one of those ‘video cameras,’ I could also behold her face in all its splendor!” He wasn’t intending for anyone else to hear this, but his voice was just loud enough to reach Shess’s ears, and her facade crumbled again for the umpteenth time that day.

“These items are all wonderful, Your Majesty,” the prime minister remarked.

“Indeed, Magath,” the young king agreed.

It appeared that my sales pitch had been a resounding success. But it turned out that I had made one slight miscalculation in my plan, for it wasn't just the king and the prime minister who were enthralled with my wares. Shess had fallen under their spell too, and furthermore, it was written all over her face.

"Princess," Luza said to grab her attention.

The little princess jumped in surprise and quickly regained her composure. I made a mental note to give her the items she most liked as a gift later.

"These are the wares I currently stock," I concluded, giving one final bow to the king and the prime minister.

"They are all truly splendid," Orvil IV remarked, looking genuinely impressed by the items.

"I have never seen items like these before," the prime minister commented, continually throwing hungry glances at the coffee table where I'd lined up my wares.

Judging by their reactions, their impression of me had shifted from "purveyor to the royal family of our neighbor" to "peerless merchant." Up to this point, everything had gone according to plan, but the real challenge still lay ahead. The king and the prime minister were the highest authorities in their nation, so there was absolutely no way they hadn't figured out that Shess had some ulterior motive behind introducing her royal purveyor to them.

"So please tell us, Princess Shessfelia, why you wished to introduce this man to us," the prime minister said.

Score! The question I'd been waiting for! "Might I answer the question in Her Highness's stead?" I asked.

The prime minister nodded. "Most certainly."

I took a step forward. "As it happens, I wished to ask for a favor from you, Your Majesty."

"From me?" the young king queried.

"Yes. That is why I insisted on accompanying Her Highness here."

Orvil IV hummed and glanced over at Shess, who nodded to confirm what I

was saying. "I shall allow it," he said. "What is your request?"

"Thank you, Your Majesty." I dropped to one knee and lowered my head in deference to the boy king once more. "Would it be possible for you to grant me the authorization to do business in Orvil?" I asked.

"You wish to do business in our kingdom?" the young king replied.

"Yes. Orvil is the largest trading hub in this region, and owning a business here is considered the ultimate aspiration of any merchant, myself included. I assure you I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that opening a business here has been my lifelong dream. Therefore, I humbly beseech Your Majesty to grant me the opportunity to turn that dream into reality."

Orvil IV crossed his arms and hummed in thought again. For a good minute, he simply stared in silence at the items I'd lined up on the coffee table, a contemplative look on his face.

"What do you think, Magath?" he asked his prime minister. "I believe we should grant his request—"

"We cannot!" the prime minister interrupted. *Surely talking across the king like that isn't acceptable, is it?* "If we start granting business permits to outside merchants, royal purveyor or not, our own merchants will not stay silent," he said by way of explanation.

"Y-You think so?" the young king mumbled, recoiling as if scared of the prime minister, who had just chided him for the second time since our arrival.

The prime minister had refused my request, but that didn't bother me, for if I were to give up there and then, I would be a total failure as a merchant. "Please hold on a moment, Your Excellency," I said. "As you have seen, all of my wares are unique. No other merchant in your nation offers the kind of items I stock, so I won't be stealing their clients from them. Plus, a number of my wares—such as those single-use pocket heaters I showed you at the beginning—would help to enhance the lives of Orvil's citizens even further."

"Our citizens are happy and prosperous without your trinkets," the prime minister retorted. "Isn't that right, Your Majesty?"

"Magath is correct," the young king agreed. "Much like my father before me, I

have made it a point of honor to ensure that all of our people—both humes and beastfolk alike—are living well and thriving. And according to my minister’s reports, we have so far been successful in that mission,” he added, a self-satisfied look on his face.

Huh? The beastfolk? Thriving? The king’s words didn’t chime with what we had seen with our own eyes in the city itself and the adjoining Dura Forest, and I wasn’t the only one who had spotted this discrepancy.

“What?!” Shess exclaimed, her mask slipping again, but once more, Luza cleared her throat to get her attention, and the princess quickly regained her composure.

“Hear that? *Everyone* in Orvil leads full, happy lives. We do not need these items of yours,” the prime minister asserted, his expression clear and composed.

“Magath is right,” Orvil IV agreed. He didn’t seem to doubt his prime minister’s words at all.

Is it possible that the real power in Orvil lies not with the king, but with the prime minister? The more I thought about it, the more likely this theory seemed. After all, the king was only ten, and from all that I’d witnessed up to this point, his only duties seemed to be nodding along with whatever the prime minister was saying, and signing whatever document got put in front of him. That would explain why he appeared to have no clue about the real situation outside the royal palace.

“However, it would pain me to outright refuse a distinguished merchant like yourself to do business in our kingdom, *especially* after Princess Shessfelicia has personally recommended you,” the prime minister said, a troubled look on his face. “But if we were to grant you a business permit, our own merchants would never let us hear the end of it. Oh, what a *dilemma*.”

Given how exaggerated his display of concern was, I immediately understood he wasn’t actually troubled at all, and this was all an act. It was most likely one of his negotiating techniques, since it was obvious from the way he kept glancing at the kiriko glasses on the table that he was really, *really* interested in my wares. Just as the young king had fallen in love with Shess at first sight, the

prime minister had fallen in love with the kiriko glasses.

“Oh! I’ve just had an idea!” he said, feigning a revelation and attempting to sell it even further by bringing his fist down on the palm of his hand. “Have you perchance heard about our nation’s upcoming combat tournament?”

“Combat tournament?” I repeated.

“Yes. It is one of our nation’s long-established festivities,” he said. “I assume you know of it?”

“I did hear that Orvil organizes a large tournament once every few years, but that’s the extent of my knowledge on the matter,” I replied.

The prime minister nodded, seemingly satisfied with this. “You see, His Majesty grants the winner of the tournament one wish. In other words, all you have to do is win and ask for a business permit as your prize, and you will be allowed to open up a store in our nation. And since it would be a *royal* reward, it is unlikely that the other merchants would object.”

Huh? What the hell is this guy saying? Me? Enter a combat tournament? Is he being serious right now? Sure, I’d made a name for myself on the college pro wrestling circuit back when I was a student, but all of those matches I fought were scripted! Fighting fair and square had never really been my thing.

“I’m immensely grateful for the invitation to participate in the tournament, but...” I paused and gestured at myself. “Just look at me. As you can probably tell from my decidedly non-muscular frame, I have no experience whatsoever when it comes to sword fighting or martial arts. My chances of winning that tournament are about as remote as the sky falling in.”

The prime minister let out a chuckle. “An amusing joke. I never said *you* would be the one fighting.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am quite aware that someone of your build would not stand a ghost of a chance in the tournament. In all honesty, you would most likely be killed in the first round. However...” The corners of his lips curled upward into a fiendish grin. “Surely the purveyor to the Giruam Kingdom’s royal family has a private army of his own? You should make them fight.”

“A private army?” I repeated in confusion.

“What? Are you saying you do not have one? Pray do not tell me that you rely on *mercenaries* and *adventurers* to escort you on your travels,” he said, his face twisting as if the very idea of it disgusted him. “We would never allow a merchant with ties to *those* kinds of people to enter our royal palace—”

“H-He does!” Shess interrupted the prime minister. “Amata has his own private army.” She turned to me and silently gestured to me to play along. “Right, Amata?”

She must have realized from the way the conversation was going that this was a critical moment, and was trying to ensure that I wouldn’t say anything wrong. *She’s not royalty just for show, huh?*

I nodded. “Well, yes, I do have my own ‘private army.’ But I usually refer to them as ‘bodyguards,’ so I was a bit perplexed when you called them that.”

“I see,” the prime minister said, seemingly satisfied with this explanation.

Whew, that was a close one. Thank goodness I managed to come up with a convincing lie on the spot. Going from the prime minister’s words, it seemed that in this world, once a merchant had reached a certain status, having their own private escort was considered standard practice.

“Then, that is perfect. You can just make these ‘bodyguards’ of yours fight in the tournament. And if they win, His Majesty will grant your wish.” The prime minister paused and turned to address one of the civil officials who was standing at the back of the room. “Which event do the merchants’ private guard corps participate in again?”

“The team battle, Your Excellency,” said a young man who previously hadn’t uttered a word since entering the room.

“Explain what that entails to him,” the prime minister said, gesturing toward me.

“Of course, Your Excellency,” the young man said, his sentence punctuated with a bow to the prime minister before he turned to me. “Mr. Amata, one of the events in our nation’s prestigious combat tournament is the ‘team battle.’ In this event, teams of between three and ten members compete against each

other until one emerges victorious. There are no restrictions regarding the kinds of weapons the participants are allowed to use, and magic is also allowed, with the exception of healing spells. Items are not allowed in the arena either. Once every member of a team is unable to fight, has fallen out of bounds, or is dead, the bout is over and the opposing team is declared the victor. The same is true if the leader of a team concedes defeat. You are also allowed to change your team's lineup in between bouts."

According to this young man, the team battle was particularly popular with the masses as it stood out from the other events, which were predominantly one-on-one bouts. And unlike in the jousting or the gladiatorial bouts, the participants were allowed to use magic, which was always a crowd pleaser. For these reasons, it was considered one of the tournament's highlights. The participants were usually mercenary groups and adventuring parties, though it wasn't unknown for the private army of a big-shot merchant and even the personal guard of a noble to take part.

"And that concludes my explanation," the young man said, taking a step back.

I turned back to the prime minister, who picked up where his official had left off. "Under normal circumstances, participating in the tournament would require a proven track record or a recommendation letter from a noble, but..." He glanced at the kiriko glasses on the table. "If you, ah, *insist* on participating, I am certain I can put in a good word for you. What do you say?"

The meaning behind his words was crystal clear: if I gave him one of my kiriko glasses free of charge, he would let me participate in the tournament. "By all means, I would love to take part," I said.

"Good. And let it be said that I cannot refuse a request from Princess Shessfelia's royal purveyor. For the sake of the friendship between our two nations, I shall make every effort to ensure that you are given the opportunity to compete," the prime minister said, glancing at the kiriko glasses a couple more times for good measure. He couldn't have been more obvious if he'd tried.

"Thank you very much. And as a token of my gratitude, please allow me to give you one of these kiriko glasses as a gift. Please go ahead and pick your

favorite.”

“May I, really?”

“Of course,” I replied, flashing him a smile. “Considering the favor you are doing for me, it’s the least I can do, Your Excellency.”

The man chuckled with satisfaction. “I can see that you are a man of reason,” he said, then he lowered his gaze to the kiriko glasses on the coffee table and studied each one intently to make sure he picked the best.

“Oh, come to think of it, there is *one* last thing I forgot to mention about the team battle,” he said, sounding distracted. “Only demi-humes may participate in the bouts.”

“Huh? Demi-humes?” I queried. “Might I ask why, Your Excellency?”

“It is simply the way it has been since His Majesty ascended to the throne five years ago,” he replied, his gaze still firmly fixed on the selection of kiriko glasses. “You see, the people of Orvil love to see demi-humes fight—especially beastfolk—and as such, we ask that all participants in the team battle format enter teams composed exclusively of demi-humes. Naturally, that rule applies to your own team too. Oh, and your team must have at least one beastfolk among its number.”

“D-Duly noted,” I said.

And just like that, one thing had led to another, and I found myself registered to enter a team into the upcoming combat tournament.

Chapter Eight: Forming a Team

Our audience with the king swiftly ended soon after and we were taken to an estate the king had prepared for us. From what I'd been told, the mansion had specifically been built to house state guests for the duration of their stays in the city-state, so it went without saying that it was absolutely huge and lavishly furnished and knights constantly patrolled the grounds to ensure the highest level of security was maintained. It appeared Orvil had several of these estates, as they often invited royal families from their neighboring nations to their grand tournaments. We regrouped with Celes, Dramom, and Suama and all gathered in one room to share what had happened during our audience with the king.

"How in the world have we ended up in this situation?" I grumbled, holding my head in my hands.

I couldn't believe I'd let myself get so swept up in the conversation that I'd ended up signing up for an event in the upcoming combat tournament. And not just any event but one only demi-humes could participate in. Now, you might be wondering what exactly was a "demi-hume." Well, to put it simply, the term referred to any intelligent humanoid race other than humes themselves, so beastfolk, elves, dwarves, fairies, titans, halflings, lizardfolk, six-limbed folks, *et cetera, et cetera*. You couldn't count all the different races if you tried. Oh, and technically speaking, devils like Celes also counted as demi-humes, but since she looked like a regular hume, I couldn't really enter her into the tournament.

"Sorry, Amata," Shess said sheepishly. "It's all because I said you had a personal army that things turned out this way." It sounded like she was also regretting some of the things she had said in the heat of the moment.

"Nah, you did nothing wrong," I reassured her. "If anything, you pretty much saved me back there. I was at a bit of a loss when the prime minister mentioned the whole 'private army' business."

"Amata..." the little princess said quietly, her voice full of emotion.

"If you hadn't told him I had a private army, we would've completely lost any

chance we had of helping the beastfolk. So thank you from the bottom of my heart, Shess.”

“Y-You’re welcome,” she mumbled as she fidgeted awkwardly in her seat. I got the feeling she’d believed I was going to scold her for being so reckless with her speech, which explained her visible embarrassment when I thanked her instead.

“So what are you going to do now, Amata?” Luza jumped in. “The princess’s quick wit may have secured you a spot in the tournament, but you’ll still need to find a team that’s willing to fight for you.”

“I agree with Miss Luza. We need to start coming up with a strategy,” Duane said. “Ah, if only humes could participate, I would’ve volunteered to fight, but as it is...”

“B-B-But the prime minister said only demi-humes were allowed to fight in the team battle, Sir Duane,” Luza said, staring at the knight in awe. The mere act of speaking to her crush had her so flustered, she found it difficult to get the words out.

Duane nodded, a grave expression on his face. “I’m well aware. That’s why we need to start recruiting demi-humes for the team as soon as possible. We only have a week until the tournament, after all.”

“S-Sir Duane, what about heading back to the Giruam Kingdom to recruit some fighters?” Luza suggested.

“Yes, that seems like our best plan right now. But I wonder if we can really manage to form a team that’ll be strong enough to win the tournament.”

The two knights hummed, deep in thought. I’d actually come up with the idea of heading back to Ninoritch and recruiting team members at the Fairy’s Blessing too. Magic was allowed in the team battle event, and there were quite a number of adventurers who specialized in magic, so that sounded ideal. There was one major issue with this plan, however.

“Mister Shiro,” Aina said, attempting to get my attention.

“Hm? What is it, Aina?”

“People can die in this tournament, right?” she asked, looking up at me wide-eyed.

I hesitated for a moment. “Yeah. People can die in it.”

Real weapons were to be used by the participants in this tournament, and even with Dramom’s ability to heal any wound, no matter how serious, I still didn’t want people to have to put their lives on the line just so I could earn the right to open up a shop in Orvil.

“Should I ask the earl for help? I’m certain Lord Bashure would lend us a hand. And many demi-humes live in Mazela, so I’m sure there are skilled individuals among them,” Duane suggested.

“I could ask Her Majesty, the Queen, for her help as well,” was Luza’s next suggestion.

“And I could ask my father!” Shess added eagerly.

For a while, I listened to them exchanging ideas over where we might find skilled team members, and after putting a great deal of thought into it, I finally spoke.

“I may know someone who can help us.”



“I think I get the picture. So that’s why you’ve come to me.”

“Yes. Can you help us, Miss Valeria?”

I’d returned to Lugu Village, the bearfolk’s village in the Dura Forest, to ask a favor of their head warrior, Valeria. Apart from Celes, who was acting as my bodyguard, I’d left the rest of my companions back in Orvil, and the two of us successfully made it to Lugu Village by retracing my steps from the last time I was in the forest. On our arrival, the bearfolk welcomed us with open arms and warm smiles, but time was of the essence, so I’d asked them to go fetch Valeria. Once she had joined us, I greeted her and wasted no time in asking her to compete in Orvil’s tournament as part of the team I was putting together.

“The combat tournament, huh?” she mused.

“Yes. I *have* to win it,” I said resolutely, before relating what had been said

during my audience with the King of Orvil.

By this point, the three of us had moved to Valeria's house, and the room we were in was lit by a couple of lanterns, since night had already fallen. Valeria's little brother—who was in much better shape than the last time I'd seen him—was out helping the others to build houses to accommodate all the apefolk refugees who had come to Lugu Village. Bearfolk had good night vision, so they could carry on working even after the sun had set. That was pretty incredible if you asked me.

"So you need my help to win the tournament," Valeria summarized when I finished recounting my tale.

As the head warrior of the bearfolk, she was stupidly strong. Like, "killing an ogre with her bare hands" strong. Even Kilpha, who wasn't all that far away from being a gold-rank adventurer herself, had been impressed by her combat prowess.

"I know I'm asking a lot, especially as I can't fight to save my life. But..." I paused and placed both hands on the floor before bowing my head deeply to Valeria. "I'm begging you. Please help me win the tournament and save the beastfolk."

"Raise your head, Shiro," Valeria said.

"No," I replied. "It's a completely unreasonable request, so the least I can do is lower my head."

I heard her sigh. "Good grief. I told you to raise your head." The next instant, I felt her grab me by the collar and lift my upper body up by it, forcing me to raise my head. "I refuse to allow the man who saved our village to bow his head so easily," she said firmly. "You are our savior, Shiro. We owe you our lives."

"Well, I don't consider myself your 'savior' or anything of the—" I started, but Valeria interrupted me before I could finish.

"Besides, I told you, didn't I? If you ever needed my help, you just had to come and find me," she said, a broad grin appearing on her face. "If you win, you'll be able to save all the beastfolk in the Dura Forest, right? And you might even get your fiancée—get Kilpha back, right? Then, how can I possibly refuse?"

She paused and looked me straight in the eye. “You just leave it to me, Shiro. I’ll win the tournament for you.”

“Miss Valeria...”

“Between the two of us, we can get Kilpha back. Okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Thank you so much, Miss Valeria.” I was so touched by her kindness that I could feel tears welling up. I quickly wiped the corners of my eyes, though I disguised the motion by making it look like I was just scratching my cheeks, in the hope that Valeria hadn’t noticed.

“You need at least two more fighters for the team battle, right?” Valeria said. “Want me to bring a couple of my strongest warriors with me?”

“Would that be okay with you?” I asked.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” she said. “Besides, the girls would be honored to fight to save their brethren.”

“Then—”

What I had been about to say was, “*I might take you up on that offer,*” but Celes—who hadn’t said a word prior to this moment—interrupted me.

“Hold on, Shiro. I have an idea.”

I blinked at her in surprise. “What’s your idea?”

“The only requirement to participate in this tournament is that you have to be a demi-hume, correct?” the demon said. “So anyone who *looks* like a demi-hume can participate, yes?”

“Well, I guess, but...” I trailed off, my head tilted to one side in bewilderment at where she was going with this.

A devious smile curled her lips upward, and I suddenly remembered that Celes was, first and foremost, a proud warrior who absolutely *loved* fighting. Needless to say, the idea of a combat tournament must have thrilled her to no end, and it seemed she’d had enough of sitting still and not throwing her own hat into the ring.

“Watch this,” she said to me as she got up from her seat. She grunted and her

back started making creaking sounds until all of a sudden, jet-black wings burst out of her shoulder blades.

Valeria's jaw dropped. "Wh-Wh-What..." she stammered in shock. "Y-You... What *are* those wings?!" I was used to Celes's "flight" form by now, but Valeria had never seen it before, so it was only natural she'd be startled by the transformation.

Celes ignored Valeria's reaction and turned to me. "What do you think, Shiro? I can claim to be wingedfolk and the other humes would believe me, would they not?"

So it seemed that Celes's plan was to transform part of her body to make her look like a different demi-hume race. As their name suggested, wingedfolk were a race with wings sprouting from their backs. From what I'd been told, they lived on a continent (or was it an island?) in the sky, and encountering one was extremely rare.

"Uh, just to make sure I understand what you're suggesting here: you're *volunteering* to participate in the tournament? Is that it?" I asked Celes.

"Do you have some issue with that?" she queried.

"No, not at all. I'm actually very thankful, but, uh..."

I paused and glanced over at Valeria to make sure she was still too stunned by this turn of events to fully grasp what was going on before bringing my lips closer to Celes's ear.

"Just don't kill anyone, okay?" I whispered.



At present, my team for the tournament comprised Valeria, the head of the bearfolk village's warriors, and Celes, one of the demon king's four lieutenants. With these two alone, victory felt practically assured, but my team still needed one more person on it before we could compete in the team battle. One option was to take Valeria up on her offer and get her to bring along one of her warriors to the event. But something else she said gave me another idea.

"You said your friends saw some former fighters over in Orvil's slums, didn't

you? In that case, there might be a few of our brethren there,” she said.

I mentioned that one of my companions had the ability to heal even the worst injuries with her magic, which prompted Valeria to practically beg me to take her to the slums to heal any bearfolk that might have ended up there. She told me I could ask them to participate as part of my team in the tournament as a way of paying me back for the treatment. Personally, I would have much preferred not asking for anything in return, but apparently, bearfolk warriors—scratch that, all *beastfolk* warriors refused to accept help from a stranger if they couldn’t repay them in some way. And so, I came to the decision that I would recruit the last member for my team in the slums.

Valeria didn’t say it outright, but it was clear her main reason for bringing up the idea of going to the slums in the first place was to go look for the bearfolk who had left the village to find work and never returned. Perhaps someone dear to her had made that journey and she’d been waiting to see them again ever since, desperately hoping they were still alive somewhere.

“Okay, just to make sure we’re all on the same page here: our team will be composed of you two, plus whatever former beastfolk warrior we find in the slums. Are you both fine with that?” I asked Celes and Valeria, and they nodded.

And just like that, my team for the tournament was pretty much set.



We decided to spend the night in Lugu Village and return to Orvil in the morning. I took a whole load of food out of my inventory—enough to satisfy all of the bearfolk, the apefolk, and Celes—as well as some booze. I hadn’t stocked up on quite enough alcohol from Japan for everyone, so I threw in a cask of wine I’d bought in Orvil too, and just like the last time I’d been here, an impromptu party broke out. The bearfolk kids all looked like they wanted to ask me to come and play with them, but they must have been scared of Celes since none of them dared to approach us. *I guess I’ll just have to go over there instead*, I thought.

But the second I stood up, Valeria called out to me. “Shiro, do you have a minute?” she said. “There’s something I want to show you.”

“Show me? What is it?”

“These,” she said, placing a bunch of large metal objects on the ground in front of me.

“What are they? They look like giant rings.”

There were a lot of them too, each one a different size, with the smallest one around thirty centimeters in diameter and the largest around sixty. Inspecting them a little closer, I noticed they all had geometric patterns etched into them, and if they had been smaller, I would have assumed they were bracelets.

“Where did you find these?” I asked Valeria.

“Remember those ogres we killed in the apefolk village? Well, after you left, I went back there with a couple of warriors to get their loot.” She paused and glanced down at the metal rings on the ground. “We found them on the ogres.”

“These metal things?” I said, blinking in surprise.

After treating the bearfolk for the disease known to them as the Lamentation of the Forest, Kilpha, Valeria, and I had traveled from village to village to distribute medicine to all the sick beastfolk in the forest. But on reaching our final port of call, the village of the apefolk, we found it being attacked by orcs. Kilpha and Valeria rushed straight in to save the few apefolk who were still breathing, while I supported them by providing Kilpha with bear repellent to blind the beasts. A few minutes into the fight, we were also joined by Duane, who had been searching the forest for me. He joined forces with Kilpha and Valeria, and the three of them managed to kill all of the ogres. Then, from what Valeria was saying, she had returned sometime later to collect the loot left behind by the ogres, and that was when she found these metallic ringlike objects around the beasts’ arms, necks, and ankles.

“We were completely puzzled as to why the ogres had these things on them, so we brought them back to our village,” Valeria continued. “We’ve never seen anything like them before, but since you’re a merchant, I figured you might know what they are.”

“I see. Can I touch them?” I asked.

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” I bent down and tried to pick up one of the rings, but it refused to budge. “Damn, these are heavy!” I remarked.

“Are they?” Valeria said.

“Yes! They are!”

There was no way I was picking up any of the rings with one hand, and I’d almost thrown my back trying. *And to think Valeria was carrying a bunch of them in one hand. She’s not Lugu’s head warrior just for show, that’s for sure.*

“Give it to me, Shiro,” Celes said, holding out a hand toward me when I’d finally managed to lift one of the rings up off the ground and was struggling under the weight of it.

“Be careful, Celes. They’re heavy,” I warned her.

“Do not lump me in with you,” she said, taking the ring from me. Just like Valeria, she had no problem holding it.

Darn it! It might not look like it, but I do muscle training every day, y’know!

“So? Know anything about them?” Valeria asked me. According to her, it wasn’t exactly rare for ogres to wear accessories, but they generally went in for the skulls or fangs of their kills, not metal trinkets. In fact, this was the first time she had ever seen ogres sporting anything metallic on their bodies, so she was understandably intrigued. That was why she was asking for my advice on them.

“Hm, well, I’ve never seen anything like them either,” I confessed. “But...” I paused and took a closer look at the ring Celes was kindly holding up for me. “They’re glowing faintly, aren’t they? That would suggest they’re magic items.”

“Are you familiar with magic items?” Valeria asked.

“Only the stuff I deal with,” I said. “I don’t know the first thing about anything else.”

Valeria seemed a bit disappointed by this. “Oh, I see. So you don’t know what these rings are either.”

“Sorry I can’t be of more help,” I said apologetically.

She shrugged. “It’s all good. Don’t worry about it.”

I was just about to tell Celes to hand the ring back to Valeria, when she offered her own thoughts on the matter. “Shiro, the Immortal Dragon might know what they are. Most powerful dragons are well-versed in magic and magic items. She would be no exception.” She had a look of disgust on her face as if merely saying Dramom’s name left a bad taste in her mouth, yet in spite of that, for my sake, she had still suggested asking her. I was very grateful.

“Ooh, good point. Dramom might be able to help us.”

And if she didn’t know, I could always ask Nesca. And if she didn’t have a clue either, I was sure grandma would know. I may not have been able to help Valeria myself, but my friends most certainly could.

“Valeria, could we take these for now? I have a couple of friends who might have some idea what they are,” I said.

“Sure, go right ahead.”

“Thanks.” I set my backpack down on the ground and opened my inventory inside it, then asked Celes to lower the ringlike objects into it. “I’ll let you know as soon as I find out anything about them,” I assured Valeria.

“Sorry to bother you with it. It’s just... I can’t really put it into words, but I get this bad feeling whenever I look at them,” she said.

“Really? Like, a hunch, you mean?” I asked.

Valeria chuckled. “Yeah. There’s no real reason for me feeling this way. I just do. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Not at all,” I said. “In fact, I’m a firm believer in always trusting your gut.”

According to some research I’d seen, following your gut instincts tended to be the best course of action ninety percent of the time, because apparently, your brain unconsciously tried to glean answers from past experiences and stuff you’d learned before settling on an accurate appraisal of the situation more often than not. Or so it had said.

“Oh, you are, are you?” Valeria retorted.

“I am, yes.”

The two of us stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, but we

couldn't keep a straight face for long and soon burst out laughing.

The following day, Celes and I returned to Orvil with Valeria in tow.

Chapter Nine: The Third Participant

“This is Valeria, everyone.”

Once we had made it back to the mansion the king had lent to Shess, I introduced my bearwoman friend to my companions.

“Hello. I’m Valeria, head warrior of Lugu Village,” she said. “It’s nice to meet you all.”

Aina and Shess were the first to react.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Valeria! I’m Aina.”

“And I’m Shessfelicia. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

This was the first time that either girl had seen a bearfolk, and their eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Heya. We meet again,” Duane said, greeting Valeria.

Luza’s eyes widened in alarm. “Y-You know her, Sir Duane?” she stammered, her voice tinged with anxiety.

Dramom was next to say hello. “I am Dramom and this is my daughter, Suama. Come, Suama. Introduce yourself,” she prompted the little dragon girl.

“Ai! Hi, ’m Suama. I’m zewo ye-ars owd,” Suama babbled.

“Good job, Suama,” Dramom said, pleased with her daughter’s efforts.

“Z-Zero years old?” Valeria gasped. “That’s a joke, surely?”

Once we were all done with the introductions, everyone took a seat around the dining room table. While the mansion was quite spacious, the dining room was really the only place where all nine of us could gather together and sit comfortably.

I recounted our little trip into the forest to the others. “So there you have it,” I said when they were all caught up. “Valeria and Celes have agreed to fight in the tournament for us. And we’re thinking of going to the slums to recruit the

final member of our team.”

A look of relief appeared on everyone’s faces on learning that our team for the tournament was pretty much set.

I turned to Dramom. “We ended up involving you in our plan without asking if you were okay with it first, but if you don’t mind, could you come with us to the slums to heal all the suffering bearfolk warriors there?” I asked.

“I belong to you, body and soul, master. You may use me however you wish,” she replied.

As always, she wasn’t letting up on the whole master shtick, and it was every bit as creepy as ever. Poor Valeria was speechless, and Luza just stared at me in disgust. At least Shess and Duane didn’t seem *too* uncomfortable, which was a clear indication that they were already starting to get used to it.

“However, master...” Dramom started, glaring at Celes. “I wish to know how the devil can fight in the ‘tournament,’ or whatever it is called. I thought that would not be possible.”

“Oh, uh, well...” I said hesitantly. “Celes can grow wings, so we were thinking of having her pretend to be a wingedfolk so that she’d be allowed to participate. You know, since only demi-humes can compete in the tournament. Uh, you okay, Dramom?” She was grinding her teeth and seemed so incredibly frustrated that even her shoulders were shaking.

She fired off a barrage of questions at Celes. “You do not *mind* masquerading as a creature from another race? Have you no pride in your own identity? Do you wish to be helpful to master *that* badly?”

Celes’s lips curled upward into a defiant smirk. “I do not wish to hear that from someone who is parading around as a hume.”

“I-I merely took this form to match master’s—” Dramom said in her own defense, but Celes interrupted her.

“Stop making excuses. You are just embarrassing yourself.”

Dramom always acted like she was better than Celes, but this time around, the roles were reversed. She made a frustrated sound at being looked down on

by her fierce rival.

“I do not mind pretending to be of another race if it will help Shiro. He wishes to win the tournament, so I will compete and grant his wish. That is all there is to it,” Celes said.

Dramom made yet another frustrated sound. She seemed to have particularly disliked the part where Celes said she would grant my wish. The sound of her grinding her teeth echoed around the dining room. *Grind. Grind. Crack.*

Huh? Wait, did her teeth just crack?! I wondered in alarm. The noise must have scared Suama too, as she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

“Master,” Dramom said eventually, her tone calm yet oddly threatening.

“Y-Yes?” I stammered.

“I have a suggestion, master.”

“Wh-What is it?”

A radiant smile spread across her face. I was terrified. Could you blame me? A few seconds before, her teeth had been making all sorts of scary sounds, and now here she was, smiling away like nothing had happened!

“Please watch this,” she said as she rose from her chair. She grunted softly, and an instant later, snow-white wings had sprouted from her back.



“Wow.”

Needless to say, we were all stunned by the sight of them.

Valeria, in particular, looked like she'd just seen a ghost, her eyes wide in disbelief. “Wh-What?! That one can grow wings *too?!*” she exclaimed.

“What do you think, master?” Dramom asked once her transformation was over.

“Huh? What do you mean, what do I think?” I said, tilting my head to one side in confusion.

Dramom hovered closer to me. Like, really, *really* close to me. She leaned forward, locked eyes with me, and with a smile still on her face, said, “I have grown wings.”

“Uh, yeah,” I mumbled uncertainly. “You sure have.”

“Yes. I did it for you, master.”

I was so lost, the only sound that managed to escape my mouth was an incredulous “Huh?” Dramom, on the other hand, was still smiling. *Her smile is so intense, I can't think clearly at all!* I bemoaned inwardly.

I somehow managed to regain some semblance of composure, only for Dramom to bring her face even closer to mine so that our noses were practically touching. How could she expect me to think clearly under these conditions?!

“Master, please take a good look at me,” she said.

“O-Okay.”

Um, so, uh, her hair and her dress are still the same as before, I thought. They're both as white as snow, but she has wings now too. And she's still floating a few feet off the ground. Heh, all she needs now is a halo and she'd look like an angel.

I gasped at that thought and suddenly remembered a pearl of wisdom my grandma had once bestowed upon me: “*Shiro, if you notice a change in a woman's appearance, you have to compliment her right away, you hear?*” I

finally understood what she had meant by that. This was the moment grandma had been preparing me for.

“Dramom!” I said, my voice slightly louder than usual.

“Yes, master?”

“You, uh...” I began. “Y-You look like an angel?” For some reason, my compliment ended up coming out more like a question.

“Excuse me?” Dramom said, her aura growing even more overwhelming.

It seemed I hadn’t found the right response and I quickly backtracked. “No, it’s nothing. Forget I said anything!”

I’d tried following grandma’s advice of complimenting her, but all it had done was make her even scarier. *That’s not what you said would happen, grandma!*

Dramom continued to smile at me, clearly expecting me to say *something*, but I was at a total loss over what she wanted, and panic set in as I struggled to find the right words.

“Mister Shiro?” Aina piped up, tugging at my shirt sleeve to get my attention.

“What is it, Aina? I’m sorry, but I’m a bit busy just at the moment. I need to come up with the right answer or else—” I started explaining, but the little girl interrupted me before I could finish.

“Mister Shiro, um...” She brought her lips up to my ear and lowered her voice to a whisper. “I think Miss Dramom is trying to pretend to be a wingedfolk like Miss Celes did.”

Aina’s words hit me like a lightning bolt and I couldn’t prevent a gasp escaping from my lips. *I see*, I thought. *So that’s how it is*. Thanks to Aina, I finally understood what Dramom wanted from me.

“Thank you, Aina,” I said to the little girl before turning back to Dramom. I took a long, deep breath, then broke out into an excited smile. “That’s *amazing*, Dramom! You look just like a wingedfolk!” I exclaimed, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

Well now, I thought to myself. *How’s she going to react?*

“Do you think so, master?” she asked.

“Yes! Your camouflage is spot on!”

Nailed it! Dramom’s aura mellowed practically the instant the words left my mouth.

And I knew *exactly* what to follow up with too. “Dramom, if it’s not too much of a bother for you, would you please compete in the tournament for me?”

“Of course. If that is your wish, then I, Dramom, swear that I will bring you victory, master.”

“Th-Thank you so much!” I mumbled.

And with that, all three members of my team had officially been chosen: Valeria, Celes, and the Immortal Dragon, also known as Dramom. With such a powerful team, there was no way we weren’t winning this tournament. Heck, the three of them together could destroy entire nations if they put their minds to it.

“What was that farce?” Celes muttered, clearly unimpressed after silently watching the previous scene play out.

Chapter Ten: To the Slums

“Shiro, do you mind accompanying me to the slums?” Valeria said once our discussion had come to an end.

Even though our team now met the entry requirements and we technically didn’t need to recruit any more fighters from the slums, I could tell that she was still concerned about her brethren who might have ended up there. She requested that Dramom and I accompany her there, and naturally, I accepted. And so it was that the three of us plus little Suama headed off to the slums, with Dramom holding Suama’s hand so the little dragon girl wouldn’t get lost, and Valeria making sure the hood of her cape was up to hide her ears.

“Looks like we need to hang a right here, then continue straight ahead,” I said, reading the map Duane had drawn for us.

Our initial plan had been for Duane to accompany us, but Orvil IV had turned up unannounced at the mansion to invite Shess for tea, so Duane ended up having to go with her as one of her bodyguards, along with Luza and Aina, the latter quickly changing into her maid dress. At that very moment, Shess was probably making awkward small talk with the boy king while sipping on tea. I just had to hope she wouldn’t let her mask slip too much.

“Huh? Have we taken a wrong turn?” I wondered aloud when I noticed that we didn’t seem to be going in the right direction. No doubt an unfortunate consequence of my reliance on digital map services all the time, since it meant I had no idea how to accurately read an analog map. *Especially* not a hand-drawn one.

I decided to ask a passerby for directions. “Um, excuse me. We’re trying to get to the slu—uh, the Kuad District. Is this the right way?”

The woman I’d approached eyed me with suspicion. “What business do you have in the Kuad District?” she asked curtly.

“Um, we’d like to go see the beastfolk—” I said, trying to explain the reason

for our visit to that part of town, but she cut me off.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” she said. “What exactly do you want with the beastfolk? Are you planning to hurt them? Hire them as laborers and mistreat them to the point of exhaustion?”

“Wait, what?” My brain was having a hard time following the situation I had suddenly found myself in.

“If you’re planning on harming the beastfolk, I won’t tell you how to get to the Kuad District,” she said firmly. But although her tone was resolute, she seemed uneasy. I soon noticed that she was repeatedly glancing over at Valeria, who loomed behind me with her hood partially covering her face, and realized she must have been quite wary of her. Yet despite her evident fear, she had gathered up enough courage to refuse to give us directions.

“Huh? Wait a minute. Aren’t you a hume?” I pointed out. “Why are you trying to protect the beastfolk?” I was at a complete loss.

“And why shouldn’t I try to protect them? Up until the new king came to power, we lived in harmony with the beastfolk. And that was only five years ago! But...” The woman clenched her teeth, a look of frustration flashing across her face. “A lot of people in the city have started doing such awful, awful things to them, and it’s all because the new king doesn’t like the beastfolk. Now, don’t get me wrong, I understand the desire to curry favor with the king, but I find it deplorable that they would break the trust we once had with our neighbors just for that.”

It was evident the woman was furious about the situation.

“I used to have beastfolk friends, and I wasn’t the only one,” she continued. “There are still plenty of people who consider the beastfolk as friends, and who love them. But if we say that out loud, we get taken to the guard post and whipped!”

“*Whipped?!* ” I exclaimed in shock. I could hardly imagine the boy king who had fallen in love with Shess at first sight making such a cruel decree. *But if it wasn’t him, it must have been someone else. And I have a pretty good idea who that “someone else” might be...*

“It was horrible. Before I knew it, the main street was flooded with people tyrannizing the beastfolk left and right,” the woman continued. “Those of us who still see the beastfolk as our friends have no choice but to keep silent if we don’t want to be punished.”

So as it turned out, there *were* still people in Orvil who cared about the beastfolk. To be perfectly honest, I’d started to hate the hume population of Orvil as a whole for the treatment of the beastfolk, but after meeting this woman, I felt a glimmer of hope.

“Did you hear me? I said if you’re going to hurt the beastfolk, I—” the woman started, but Valeria interrupted her.

“Thank you,” she said, removing the hood covering her ears and flashing a warm smile at the woman.

“A *bearfolk*?!” the woman gasped. “You were a beastfolk all along?”

“My name is Valeria. I asked this man named Shiro to take me to the slums to see if any of my kin have ended up there.”

“I see. So that’s why you want to go there,” the woman murmured, her voice softening. A look of relief flashed across her face. “I’m sorry for doubting you. Uh, so do you also...” She trailed off, seemingly hesitant to finish her question.

I nodded and gave her a thumbs-up to reassure her. “Yup, I love beastfolk too!”

“Shiro’s fiancée is a cat-sìth,” Valeria added.

“Is that so? I once dated a demonwolf myself. Though we ended up separating.”

The woman explained that a lot of people in Orvil still wished for the harmony between humans and beastfolk to be restored. These individuals frequently went down to the slums to offer aid and support, with some even going as far as sneaking beastfolk out of Orvil and helping them to relocate to other nations.

I was deeply moved by the woman’s story, and my resolve to rescue the beastfolk was strengthened, because I wanted to ensure that her efforts and those by others like her wouldn’t be for naught.



We followed the woman's directions and made it to the slums, but nothing could have prepared us for the sight that awaited us. We glimpsed beastfolk huddled in the dark, narrow alleyways between dilapidated buildings, some with only one arm, while others had no eyes or legs. Former warriors, most likely. Among them were young boys and girls who were so thin, they looked like they might collapse at any moment, and some even had rotting skin, perhaps due to some disease. All in all, there seemed to be about thirty beastfolk in this one area alone, and we had only just crossed over into the slums. Just how many beastfolk lived around here?

All of a sudden, a voice called out to us from our right. "Impossible. Valeria?"

The bearman that had spoken up appeared to be in his late twenties and over two meters tall, though he was terribly emaciated, most likely due to the severe lack of food available in these parts. He also only had one arm.

"That voice..." Valeria gasped. "Gugui? Is that you? What happened to you?" She rushed over to the man's side and supported him as he staggered toward us.

The man chuckled feebly. "It really is you. I never thought I'd get to see you again."

"Don't talk. Save your strength. Sit down. Are you hungry?" she asked before shaking her head at the absurdity of her own question. "Why am I even asking that? Of *course* you're hungry. Do you think you can eat?"

She grabbed a nearby wooden crate and lowered Gugui down onto it, before unshouldering her backpack and producing an apple from it.

"Here. Food for you," she said, handing the apple to Gugui. "This guy here with me, Shiro, gave it to me. C'mon, eat up."

Gugui shook his head. "I don't need to eat. Give it to the youngsters instead."

He turned and motioned to a group of young kids behind him, their hungry eyes fixated on the apple.

"There are children here too?" Valeria said, her voice strained.

“They were sent away from the other villages to reduce the number of mouths they had to feed. Poor mites. I guess they were probably sold into slavery and ended up here after escaping from their cruel masters.”

Valeria was speechless as she looked around at the kids, who all seemed to be between five and ten years old. They were so young, yet they had already endured so many hardships. My heart broke for them.

“There are a few kind humes who bring us food from time to time, but it’s not enough to fill our bellies. So...” He paused. “Please give whatever you have to the children.”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry, Gugui. We have more than enough food for everyone,” Valeria assured him, before turning to the children and waving them over. “Gather around, kids. We’ve got some yummy fruit for you.”

Their faces lit up as they eagerly accepted the apples she handed out to them. A line quickly formed behind the children as the other beastfolk trudged over, hoping to get some food as well. In fact, there were so many of them, we soon ran out of apples. But that wasn’t a problem, because I just produced some more food from my inventory, and with Valeria’s help, distributed it all to the beastfolk.

“So, Gugui...” Valeria said once all of the beastfolk in this region of the slums had received some food to tide them over. “How’d a strong warrior like you end up looking like *that*?”

Gugui had once been a bearfolk warrior, and a pretty strong one at that, if Valeria informing me that he had almost beaten her to the title of head warrior of their village was anything to go by. It was no wonder that she had looked so shocked when she first saw him, because anyone would have been stunned to see a former rival reduced to such a sorry state.

“I lost my left arm in the colosseum,” Gugui explained. “I told my master I could still fight, but he kicked me out of his private army anyway. I tried looking for another job, but no one would hire me. And I wasn’t allowed to leave the city, so...”

“You ended up here,” Valeria said, finishing his sentence.

“Yeah, I had no other option.” He sighed. “Home—the Dura Forest—is so close, yet it feels so impossibly far away. And not just for me, but for all of us here.”

To summarize Gugui’s tale, all the beastfolk who had left the Dura Forest to come to look for work in Orvil had been forced to sign employment contracts with their new masters, and calling them “unfair” wouldn’t even begin to describe how exploitative they were. There were a few clauses that appeared in all of these contracts, and one such clause stated the beastfolk weren’t permitted to leave Orvil until the duration of their contracts was up. Even those who had been fired before the end of their contract weren’t allowed to leave town before the original end date, because the city would raise their brethren’s taxes as punishment for absconding. Or at least, that’s what Gugui and the others were told.

“I only have to stay in this accursed city for one more year, then I’ll finally be allowed to go back home. Well, if I survive that long, that is.”

In reality, I figured that the reason Gugui and the others had been stopped from leaving Orvil was most likely so the other beastfolk wouldn’t learn about how their kin were being treated here.

“Still, Valeria...” Gugui began.

“What is it?”

He stared at her in silence for a couple of seconds before continuing. “I’m surprised you managed to enter the city at all. I’d heard beastfolk from the forest weren’t even allowed inside the city anymore, even when accompanied by a hume. Well, unless they’re coming to find work, of course.”

Valeria nodded. “You’re right. I tried coming here to look for you and the others a bunch of times, but I always got turned away at the gate. But...” She paused and placed her hand on my shoulder. “Shiro helped me out. He’s the official royal purveyor of a nearby kingdom, so the guards had no choice but to let him and his entourage through. You should’ve seen the guard’s face when he had to let me pass. It was priceless.”

“I’m sure it was,” Gugui said. “I wish I’d seen it.”

“Right?” Valeria agreed, and they both laughed, though I noticed a sad glint in Valeria’s eyes. It must have been heart-wrenching to see her old friend in such a dire state after all these years.

Gugui began to recount everything that had happened to the beastfolk who had come to Orvil either to work or to fight in the colosseum. Valeria updated him on the situation in the Dura Forest, including the fact that the supplies Gugui and the others said they were sending to them had never arrived.

“I see. I feared that might be the case. So he really didn’t send them,” Gugui growled through gritted teeth.

The beastfolk warriors had only agreed to fight in the colosseum on the condition that their employers would send supplies to their kin in the forest. It was clear they hadn’t honored that promise.

“I’ll kill that louse,” Gugui said, his eyes burning with anger.

“I’ll help you with that,” Valeria said. “But first, we must save our brethren—no, we must save *all* of the beastfolk.”

“Save them? How?”

“We have a plan.”

Valeria outlined my strategy to Gugui: I would win the combat tournament, receive a business license from the king, then hire solely beastfolk to run my shop, paying them all a fair wage.

“Can we trust this merchant, though?” Gugui asked, eyeing me with suspicion.

“I assure you we can. Even my little brother trusts him,” Valeria said.

“I see. Well, I’ll take your word for it, then,” he said, though I could tell he wasn’t entirely convinced.

That’s all right. I have just the thing that’ll convince him that I’m doing all of this in good faith.

“Dramom,” I called out.

“Yes, master.” Dramom had been standing quietly at the back of the group,

but at my bidding, she took a step forward. She was holding Suama's hand, and the little girl had to take two steps forward in order to keep up with her mother.

"Could you heal Gugui's wounds please?" I said.

"Of course, master. However, would it not be more time-efficient if I healed everyone here at once?" she inquired.

"I mean, yeah, it sure would," I conceded. "But can you really do that?"

"With ease," Dramom replied before casting a spell. "'Light of Healing.'" Within an instant, the whole alleyway was encased in a thin dome of light.

Gugui was standing closest to Dramom, so he was the first to witness a miracle. "M-My arm!" he cried out. "My arm's grown back!"

"I can... I can see!" someone else shouted.

"My legs are back to normal!"

"The rotting's stopped! My skin's all healed!"

Miracle after miracle coursed down the narrow alleyway.

Valeria watched on wide-eyed and thoroughly bewildered by what she was seeing. "Shiro, this 'Dramom' lady is amazing," she breathed.

I couldn't help chuckling at her reaction. "Well, she *is* one of the world's most powerful dragons, after all."

Valeria hummed. "A dragon, huh?" Then she realized what she had just said. "Wait, what?! A *dragon*?! You're kidding, right?"

I laughed again. "Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. I'll leave it to your imagination."

"Well, if *you* say it's true, I guess it must be," Valeria said, an incredulous smile curling her lips upward. The other beastfolk in the alley were staring at me in stunned silence too, awaiting an explanation for what had just happened.

Gugui eventually stepped forward. "Hey, chief. Your name's Shiro, right?"

"That's right. Shiro Amata, merchant. Sorry for the tardy introduction," I said, holding out my hand for him to shake, which he did.

"I'm Gugui, a warrior from Lugu Village. On behalf of everyone here, thank

you.”

Chapter Eleven: Who's Pulling the Strings?

The beastfolk chose to stay put in the slums for the time being, as they wanted to avoid the prospect of running into their former employers now that their bodies had been fully healed. Their logic was sound, for if the people who'd fired them for missing limbs saw that said limbs had been miraculously restored, it was highly likely they would try to make them fight again. But given that the beastfolk now knew their employers had failed to uphold their end of the bargain, I could only imagine the kind of bloodshed that would ensue if they were to encounter them again. Partly due to this, I asked the beastfolk warriors to wait until the tournament was over to make their move, as recompense for healing them. Gugui immediately agreed, but it took some time for the others to come around to the idea. They did all eventually agree to wait, though.

We were just about to head off when Gugui stopped Valeria. "I wish I could participate in the tournament with you, but I have to stay here and make sure no one gets it into their heads to do something stupid."

From what I'd seen so far, it appeared Gugui was the leader of the beastfolk residing in the slums. He assured me he would keep an eye on the others and stop anyone who tried to sneak out to get revenge on their former employers.

"And since I can't go... Take this," he said, picking up something from the ground that was wrapped in a tattered cloth. He removed the cloth to reveal a large battle hammer.

"That's Mountain Crusher, isn't it?" Valeria said, her eyes wide. "You're *giving* it to me?"

"Yup. My pops passed it down to me, but it was really meant for the next head warrior, so I want you to have it."

Valeria was momentarily speechless.

"C'mon, head warrior, take it," Gugui urged.

The bearwoman sighed. "Fine. But I'm not giving it back to you even if you

beg me, you hear?” she said, grinning.

Gugui returned her smile. “If I want it back, I’ll just beat you in a duel and become head warrior myself.”

“Oh, will you now? Well, I look forward to it,” she said as she took the battle hammer, which was absolutely *massive*. The handle alone was about as tall as Valeria was, while the head was roughly fifty centimeters in both height and length and about one meter in width. One swing of that thing is all it would take to flatten someone like a pancake. Thanks to Gugui, Valeria had acquired herself one hell of a weapon. Winning the tournament seemed like a mere formality at this point.

With the beastfolk in the slums now all healed up, our group of four returned to the mansion in triumph.



We got back to the mansion at around the same time that Shess did, suggesting tea with the king had just ended. As soon as she spotted us, her eyes locked onto me and she immediately asked, “Amata, how did it go with the beastfolk?”

Knowing Shess, she must have been worried sick about whether we had been able to help the beastfolk. “It went great,” I told her. “Dramom healed all of their wounds. What about you? How was your little tea party with the king?”

Her expression instantly soured. “Don’t remind me.”

“Ah, sorry,” I said. “Was it really that bad?” Shess looked utterly exhausted, as if she had barely managed to survive the tea party.

“Mister Shiro,” Aina said to get my attention.

“What is it, Aina?”

“The king wanted Shess to go have dinner with him,” the little girl told me.

“Whoa, really? And you refused? That was rather gutsy of you, Shess,” I said.

Aina shook her head. “No, the prime minister turned up and took the king back to the palace.”

“Oh, I see.”

Apparently, the tea party had overrun by quite a bit, forcing the prime minister to personally come and collect the king. For his part, the king had spent the entire afternoon making googly eyes at Shess and attempting to flirt with her, so in a way, you could say the prime minister kind of saved the princess.

Still, the boy king sure likes Shess, doesn't he? I wonder if she's his first crush...



We all moved into the dining room for dinner, where the mansion's maids had set the table and laid out food for us before leaving us to dig in. As we ate, we related our trip to the slums to Shess and the others, including our conversation with the woman who had given us directions. They were all understandably indignant when they heard the employers of the various beastfolk hadn't been sending supplies back to their hometowns in the forest like they had promised, but seemed relieved when I told them there were many people in Orvil who wanted to help the beastfolk.

When I finished my account, it was Aina's turn to take the floor. “I don't think the king is a bad person,” she declared, adding that it seemed to her that he was more like a little boy who was playing the *part* of a king.

“I agree with Aina on that score,” Duane chimed in. “He definitely doesn't strike me as the kind of person who would willingly hurt the beastfolk.”

Luza nodded. “I-I agree with Sir Duane,” she stammered. “I sensed way more malice coming from that evil prime minister than from that portly boy king.”

Shess seemed surprised by their assessments of the king's character. “What? But Orvil IV always has this scary look in his eyes.”

“That's because he likes you, Shess,” Aina told her.

“*What?!*” the little princess shrieked in horror.

So even Aina has noticed Orvil IV's affection for Shess, huh? I noted, before gently steering the conversation back on track. “In all honesty, I also think the prime minister's up to no good.”

“You think so too?” Duane said.

“Yup. And I’m pretty good at recognizing greedy and unscrupulous folk,” I added.

When the king saw the items I had brought over from Japan, his eyes had brimmed with curiosity, while the prime minister’s had been filled with greed.

“My intuition’s telling me the one with the power in Orvil isn’t the king but the prime minister,” I stated.

Duane nodded. “The king is still young, so that’s almost certainly the case. I actually thought the same thing as you during the meeting.”

By “the meeting,” he meant our previous audience with the king. Back then, I kept getting the feeling that the prime minister had zero respect for the king, and if a born-and-bred Tokyoite like me could sense it, there was no doubt that Duane would have noticed it too.

“Orvil IV ascended to the throne when he was only five years old, so it’s likely the prime minister has been running things behind the scenes since then,” Duane said.

“Right?” I agreed. “I mean, all he did during our audience was nod along to whatever the prime minister was saying.”

The king was still only ten, meaning it wasn’t impossible that the prime minister was acting as regent until he came of age, and using the clueless boy like a puppet to fulfill his own ambitions. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like we might be onto something.

“So the prime minister is our enemy?” Shess asked.

“Princess, you shouldn’t use that word so lightly,” Luza chided.

“Why not? If the shoe fits,” the little girl retorted. “Anyone who hurts the beastfolk is my enemy.”

“Hold your horses, Shess,” I interjected. “We’re not *completely* sure the prime minister is the true mastermind behind the beastfolk’s woes yet.”

“Shiro’s right, Your Highness,” Duane chimed in. “I will investigate the matter thoroughly, so please don’t do anything rash until we have more information.”

“Fine,” the little princess said. “I’m counting on you, Duane.”

“Leave it to me,” came the reply.

With Duane having volunteered to investigate the prime minister, we moved on to the next pressing topic: the tournament.

“With Miss Valeria, Celes, and Dramom on our team, victory is basically assured,” I said. “So I’m thinking of going to look for a property tomorrow, so that I can open up a shop pretty much as soon as I get my business license.”

A few of the beastfolk in the slums had said they would be interested in working in my shop, so now that I had some prospective employees lined up, all I needed was somewhere to set up my business. Then, once everything was ready to go, I’d return to the Dura Forest, get Kilpha back, and kill the ogres.

Oh, right. Speaking of ogres, I suddenly remembered the accessories Valeria had found on the ones we had defeated in the apefolk’s village.

“Dramom,” I said to get her attention.

“Yes? What is it, master?” she replied.

I got up from my chair and took a seat next to Dramom (who had already polished off her dinner), then retrieved the oversized knickknacks from my inventory.

“These are magic items, right?” I said, handing one to her. “Do you know what kind of spell they might have been enchanted with?”

“I shall take a look,” she said, scooping up the ring. She studied it for a couple of seconds before her face soured. “Master, this accessory has been imbued with a domination spell.”

“A domination spell?” I said. “Hold on. Does that mean...”

Dramom nodded, confirming my worst fears. “Judging by the size of this one, they were meant for monsters, not people,” she said. “I would say it is either a Collar or perhaps a Bracelet of Domination. Either way, an item such as this would allow one to manipulate the creature wearing it and completely control it.”

A silence fell over the room as the gravity of Dramom’s words sank in.

“A domination spell?!” Valeria cried out in rage. “Are you telling me someone

sent these ogres to attack the apefolk village?!”

I was speechless and unable to reply.

Intermission

Ever since she said goodbye to Shiro, Kilpha's world had turned gray and dull. She spent most of her days shut up in her room, staring vacantly into space.

"Shiro..." she whispered unconsciously.

She had tried so hard to forget about him, but in spite of her efforts, she found that he was always on her mind.

"Does he hate me now?" she mumbled to herself.

She had lied to get him to accompany her back home. She had used him for her own convenience, even going as far as making him pretend to be her fiancé before casting him aside. There was no way Shiro still considered her a friend. Thoughts of regret and resignation swirled around in her mind as she lamented the future she had lost and the former companions she would never see again.



“Meow...”

Her heart felt like it was being ripped in two as she thought back to those happy days with her friends, and a wave of sadness washed over her.

“I’m coming in.”

Sajiri’s voice snapped her back to reality, and he entered her room without even bothering to knock. She couldn’t really blame him for that, though, since there was no culture of knocking among the cat-sìths.

“Heya, Kilpha,” he said, but she turned her face away without even gracing him with a reply. “You really don’t like me, do you? Well, that’s fine. I forgive you. After all, I am a very lenient man.”

“Lenient? *You*?” Kilpha spat. “I’m surprised you know the meaning of the word.”

Sajiri didn’t even acknowledge her snide remark. “Oh, but I am. After all, I’ve forgiven you, my fiancée, for being pregnant with that hume’s brat. What would you call that if not lenience, hm?”

Kilpha tensed up. She had told her grandmother she was pregnant with Shiro’s baby, but that had just been a lie she had come up with in the heat of the moment. Sajiri must have somehow heard about it from her and he seemingly believed it.

“It’s such a shame, though,” Sajiri continued. “If I’d known about that damn hume knocking you up earlier, I would’ve killed him instead of just letting him go. He got lucky.”

Kilpha didn’t rise to Sajiri’s provocations. If she were to tell Sajiri that she wasn’t actually pregnant, she was sure he’d claim her body for himself right there and then, so she simply held her tongue and kept her face determinedly turned to the side.

“Your grandma told me not to lay a hand on the brat in your belly,” Sajiri said, but Kilpha again chose to remain silent. “I hear she wants to hand the brat over to the hume once it’s born. Normally, I’d just kill both the hume and his brat, but...” He trailed off as he reached forward and grabbed Kilpha’s face with both

hands, forcing her to look at him. “If you promise me you’ll be my obedient little wife, I’ll let them live. Because I am a very *lenient* man.”

A sleazy smile curled his lips upward and he let go of Kilpha’s face.

“Think it over, okay? Think long and hard about it.” His shrill laugh echoed around the room as he walked out again.

But Kilpha found herself thinking of the same person as always.

“Shiro...”

Chapter Twelve: The Tournament, Part One

Duane had volunteered to look into the Collar of Domination Valeria had found on the ogres, telling us that he would take full advantage of his status as a knight to investigate both the public and hidden sides of Orvil. I was fully on board with this idea, because I figured it was much better to have a knight looking into the matter than some Japanese beanpole like me. No doubt I would have ended up doing something stupid and getting myself into trouble. It also allowed me to fully focus on the tournament.

Finally, the day of the tournament was upon us. The days before it had been nothing short of hectic. First of all, I needed to register my participation in the tournament, which involved going to the headquarters and jumping through all the necessary hoops, such as presenting the letter of introduction the prime minister had written for me, and paying the hefty entrance fee of ten—yes, *ten*—gold coins. I hadn't thought it would be so expensive.

"Do you wish to withdraw from the tournament, then?" the receptionist sneered at me when I remarked upon the expense, and I was fairly sure I was never going to be able to forget the look of sheer contempt on his face.

After parting with my ten coins to complete the registration process, I set about looking for a suitable locale for my future shop. As I'd expected, there were no vacant properties available on the main street, as every building on it belonged to the city's big-shot merchants. Nevertheless, I managed to snap up a nice little property on another street that had a good length of passage outside, so all in all, I was pleased. I signed the contract and had everything ready by the eve of the tournament. Or in other words, yesterday.

This meant I was free to focus all of my energy on the tournament, which was scheduled to last for five days. The first day was taken up by the opening ceremony as well as a few one-on-one matches intended to start the festivities with a bang. Various events would take place on days two and three, but it was day four that would see the start of the team battle, the event I'd signed up for.

The finals for each event were to be held on day five, and every winner would receive their reward from the king before the closing ceremony that marked the tournament's conclusion.

And so began the opening ceremony, with the colosseum packed with spectators. From what I had heard, there were tournaments several times a year in Orvil, but this kind of "great" tournament where all of the events were held over the course of five days only took place once every few years. If I had to compare it to something from my own world, I'd say it was a bit like the Olympics.

The place was jam-packed with not a single empty seat in sight, yet there was still a huge line of people outside, all hoping to get in. When I arrived, I was told I was in the "master" category as I "owned" some of the warriors participating in the group battle, entitling me to a box seat that gave me a much better view of proceedings than the regular seats. The interior of the box was unnecessarily lavish, with a fancy table placed in front of a sofa that could easily accommodate six people on it. Each box also had a dedicated staff member whose job it was to provide food and alcohol from the exclusive lounge reserved for patrons in the box seats. I could have gone into the lounge myself and mingled with the other masters if I so wished, but the thought didn't appeal. All in all, everything about it screamed luxury and it really allowed you to experience what it was like to be rich in this world.

I'd heard that all of Orvil's big-shot merchants were participating in the team battle, and I knew those rats had played—and were still playing—a huge role in the struggles of the beastfolk, so the mere thought of their presence here made my blood boil. I would have to be extra careful not to accidentally drop-kick them in the face if I bumped into one of them.

As she was royalty, Shess had been reserved a seat in the royal box, where all the kings, queens, and other high-ranking nobles were seated, and Luza and Duane had gone with her to ensure her safety. Aina should have accompanied her too, as she *was* pretending to be Shess's maid, but she was a little afraid that someone might see through her cover story, so we'd decided she would stay with me instead, as would Suama.

"Ain-ya! Wook, wook!" the little dragon girl squealed.

“Hm? What is it, Suama?” Aina said.

“Wook, wook! Ain-ya, wook!” Suama exclaimed again, pointing down at the arena floor.

Orvil’s finest songstress was in the middle of her performance as part of the opening ceremony, her beautiful voice echoing around the colosseum. It seemed Suama really liked her singing. There were also dance performances and a few orchestral pieces, which all culminated to make the opening ceremony a truly spectacular event. It was hard to believe that such a wondrous display would be followed by blood-soaked battles.

Valeria, Celes, and Dramom would stay put at the mansion until the day of the team battle. Dramom wanted to bring me victory, Celes wanted to fight strong opponents, and Valeria wanted to save her brethren. All three eagerly awaited the day of their event.



The fourth day of the tournament finally arrived, heralding the start of the team battles. The first match pitted a team full of dogfolk and demonwolves against a team of foxpeople. Both sides had ten members—the maximum allowed—and they were all armed with swords, lances, bows, crossbows, and a range of other mean-looking weapons.

“The first bout will be a showdown between the private armies of two of our nation’s great merchants: Mr. Gigal’s ‘Scales of Glory’ against Mr. Wagne’s ‘Silver Lyre,’” proclaimed the announcer, his voice echoing around the colosseum thanks to a voice amplification spell.

In the boxes opposite mine, a slightly overweight elderly gentleman and an extremely overweight middle-aged man stood up and waved to the crowd. These two were presumably the “great merchants” the announcer had just name-checked. The fight hadn’t even started yet, but the whole crowd was already cheering loudly.

“Let the first bout begin!” the announcer declared, and the two teams surged toward each other, weapons drawn.

“Aina, could you cover Suama’s eyes for me?” I said to the little girl.

“O-Okay,” she replied, placing her hands over the eyes of the little dragon girl sitting in her lap as I moved around behind the two of them. “Mister Shiro?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t watch either?” she queried as I covered her eyes with my hands.

“Nope. This isn’t for children. Even I’m not liking what I’m seeing right now,” I told her.

“I see.”

I didn’t know what the beastfolk had been promised by their masters to make them participate in these fights. Perhaps they had been told they would be set free if they performed well enough, or their families would receive more supplies. Whatever the case, they were definitely giving it their all, for even as blood sprayed high into the air and screams of pain echoed around the colosseum, they continued to fight relentlessly. I glanced in the direction of the royal box and spotted Shess sitting among the other high nobles. Just like me, she seemed to have her teeth clenched, and she was trying her hardest to endure the bloody spectacle.

“Bout over!” boomed the announcer’s voice. “As all of the members of the Scales of Glory have been rendered unable to fight, the victory goes to Mr. Wagne’s Silver Lyre!”

A mix of cheers and boos erupted from the crowd, the former coming from those who had placed a bet on the winning team, while the originators of the latter had seemingly lost theirs. I wished I could cover Aina’s and Suama’s ears too, but unfortunately, I didn’t have enough hands for that.

At least no one died in that bout, I thought, trying to console myself.



Valeria and the others weren’t in action until the fifth bout, so I decided to head over to the lounge and spend my time there, since it wasn’t like I could let Aina or Suama watch any of the fights anyway.

“I’ll have some fruit wine, and these two will have milk or just whatever fruit juice you have,” I said, placing my order.

“Right you are, sir,” the barman said, eyeing me with suspicion either because he’d never seen me before, or because he was wondering what kind of lunatic brought children to a combat tournament. Our drinks didn’t take long to arrive, and we settled down in a corner of the lounge to enjoy them.

“Hm, might you be Mr. Amata?” said a middle-aged man with a goatee and clothes that screamed “rich merchant” as he approached us. *I don’t think I know this man.*

“I am, but um, who are you?” I said.

“Oh, forgive me. My name is Zatt. I run a company that deals in precious metals. And...” A sly smirk curled his lips upward. “Your team will be facing my private army in the fifth bout.”

So this man was to be my first opponent, huh? I couldn’t show any weakness. I had to stay sharp and composed.

“Still, I must say I am rather surprised you brought your daughters with you to watch the tournament,” he continued. “Do you not have any servants you could have entrusted them with while you were here?”

“Of course I do. I just felt like bringing them along,” I replied, meeting his pompous remark with a smile.

“Is that so? Well, each to his own, I suppose. I won’t pry any further.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

“By the way, Mr. Amata,” Mr. Zatt continued. “How many members do you have on your team?”

“My team?” I asked, blinking in surprise. “It’s a team of three. Why do you ask?”

“Three?! Your team only has *three* members?!” he exclaimed, then burst out laughing. This man was starting to get on my nerves. “I was not expecting that,” he said once he’d calmed down again. “But seriously, a team of *three*? Do you have no intention of winning? Or is it some sort of punishment for the demi-humes on your team? Have they defied you in some way?”

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort,” I said. “And I fully intend to win. I wouldn’t have

entered otherwise.”

“You want to *win* the tournament? That’s rather a bold claim from a first-timer. Still...” The man stroked his goatee, looking lost in thought. “Three members, huh?”

“Is there some problem with my team?” I asked, getting increasingly annoyed with his attitude.

“Not exactly, no. It’s just that it’s customary for merchants participating in the team battle to make a wager with their opponent using their sla—um, their *private armies*, shops, and monopolies as collateral.”

He was totally gonna say “slaves” just then, wasn’t he?

“A wager, you say?” I repeated.

“That’s right. Take a look around,” Mr. Zatt said, looking over to the right of us.

“If my slaves win, I want your entire private army *and* all of the shops you have in the Gelg district,” one merchant said to another.

“Aren’t you being a little *too* greedy there?” his counterpart replied.

“Fine. I’ll throw in my shops in the Marasa district too. Does that work for you?”

The other merchant chuckled at this. “Very well. No backing out now.”

“Then, we have ourselves a bet.”

Mr. Zatt next glanced over to our left. Two other merchants appeared to be in the middle of negotiating a bet.

“I’ll bet my private army and all my shops on main street.”

“Count me in,” came the response.

Lastly, Mr. Zatt indicated that I should look over toward the back of the lounge.

“If I win, I want your private army and all of your apewomen,” an elderly man said to a much younger merchant.

“In that case, if I win, I want exclusive rights to the sale of barley.”

Like Mr. Zatt had said, there were merchants placing wagers all over the lounge, using their private armies and shops as collateral. I was slightly put off by the shameless display.

“Do you see now, Mr. Amata?” Mr. Zatt asked. “You see, I came here to honor this tradition and make a bet with you as well.” He paused. “But if your team only has three members...”

“It won’t be a fair fight? Is that what you’re implying?” I asked.

“Well, of course it won’t. It’s already evident which team will come out on top, so there seems little to no point in betting on the outcome. Besides, if your private army only has three members in it, I am not particularly interested in acquiring it from you. Hm, what should we do?” he said, again looking lost in thought.

This kicked my brain into high gear. The merchants here liked to use the beastfolk they “owned” as betting chips, which meant if I played my cards right, I could free those beastfolk. After all, my team was a strong one. Stupidly strong, in fact. It boasted Valeria, head warrior of the bearfolk; Celes, a devil who was one of the Demon King’s four lieutenants (as I had learned just recently); and Dramom, the Immortal Dragon. It was extremely unlikely that any of these merchants’ private armies would be able to defeat them. As such, I knew *exactly* what I had to do here.

“Mr. Zatt, would you mind taking a look at this?” I said as I produced a wooden box from my backpack.

“What is it?” he asked.

“This was made by the same artisan who crafted the piece I gave to His Excellency the Prime Minister a few days ago,” I explained, opening the box to reveal a crimson kiriko glass.

“O-Oh! What a beautiful drinking vessel!” he said, his eyes instantly glued to the glass. Being a merchant himself, he likely had a keen eye for quality in an item.

“What do you think, Mr. Zatt? Would you accept this glass as collateral?”

“You would be willing to include this wonderful creation in a bet?” he asked.

“I would, yes. His Excellency is the only other person who owns anything remotely similar, which means it is extremely rare, and as such, *very* valuable.”

“I-Is that so?” He swallowed hard, his eyes firmly fixed on the glass. “F-Fine. I will accept this as your collateral. But what should I bet in return?”

“Let’s see...” I mused. “What about betting all of the beastfolk and demi-humes that you own—I mean, that you employ?”

“All of them?” he queried. “That’s quite a bold request.”

“Well, it’s the only way to make it fair. I *am* the only person in the world who deals in these glasses, after all.”

For the third time in nearly as many minutes, Mr. Zatt looked lost in thought, though I noticed that his gaze didn’t once leave the kiriko glass. *One last push should get this over the line.*

“Like I said earlier, other than me, the only person in the whole world who owns one of these glasses is His Excellency, the prime minister. So if you win, I believe it will present you with a great opportunity to get in with him. You could even invite him to enjoy a drink with you in your matching glasses, for instance,” I suggested, knowing that no greedy merchant would be able to pass up the chance to get closer to the most influential man in the nation. Sure enough, Mr. Zatt was no exception.

“Well, why not?” he said. “It *is* almost harvest season, after all. Fine, then. I shall wager all of my demi-humes if you agree to bet that glass on the result.”

“Fine by me.”

And with that, the bet was made, and not long later, it was time for the fifth bout to begin.

Chapter Thirteen: The Tournament, Part Two

“Since you and I have now gotten to know each other, why don’t you come and watch our teams do battle from my box? I have alcohol there that’s much better than anything you can get in this lounge,” Mr. Zatt suggested. I accepted and followed him to his box with Aina and Suama in tow.

At first glance, his offer might have seemed generous, but I had a hunch he was more interested in making sure I didn’t try to slip away and take the kiriko glass with me if my team ended up losing. After all, the mean-looking, heavily armed guards blocking the entrance to his box probably weren’t standing there for no reason, and now that I thought about it, they were pretty clearly glaring at me. Mr. Zatt took a seat on the right side of the sofa, while the girls and I sat down on the left, leaving the middle seat between us empty. As before, Suama had perched herself on Aina’s lap.

“Both teams, enter the arena!” boomed the announcer, his voice echoing all around the colosseum. Seconds later, a team of high cat-sìths slunk into the arena.

“I like high cat-sìths. My private army is composed exclusively of them,” Mr. Zatt said, as if boasting about a private art collection.

All of the high cat-sìths were clad in matching armor and wielded similar-looking weapons, which seemed to make the crowd go even crazier. My team was next into the arena, with Valeria front and center lugging Mr. Gugui’s absurdly huge battle hammer, Mountain Crusher, around on her shoulder, followed by Celes and Dramom, sporting black and white wings respectively. The crowd was suddenly abuzz with astonished murmurs at the sight of them.

“L-Look! Wingedfolk!” one spectator exclaimed.

“Are they *real*?”

“Who would’ve guessed that a day would come where I would lay eyes on genuine wingedfolk?”

“I never thought I’d get to see real wingedfolk in my lifetime.”

The commotion soon swelled into the loudest cheering of the day—no, of the *entire* tournament so far. *Oh, yeah, that’s right. Nesca once told me that while they weren’t quite as elusive as fairies, wingedfolk were still one of the rarest races in all of Ruffaltio.* Judging by the crowd’s reaction, it seemed Nesca hadn’t been wrong. Of course, Celes and Dramom weren’t *actually* wingedfolk, but no one needed to know that little detail.

“Wh-What? *Wingedfolk*?” Mr. Zatt gasped beside me. “M-Mr. Amata! You have *wingedfolk* in your private army?” he said excitedly.

“I do. What of it?”

Mr. Zatt clenched his teeth in frustration. “If I’d known that, I would’ve asked him to wager his private army instead of the glass,” he muttered under his breath.

It seemed the sight of Celes and Dramom with wings on their backs had set the touch paper of his greed alight, and looking around, the same was probably true for the other merchants in attendance, if the way they were pointing at them from their box seats was anything to go by.

“This bout pits Mr. Zatt’s ‘Ferocious Tigers’ against Mr., uh, Amata, is that? Mr. Amata’s ‘Amata Guard’!” the announcer stated, his voice echoing around the colosseum once more, but the crowd was so enraptured by Celes and Dramom, the information barely registered.

“Let the fifth bout begin!”

As soon as the announcer finished speaking, Mr. Zatt’s Ferocious Tigers fanned out and surrounded Valeria and the other two in an attempt to make the most of their numerical advantage. This didn’t deter my team, however.

“Take *this*!” Valeria yelled as she took a step forward and swung her battle hammer at the high cat-sìths, sending one flying out-of-bounds. “And another! Watch this!” This declaration was promptly followed by her taking another powerful swing which sent a second high cat-sìth soaring through the air. Any contestant that fell outside of the raised platform in the middle of the arena was instantly disqualified, meaning that Valeria had reduced the Ferocious

Tigers to a team of eight with just two swings of her hammer.

“Wh-What the hell are you all *doing*?! There’s only *three* of them!” Mr. Zatt yelled down to his team, starting to panic. He had clearly underestimated Valeria’s strength prior to this display of force.

He wasn’t the only one panicking, however. I was too, though for very different reasons. I was worried that if people knew how stupidly strong my team was, I would have a much harder time convincing the other merchants to bet the beastfolk in their private armies in the next rounds, since they would believe they were certain to lose. I quietly moved myself over to a corner of the box and took a walkie-talkie out of my backpack.

“Shiro here. Can you hear me, Dramom?” I whispered into the communication device.

Thankfully, she replied immediately. “Dramom here. Is something the matter, master?”

“Oh, it’s nothing major. There’s just been a slight change of plan. I’m really sorry to ask you this when Valeria seems to be having such a good time down there, but could you three pretend to find it a little harder to beat these guys? I’ll explain everything later, but it’d be great if you could make it look like you barely scraped the win.”

“If that is your wish, master,” Dramom replied.

“Thanks.”

I had equipped my fighters with walkie-talkies so that I could get in contact with the team at any point during the bout. Theirs came with earphones with built-in microphones, and since these earphones were handily hidden by their hair, we were able to communicate discreetly without arousing suspicion. I peered down at the arena and watched on as Dramom approached Valeria and quietly explained the situation to her. The bearwoman looked a little confused, but nodded all the same before turning to face the other team again. From then on, the trio did their best to make the fight appear to be on a knife-edge, with Valeria and Dramom pretending to struggle to repel the high cat-sìths rushing at them before eventually pushing them out-of-bounds. Then, Celes grabbed the last remaining high cat-sìth and flung him high into the sky, causing the crowd

to erupt.

At last, ten minutes after the beginning of the bout, the announcer declared my team victorious and the audience roared with delight.



Once the bout was over, Mr. Zatt and I returned to the lounge. “Mr. Amata, here are the contracts of every demi-hume in my possession,” he said, handing me a stack of papers.

“Thank you,” I said, taking them from him.

He had already listed me as their new employer, and a quick scan of the documents told me that Mr. Zatt owned thirty-seven demi-humes, all of which were high cat-sìths. I was astonished that it was possible to make amendments to contracts right there and then in the lounge, but I supposed that was just proof of how corrupt the tournament was. Scratch that, how corrupt Orvil as a whole was.

“I may have lost this time, but I’d love to face you again in the next tournament,” Mr. Zatt said before leaving, a frustrated look on his face. He must really have wanted those wingedfolk, huh?

“Mr. Amata! What a truly impressive bout!” said a man who accosted me just after Mr. Zatt had left. “I am Gene, your opponent in the next round. Do go easy on me, won’t you?”

So my next opponent had appeared. We exchanged pleasantries, then immediately moved on to negotiating the terms of our bet. Just as I had expected based on the crowd’s reaction to my team’s first bout, Mr. Gene wanted me to put Celes and Dramom up as collateral. This corrupt louse was asking me to bet my friends as if they were mere objects, and I couldn’t help shuddering in disgust at the thought. But I knew if I wanted to free all of the beastfolk Mr. Gene was keeping captive, I had to be careful not to arouse suspicion, and for that, I needed to pretend to be just as corrupt as he was. So I temporarily squashed down my conscience, my humanity, and my sense of values, and accepted Mr. Gene’s terms, asking him to bet all of the beastfolk in his possession in return. I thought he might try to argue that this would make the bet unbalanced, but to my great surprise, he agreed immediately. Just like

Mr. Zatt, he must have *really* wanted to get his hands on a pair of wingedfolk. So just like that, the bet was made, and not long after, my team was in the arena for their second bout.

“Shiro here. Celes, could you make it look like you’ve taken more damage?” I whispered into my walkie-talkie in the middle of the bout.

I heard a click of the tongue on the other end of the line. “Your request displeases me, but I will do as you say.”

“Thanks.”

Our second bout ended in another “narrow” victory for my team. The other merchants must have believed they could beat my team from what they had seen, for my opponent for the third round sidled up and suggested we should bet on the outcome without a hint of hesitation. By this point, I had gotten pretty good at playing the role of corrupt merchant.

“You want to make a bet with me?” I asked, peering at the man through my teardrop sunglasses and taking a sip of my whiskey on the rocks. “I mean, I *suppose* we could. But only if you’re willing to bet all of the demi-humes in your possession.”

He agreed, and once again, my team secured a “narrow” victory. It was the same story in the fourth round.

“Just so you know, my private army isn’t like the others. We aren’t even in the same league, really. But if you *insist* on making a bet with me, I’m gonna need you to offer me something of comparable value,” I said to my next opponent, trying to sound as pompous as humanly possible.

Naturally, we won, bagging myself all of the demi-humes that man had in his possession, plus a sweet property on the main road. It was a shame I’d spent a small fortune only a few days before on *another* building to house my new shop, but never mind. The final bouts of the day were the semifinals, though it must be noted that the only reason the tournament could progress so fast was due to the existence of healing magic and restorative items, which allowed fighters to recover swiftly, keeping the bouts moving apace.

“Hm? Oh, this? It’s one of my wares. It’s called a ‘cigar.’ It’s tobacco. Hm? It

has piqued your interest, has it? Ah, a fellow tobacco enthusiast, I see. Well, in that case, as a token of our newfound acquaintance, I'll give you one. All you do is cut the tip like so, and light it. Here you go. What do you think? Pretty neat, isn't it? Hm? You want me to bet these cigars as well as the exclusive rights to sell them in Orvil? I mean, I don't mind, but you'll need to put up something of equal value."

I'd never smoked in my life, but I figured cigars would be a nice touch in my portrayal of a corrupt, greedy merchant, so I'd brought some with me. They had certainly piqued the curiosity of my opponent for the last bout of the day, and I agreed to bet them against all of the man's demi-humes, plus the exclusive selling rights to wheat in Orvil. I won, obviously.

And so, the first day of competition concluded with a string of victories for my team. The only team battle left was the final, which was due to be held the following day.

Chapter Fourteen: The Tournament, Part Three

The following day was finals day for all of the events in the tournament. Thanks to my bets the previous day, I was now the owner of a ton of demi-humes (mostly beastfolk)—257, to be precise. That was nearly equivalent to the entire student body of a small elementary school in Japan (though due to the declining birth rate, that number kept dropping). All of the demi-humes would be sent my way once the tournament was over and I planned to free them as soon as possible.

“Only one bout to go, Miss Valeria, Celes, Dramom. If you win this one, we win the entire tournament! So give it your all out there!” I said, offering my team some last words of encouragement in the waiting area beneath the arena. Save for a few other competitors, the place was practically empty, likely because there were only finals left to be contested.

“Do your best!” Aina said cheerily.

“Ma-ma, do best!” Suama babbled, only encouraging her mother.

“Leave it to me, Shiro,” Valeria said, confidently slapping her chest.

“I will not lose to these small fry. Not one is strong enough to rile me up even slightly,” Celes muttered, looking bored out of her mind.

As for Dramom, despite my prior protests, she still hadn’t given up on the whole master shtick. “I shall bring you victory, master,” she declared grandly.

All three of them vowed to emerge victorious.



After that little pep talk, I returned to my box with Aina and Suama in tow. The finals for all of the tournament’s events were being held today, which meant things were probably going to get quite bloody. There was absolutely no way I could let Aina and Suama see all that, so I placed my tablet on the table in front of the sofa and pressed play on the kids’ anime I’d downloaded in advance for them. Neither girl understood Japanese, but they watched it intently,

captivated by the animation. With the children taken care of, I moved to the lounge to get myself some booze.

“Ah, Mr. Amata, *there* you are!” called out Mr. Zatt, my first-round opponent, as he approached me.

“Good to see you again, Mr. Zatt. Something the matter?” I asked with an insincere smile, slipping right back into my corrupt merchant persona.

“There’s a matter I would like to discuss with you. Could I take up some of your time?”

“Sure. There’s still a little time until my team is up.”

“That’s good to hear. Let’s go talk over there, shall we?” he said, leading me to an empty corner of the lounge. *Why a corner?* I wondered. “Mr. Amata, your winning streak has been truly remarkable. However...” He paused as if trying to find the right words. “It might be best if you sent out some of your, ah, *least* important beastfolk for the final.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you happen to know who your last opponent is?”

“Of course,” I said, digging through my memories of the previous day. You see, playing the greedy merchant wasn’t the only thing I had been focused on during the preliminary rounds. I’d also been following the results of the other team battles intently, which meant I knew that the man who had made his way through the knockout stages on the other side of the draw was none other than...

“The prime minister, right?”

Mr. Zatt nodded. “Indeed.”

Merchants weren’t the only ones who could afford the steep entry fee of ten gold coins. It seemed the prime minister could cover it too. Yup, the same man who had invited me to participate in the tournament was my final opponent.

“Since this is your first time participating in the tournament, I feel it incumbent upon me as your first opponent to tell you something important.” He paused and glanced around the room before lowering his voice to a whisper.

“All the teams who have faced the prime minister’s private army have lost their lives.”

“What?!” I uttered, shocked by this revelation.

According to Mr. Zatt, the prime minister had won every single tournament over the past few years, ordering his warriors to kill every member of the opposing team—even those in the process of surrendering—in a show of strength. His private army was so powerful, it had even mercilessly crushed teams that had been considered favorites to win the tournament.

“Your team is strong,” Mr. Zatt continued. “It truly is. But all of your matches up to this point have been narrow victories. I’m afraid to say you don’t stand a chance against His Excellency’s team. You own *two* wingedfolk and I’d hate to see them lose their lives over something as trivial as this tournament. So, Mr. Amata...”

He paused and grabbed me by the shoulders, a serious look on his face.

“You should send out another team to contest the final. Wait, I know! What about the high cat-sìths you won from me? After all, it’s nearly harvest season, and you’ll be able to get your hands on a ton of other beastfolk soon, not just high cat-sìths.”

“Harvest season?” I repeated, tilting my head to one side.

“Hm? You’ve never heard of it? Oh, right. You’re not from Orvil, are you?”

“Nope. I’m from the Giruam Kingdom.”

“Allow me to fill you in, then. It’s almost winter, which means we’ll soon be seeing an influx of starving beastfolk pouring out of the forest nearby and turning up at our gates, begging for work.”

I remained silent, so Mr. Zatt continued.

“We call this period the ‘harvest season.’”

All of the beastfolk in the Dura Forest were starving, and things would only get worse when winter rolled around. With the forest devoid of any monsters to hunt, they could only rely on the bounty of the forest and that disappeared in the cold season, forcing the beastfolk to head to Orvil to find work.

“You made a mistake by asking the other merchants to put their demi-humes up as collateral,” he continued. “To us, demi-humes—especially beastfolk—are like toys we can get our hands on every year.”

“So that’s why they didn’t argue the toss when I asked for their demi-humes?” I said coldly.

This drew a chuckle from Mr. Zatt. “You can’t change your mind now the bouts are over, unfortunately. If you want to blame anyone, you ought to blame yourself and your poor sense of judgment.” A mocking smile curled his lips upward. “High cat-sìths, demonwolves, apefolk, bearfolk, foxpeople, dogfolk... We will soon be able to get our hands on all the beastfolk we want. So for this final, you should send your least valuable ones out to fight.” I didn’t reply, causing Mr. Zatt to shrug. “Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said, then left.

I could feel my rage rising up from the bottom of my stomach. “Harvest season”? “Toys”? “Least valuable”? This city’s merchants had zero respect for beastfolk.

“Damn it!” I said, punching the wall in an attempt to vent some of my anger. I hated how Mr. Zatt—no, how *all* of the merchants in this town talked about beastfolk. All of a sudden, a familiar face floated up in my mind. “Kilpha...” I whispered.

What would she say if she were here at this moment? Would she be angry like me? Or would she apologize with a regretful smile on her face?

“I’ll focus on what I need to do,” I muttered.

There was only one thing I could do if I wanted to save the beastfolk and free Kilpha.

“I have to win.”

Chapter Fifteen: The Tournament, Part Four

“Sorry for keeping you all waiting. It is now time for the team battle final!”

The announcer’s words were met with a thunderous roar from the crowd. The earlier finals for the other events had already raised the atmosphere inside the colosseum to a fever pitch, but the enthusiasm of the crowd was truly reaching its climax in anticipation of the team battle decider.

“First, entering through the East Gate, it’s the Amata Guard!” boomed the announcer, and the crowd erupted as Valeria strode into the arena, closely followed by Dramom and Celes.



It seemed their performances the previous day had won them quite a few fans, if the shouts of encouragement from every corner of the stands were anything to go by.

“Well, well. It seems your private army is rather popular with the masses, Amata,” remarked the prime minister, who was sitting beside me.

Thirty minutes prior to this comment, an Orvil knight had come to find me in my box. “Mr. Amata, His Excellency requests your presence,” he’d said.

“Huh? The prime minister wants to see *me*?” I’d asked in surprise.

“Yes. Allow me to relay his message: ‘Since this is the final bout, why don’t we watch it together?’”

“Sure thing,” I’d replied. “It’d be an honor.”

“Then, please follow me,” the knight had said before taking us—Aina, Suama, and myself—to the royal box, where the prime minister was seated alongside Shess, Orvil IV, and various other esteemed leaders and nobles from all across the continent. *Talk about a royal gathering, huh?* I’d mused.

“Ah, Amata. Come sit beside me,” the prime minister had said, gesturing for me to join him.

“Thank you. If you’re sure that’s all right, I’ll take you up on your offer,” I’d replied, sitting in the seat next to him with Suama and Aina plonking themselves down beside me.

As the prime minister remarked on my team, I locked eyes with Shess, who had been watching us from afar, and she gave me a little nod, which I returned. We both knew the next bout was critical to our plan. And so, we waited for the prime minister’s team to enter the arena.

“Next, entering through the West Gate, it’s our esteemed prime minister’s private army that is reputed to be the strongest team in this year’s tournament. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present: ‘Judgment Day!’” proclaimed the announcer, his voice booming around the colosseum.

This time however, the crowd was completely silent. Did they have something against the prime minister’s team? Some of the nobles and big-shot merchants

frantically started clapping to cover up the total lack of cheering, but their efforts were largely in vain and the stands remained completely still. *Can't you all make an effort?* I beseeched them in my mind. *Please? It's super awkward up here!* But despite my wordless pleas, the crowd seemed resolute about not making a sound. That was, at least, until the prime minister's team actually stepped into the arena, for the mere sight of them caused all hell to break loose.

"Wh-What in the world *are* they?!" one spectator cried out.

"Monsters..." another gasped. "They're monsters!"

"What are those creatures?!"

Consternation ripped through the audience as they stared down in horror at the abominations lumbering into the center of the arena. Yup, those were definitely monsters all right. I'd never *seen* these particular ones before, though I had heard about them.

"So what do you think, Amata? Isn't my team of cyclopes a sight to behold?" the prime minister asked me in rather a conversational tone.

Yes, these monsters were cyclopes: six-meter-tall, one-eyed masses of muscle. They trudged heavily through the open gate and glared at their surroundings with their enormous single eyes. Their sheer size alone was intimidating enough, but they also wielded weapons that seemed to match their colossal statures. I rummaged through my memory and recalled that Nesca had once told me that not only were cyclopes absolute beasts when it came to combat but some of them could even use magic, and because of that, they were considered gold-rank monsters by the Adventurers' Guild. I wasn't even sure my Blue Flash friends would be able to take down a single one of them, and there were *seven* in the arena in total.

"I didn't want my private army to be overshadowed by your wingedfolk, so I hastily assembled a team of cyclopes for this bout," the prime minister explained to me, flashing me a self-satisfied smirk. I suddenly had a very strong urge to wipe that triumphant look off his face right then and there.

"I have a question for you, Your Excellency. Do cyclopes *really* count as demi-humes? I recall you mentioning before that all teams had to be composed

exclusively of demi-humes, and that at least one member had to be a beastfolk,” I pointed out.

“Ah, yes. Well, you see, I’ve decided that cyclopes are, in fact, demi-humes,” he replied, sounding composed and confident.

“Oh, I see,” I said. I mean, what else *could* I say? This man was the second most powerful person in the kingdom, and I was just a merchant. If he wanted to class cyclopes as demi-humes, I had no choice but to accept his judgment. “Though if you’ll permit me, I’ve heard cyclopes are quite dangerous. Are you quite sure it’s safe for them to be fighting in the tournament?”

“Don’t look so worried, Amata,” he assured me. “They’re all wearing Collars of Domination. They won’t go on a rampage.”

“Collars of Domination?” I repeated.

The prime minister chuckled. “Yes. Take a close look at their necks. See how they’re all wearing matching collars?”

I did as instructed and took a good, hard look at the cyclopes. They were indeed wearing some rather familiar-looking bands around their necks.

“Of course, it wasn’t easy finding collars potent enough to control full-grown cyclopes, let me tell you,” the prime minister said, sounding proud of himself.

I decided flattery was the best course of action for the time being. “Truly impressive, Your Excellency.”

“Tell me, how much do you know about Collars of Domination?” he asked.

“Very little, I’m afraid, save for the fact they allow a person to manipulate any living being that is wearing one.”

The prime minister seemed less than impressed by my response. “Is that all?”

“I apologize for my lack of knowledge. If it would please you to do so, you could perhaps enlighten me on the subject?” I suggested, laying it on thick.

A satisfied smile curled the prime minister’s lips upward. “Very well. If you insist, I shall educate you,” he said, his words dripping with condescension. “As you say, Collars of Domination allow you to control living beings. However, the *type* of creature you can control is wholly dependent on the quantity of mana

that has been infused into them. As such, an average mage is only able to dominate low-rank monsters and beasts, or slaves that have no mana.”

By “slaves,” he totally means “beastfolk,” doesn’t he?

“A court magician, on the other hand, can control much stronger monsters,” the prime minister continued.

“Stronger monsters?” I said, my curiosity piqued. “You mean like og—um, actually, never mind.”

Phew, that was close. I’d almost mentioned the ogres we’d stumbled across in the Dura Forest. I had an inkling there was some connection between Orvil and the Collars of Domination we had found around the necks of those ogres. Many of the beastfolk who had fought in the team battle the previous day had been sporting Collars of Domination, and so were the prime minister’s cyclopes. It’d be more of a surprise if there *wasn’t* some kind of correlation between the two.

“Now, cyclopes are another story altogether,” the prime minister said, picking up where he’d left off. “No regular person could ever hope to have enough mana to control a cyclops, regardless of how skilled they are as a mage.”

“Then, how *did* you do it?” I inquired. The prime minister’s statement begged the question that if normal people couldn’t dominate cyclopes, what could?

“I don’t think I’ll tell you that. If you’re really curious about it, I encourage you to investigate for yourself. Although I doubt someone like *you* could ever figure it out,” he snorted, and once more, I felt an overwhelming urge to deliver a swift karate chop to the back of his head in response to his arrogant tone, but I managed to control myself.

“Cyclopes, huh?” I muttered, my gaze drifting back to the floor of the arena. The collars around their necks really did look an awful lot like those “rings” Valeria and the other bearfolk had found on the ogres. *Could the person who ordered the ogres to attack the beastfolk be—no, hold it right there, Shiro.* This wasn’t the time for concocting conspiracy theories. I had a tournament to focus on.

“Now, Amata,” the prime minister said, speaking again without even giving me a second to gather my thoughts.

“Yes, Your Excellency?”

“How about you and I have ourselves a little bet?”

“A bet?” I repeated.

“Yes, a bet. You placed wagers with the other merchants, did you not? I’ve heard all about it.”

“As expected of Your Excellency. Your reach truly extends everywhere,” I remarked.

I must have looked like an easy target in his eyes. Sure, my team had won all of its previous bouts, but only by the very slimmest of margins. Or at least, that was how I’d made it appear. Of course, the prime minister had no way of knowing the narrow victories were all staged, meaning he was extremely confident that his cyclopes would beat my team. I could almost see the word “victory” written on his face in big, bold letters.

“If you win, I shall use my influence to ensure that no other merchants even dream of meddling with your new business in Orvil,” he said.

“That’s a very generous offer,” I replied. “But what do you demand from me in return in case I lose?”

The other merchants had all asked for Celes and Dramom, so I could only imagine he would want the pair too.

“Let’s see...” he mused. “If you lose, I want all the kiriko glasses in your possession.”

Wait, what was that? “Huh? My kiriko glasses?” I repeated in some confusion.

“Yes. They are exquisite pieces and I wish to acquire them all.”

I had *not* been expecting him to want me to bet my kiriko glasses. He must have taken a real liking to them. *Hold on a minute. Could this have been his plan all along? Had he invited me to participate in this tournament just to get his hands on them? Nah, no way. That’s way too far-fetched.* Either way, the fact that he was even proposing this bet made it abundantly clear that he had no intention of telling his cyclopes to go easy on my team. In fact, they had probably already been given orders to go all out until every last one of their

opponents was dead.

“So? What do you say to my proposition?” he asked.

“I don’t suppose I’m allowed to refuse, am I?” I ventured.

“Well, you wouldn’t want to *disappoint* me, now, would you?”

Ah, there it is. The classic power play. This man had clearly never had any intention of letting me refuse his terms. “Fine. If I lose, I shall give you all the kiriko glasses,” I conceded.

“Good. You’re a sensible man, Amata. If you stay on my good side, perhaps I’ll let you open your business in Orvil one day,” he said, a triumphant smirk plastered across his face, already convinced he’d won. “Oh, look. They’re finally getting started,” he remarked, his gaze shifting to the arena floor below.

“Let the final bout begin!” the announcer declared, his voice echoing around the colosseum once more.

As soon as they received the signal to start the fight, the cyclopes charged at their opponents as one. The night before, I had told my team to make sure they didn’t win the bout *too* quickly, and boy did they deliver, for the contest had me on the edge of my seat. Valeria was the first to make her move, grabbing her battle hammer in both hands and swinging it at one of the cyclopes. I’d been told that her battle hammer—known by the name of Mountain Crusher—had a weight-altering enchantment on it that made it light as a feather for the wielder, but absurdly heavy for whatever was its target. As a result, Valeria could literally flatten people and monsters like pancakes, and that was exactly what she did to the foot of the cyclops that had been running straight at her. The beast let out a pained cry and collapsed to the ground with a loud thud. Without wasting a single second, Valeria swung her hammer in a downward arc once more, but this time it crushed the cyclops’s knee flat, making it unable to stand. That was one cyclops out of commission for good. Valeria was already insanely strong normally—she had defeated ogres with her bare hands, for Pete’s sake—but with that battle hammer in her hands, she was practically unstoppable. If anything, the cyclopes almost looked *weak* by comparison. It was obvious to anyone who was paying attention that she had been holding back against the beastfolk she had fought the day before.

“Wh-What kind of *monster* is that bearwoman warrior?” the prime minister cried, jumping out of his seat in shock. “She just defeated a cyclops by herself!”

You ain’t seen nothing yet, bud.

“Gaaah! Die! Die!” roared cyclops number two, bringing his club down on Celes.

The demon exhaled an unimpressed humph, then effortlessly caught the weapon in one hand before it could squish her, the force of the blow causing cracks to form in the stone slabs beneath her feet. Cyclops number three then decided this was the perfect moment to lunge forward, thrusting his spear toward the demon.

“I...kill...you,” it growled.

Celes didn’t even flinch as she grabbed the spear with her other hand. Both cyclopes’ arms bulged as they tried to yank their weapons out of the demon’s grasp, but all of their effort was in vain, for she didn’t even budge a millimeter.

“So this is the best a pair of cyclopes can manage?” she said, clearly unimpressed.

“*How?! How* did a wingedfolk manage to block two attacks from cyclopes at the *same* time?!” the prime minister spluttered.

“Wh-Who knows?” I said, playing dumb. “Perhaps she’s using some sort of body-strengthening spell? I must admit, I don’t really know how she does it either.”

Beside me, the prime minister gritted his teeth, then yelled down to his cyclopes. “What are you idiots doing? Magic! Use your magic!”

It seemed his command had reached the ears of his cyclopes, as a fourth one started reciting an incantation. “Fire... Flames...” In an instant, a colossal fireball materialized in his outstretched hand. “Burn...my...enemy,” it chanted before hurling the fireball at Valeria. But it never made it to her.

“I suppose I shall be your opponent,” Dramom said as she instantly conjured a block of ice the same size as the fireball above her head. She hadn’t even needed to recite an incantation for it or anything.

“This fire is an eyesore. Begone,” was all she added as she intercepted the fireball with her block of ice, causing the two to cancel each other out. She could have easily killed the cyclops then and there, but she didn’t, most likely because I’d asked them to make the fight look close.

Cyclopes number four, five, and six continued to hurl fireballs at my team, but Dramom neutralized all of their attacks without even breaking a sweat. The sound of explosions resonated around the colosseum each time one of their fireballs collided with her blocks of ice, which drew excited roars from the crowd. It was an impressive spectacle, and that was putting it mildly.

“*Magic?!*” the prime minister squawked. “That white wingedfolk can use offensive spells?” Each of his reactions ended up being funnier than the one before, his face red with anger one second, then turning white with shock the next.

The rest of the bout was every bit as intense as the opening skirmishes had been. While Celes and Dramom bought time by suppressing the cyclopes’ attacks, Valeria swung her hammer around the arena and took the beasts down one by one. “I’m gonna crush you too! Take this!” she exclaimed as she smashed another kneecap flat.

This went on for several minutes until the last cyclops finally hit the deck.

“V-Victory goes to the Amata Guard!” the announcer declared, sounding almost in disbelief.

The crowd erupted into rapturous cheering and applause. My team had officially won the tournament. Beside me, the prime minister was seething, and he glared at me with eyes that burned with frustration.

Chapter Sixteen: The Amata Company's Orvil Branch

Having won the tournament, I got permission from Orvil IV to open up a store in the city. Without wasting any time, I headed back to the slums to gather up all the beastfolk who had expressed an interest in working at my store and brought them back to my new shop to show them the ropes. I then did the same with the ones I'd freed from the other merchants, and my new business was up and running in no time.

The beastfolk struggled at first, fumbling around a little cluelessly as they tried to learn the tasks that needed to be done to run a shop, but little by little, they began to adapt to their new roles. As for the wares we would stock in this store, I chose to focus largely on more everyday items like matches and foodstuffs with a long shelf life. Business was initially slow, as locals and merchants alike hesitated to enter a shop staffed solely by beastfolk, but that attitude didn't last for long.

"Wh-What *is* this flour? It's so fine and smooth! Even flour meant for nobles doesn't look *this* beautiful!"

"It's so white too! It's almost as if there are no impurities in it whatsoever!"

"Wow. I've only ever seen flour this beautiful once, in some remote little town in the Giruam Kingdom."

"Hey! I want two bags of the stuff!"

"I'll take four!"

"Then gimme ten!"

If you'll recall, I'd secured the exclusive selling rights to wheat from one of the other merchants during the tournament, which gave my new business a huge boost, as my shop was literally the only place in the whole city where folks could buy flour. On top of that, my flour was of a much better quality than anything you could find in this world. The traveling merchants were the first to recognize its value, and it started flying off the shelves, with some purchasing

dozens of bags at a time to resell in other nations. Who cared if the employee handing you the product was a beastfolk when you could make bank reselling it? This triggered a ripple effect, and people soon started flocking to my shop in droves, with traveling vendors, merchants from other nations, and even citizens of Orvil itself lining up to peruse my wares.

“These ‘candies’ are absolutely delicious!”

“So *these* are the matches I’ve heard so much about, huh?”

“‘Chocolate’? Oh, wow. It’s so tasty, my nose started bleeding.”

“This blanket’s so soft! How much is it?”

Day after day, my new shop was bustling with customers, though something I *hadn’t* been expecting was how popular the cigars I’d used in my evil merchant cosplay would become.

“Cigars! Do you have cigars?” said the big-shot merchant from whom I’d received the exclusive selling rights to wheat, back when he’d barged into my shop one day. “I’ll give you as much money as you want! Just sell me all the cigars you’ve got!”

A smirk curled the corners of my lips upward at his words. “Ah, well, you’re putting me in rather an awkward position there. You see, I have a lot of *other* varieties of cigars aside from the one I gave you last time, and if you were to buy *all* of them, I’m afraid it’d come to quite a hefty sum.”

“Wh-What?!” the man said with a gasp. “You have *other* varieties of cigars?!”

“Yes, indeed. And I’m quite confident you’ll love them. If you wish to place a large order, how about we set a date to discuss the specifics?” I suggested.

“Fine with me,” the man replied without hesitation. “Is tomorrow all right for you?”

“Tomorrow?” I chuckled. “You *are* an impatient man, aren’t you? But sure, I have nothing planned for tomorrow. Let’s say noon. Does that work with you?”

We ironed out the particulars, then I escorted him to the door before making a swift exit myself to grandma’s house. From there, I jumped in a taxi and headed to Ginza, where I ransacked a famous cigar shop, before returning to

Orvil with my impressive haul. My business meeting with the big-shot merchant the next day went nice and smoothly: he got his hands on a hefty supply of cigars, and I came away with a shiny pile of coins. Rumors of my wares spread like wildfire and it wasn't long until a number of other merchants reached out to me to buy my cigars, leading to me sitting through a whole bunch of business meetings, with some even resulting in long-term trade agreements.

Coins flowed into my shop at an astonishing rate, which was an expected outcome for a successful shop in a trading hub like Orvil. Within just a few days of opening, I'd made more than enough money to pay for all of my employees' generous wages, with plenty left over for myself.



My shop in Orvil had gotten off to a roaring start, and that was putting it mildly. My wares were practically flying off the shelves due to how high demand was. *This reminds me of when I first opened my store in Ninoritch*, I reminisced fondly.

Despite already employing fifty beastfolk, it still felt like the shop was understaffed. As for the other twenty-seven in my "employ," because they were mostly hunters and warriors, I'd gotten them to join my "private army," the Amata Guard. In truth, I'd wanted to send them back to the forest where they belonged, but when I went to city hall to request their release, the clerk looked at me like I'd grown a second head.

"We've never had *anyone* release beastfolk that were in their service before," the clerk had said, before adding the process would take time. A long, long time.

I considered claiming they were my bodyguards and simply walking out of the city with them, but that was a total bust too.

"Th-The beastfolk can't leave the city until they are officially free," the gatekeeper had insisted, mumbling something about it being the law or whatever.

It was frankly a ridiculous situation. I couldn't take them out of the city, and I couldn't set them free either. It was beyond unreasonable, and I was in no doubt that someone in power was behind this nonsense.

Ten days had passed since the opening of my store, and business was booming as usual, but to my frustration, the release process for the beastfolk hadn't progressed at all. There was at least one silver lining, however.

"Thanks, boss!"

"I've got no idea how we can repay you for everything you've done for us."

"You're one of the good ones, chief!"

Slowly—very, very slowly—the beastfolk started smiling again.



Valeria came knocking at my door that same night. "Hey, Shiro, do you have a minute?" she asked.

We were still staying at the mansion Orvil IV had provided for Shess for the duration of her visit to the city-state. Now, you might be wondering why we were still allowed to be there, considering the tournament was over, but well...

"Princess Shessfelicia! Would you please stay for one more day? Just one more day, I beg you!" Night after night, Orvil IV would beg Shess to extend her stay, so she did, although not without a certain amount of reluctance. Every time, I had to remind her that we were doing all of this to save the beastfolk, so that she'd suck it up and agree to stay.

"Miss Valeria? What's wrong?" I said, surprised by her sudden visit.

"Oh, it's nothing big. It's just..." She paused. "There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

A smile tugged at the corners of my lips. "Well, talk about good timing. There's something I want to discuss with you too. Come in," I said, ushering her inside.

As Shess's royal purveyor, I'd been given a pretty large room in the manor, and I gestured for Valeria to take a seat at the table while I sat down across from her.

"Well? What's on your mind?" I asked.

"I'm planning on heading back to Lugu soon. I just figured I should let you

know,” she said.

“Oh. I see.”

“Yeah. I was going to wait a bit and head back with Gugui, but those release procedures aren’t moving at all.”

“I’m really sorry. I wish there was some way I could make them go faster, but...”

“Why are you apologizing? You’ve done nothing wrong. It’s those knuckleheads down at city hall who are to blame,” she said, before pausing and continuing in a softer tone. “Shiro, you’ve already gone above and beyond for my brethren—for all of the beastfolk. You’ve seen for yourself just how much they’ve started smiling again ever since you rescued them, haven’t you?”

According to Valeria, the beastfolk hadn’t exactly been happy with the idea of me becoming their new owner at first, though they hadn’t necessarily been *unhappy* about it either. They had just thought they’d have a new master and that would be it. They’d still be treated the same, so what difference would it make? But then, as they worked alongside Aina and me, they realized we weren’t like their previous owners at all, and slowly but surely, trust began to blossom between us. One of the main factors for this was, of course, the fact that I was paying them a fair wage, as I’d promised to, though I’d argue the twenty percent discount I gave them when buying grain must have helped too. Still, they had only truly started to fully trust me after Valeria had told them I was engaged to a cat-sith. Before I realized it, the beastfolk had shrugged off their previous wariness and disgust of humes, and I soon found myself laughing along with them.

“I’ve written down the names of all the beastfolk that you’ve saved,” Valeria continued. “I’m gonna go around the Dura Forest when I get back and tell the others who made it and who didn’t.”

“You’re going to visit the other villages too?” I said in surprise.

“Yeah. Ever since I met you, I’ve realized how stupid it is to treat the other tribes as strangers. At the end of the day, all of us living in the forest are comrades, right?” she said, winking at me in a very fetching way. “Anyway, that’s all I had to tell you.”

I nodded. "Duly noted. The others will be sad to see you go. Aina will probably cry."

"Let's not go there, yeah?" she said. "I'm not a fan of tearful farewells."

I chuckled. "Sorry about that."

"Anyway, it's your turn now. What is it you wanted to discuss with me?" she said, looking me straight in the eye.

"Well, now that we've won the tournament and I've gotten my business permit, I've accomplished my goal in Orvil," I began.

I'd managed to save almost all of the beastfolk in the city. There were still a few who remained trapped under the control of their masters, but I wasn't too worried about them, because a couple of days previously, I'd gone to all of the big-shot merchants in the city and offered them some of my wares in exchange for any remaining beastfolk they owned.

"You'll give me this beautiful glass in exchange for these filthy beasts?" one had asked in astonishment.

"My beastfolk for this gorgeous fabric, you say? I'm in! You can't take it back now!"

"I'll give you three beastfolk for every dress you're willing to sell me. What do you say?"

Needless to say, they had all jumped at the opportunity. Duane had kindly offered to fill out all the paperwork and handle the transfer procedures in my stead. According to him, it should only take us a few more days of that for the city's entire beastfolk population to be saved.

"The beastfolk in Orvil won't have to ruin their health working for anyone any longer," I declared. "And that's good enough for now. My next step—"

"Is to get Kilpha back. Right?" Valeria said, finishing my sentence for me.

I nodded. "Yeah. I wanna go get her back."

"And I suppose you're going to ask me to take you to the longtails' village, huh?" she said.

“Guilty as charged,” I replied with a chuckle.

“You and I haven’t known each other long, but I can already read you pretty well,” she said, sounding amused. “Besides, you’re always trying to save someone.”

“So what do you say? Will you take me to Zudah Village?”

“Sure thing. There are a few longtails from Zudah among the beastfolk you’ve managed to rescue, so a visit there was already on my itinerary.”

“Thanks, Valeria.”

“We leave tomorrow morning. Make sure you’re ready.”

“Sure thing!”

So it was settled: I was going back to the Dura Forest. And this time, I would definitely get Kilpha back.

Chapter Seventeen: Return to Zudah Village

When I broke the news to everyone that I'd be heading back into the forest with Valeria the following morning, Celes immediately volunteered to accompany us, claiming she was worried I would keel over on the trek. Dramom wanted to join the expedition too, but an ongoing incident stopped her from tagging along with us.

"Why aren't you sending your beastfolk to the colosseum to fight? The people are itching to see blood spilled in the arena!"

"You wretch! I hear you've been selling grain to the beastfolk at the same price as to us humes! What's the big idea?"

"If you want to do business in this city, you need to follow the rules like everyone else."

"Lend me some of your beastfolk, will ya? I need some hides tanned and they're the only ones who can do it."

"There are so many jobs that require beastfolk: sewer maintenance, cleaning the public toilets, paving the roads, repairing the castle walls, and so on. You could monopolize *all* of the profits from public works! Doesn't that sound appealing? So what do you say? Ready to lend some to us yet?"

Ever since I'd become the sole owner of beastfolk in the city, I'd been bombarded with demands and complaints from every angle. The city's big-shot merchants were extremely *displeased* that they could no longer just force the beastfolk to perform backbreaking labor or to fight in the colosseum for entertainment like they had before, and they kept coming into my shop to basically order me to put my beastfolk to work, claiming that my selfishness was the reason for a severe shortage of workers for their own businesses. I could only assume I'd been a little *too* convincing in my "evil merchant" role during the tournament, since they seemed certain I would end up giving in to their demands. Unfortunately for them, however, I had no intention of doing that.

“Not a chance,” I said, adjusting my teardrop-shaped sunglasses before flashing a little smirk at the furious merchants. I didn’t really know *why* I was still playing the pompous merchant, but oh well. It felt right. “*I’m* their employer now and I’ll use them however I see fit. Plus, let me remind you in case you’ve forgotten, the Merchant League’s rules don’t apply to me as I’m not a member of it. I was granted permission to conduct my business in this city from His Majesty Orvil IV himself, so I have no reason whatsoever to heed your demands.”

Needless to say, my response didn’t go down well.

“Well, let’s just say you might come to *regret* it if you continue to treat the beastfolk as equals,” one merchant had retorted.

“Haven’t you heard that any merchant who breaks the rules in Orvil tends to mysteriously disappear without a trace? I’d be careful if I were you,” warned another.

“Be sure to watch your back when you walk the streets at night.”

They hadn’t even bothered to make their threats subtle. While I wasn’t overly concerned about my own safety due to having Celes by my side, I was worried that they might try to sabotage my new shop or harm the beastfolk working for me. That was why I decided it’d be best if Dramom stayed in Orvil. For one thing, she could heal the beastfolk if any of them got injured, and for another, her phenomenal display of strength at the tournament meant her presence alone might deter any potential troublemakers. For both of these reasons, I asked her to stay behind.



The following morning, before setting out with Valeria and Celes, I said goodbye to my friends.

First up was Dramom. “I’m leaving the beastfolk in your care, Dramom,” I said to her.

“Yes, master,” she said with a solemn nod.

Next, it was the turn of the two little girls. “Aina, Shess, I’m gonna head out for a bit. I’ll see you both when I get back.”

“Please bring Miss Kilpha back with you, Mister Shiro,” Aina pleaded.

“Yeah, you *have* to get her back! No excuses!” Shess said.

They all waved us off, and we made a beeline for the Dura Forest. Our first stop was Lugu Village, where the beastfolk were overjoyed to learn that so many of their brethren were safe, and we prayed together for the souls of those who hadn’t survived. We spent the night in the village, then set out for Zudah Village before sunrise. On our way, we stopped in the other settlements to let them know who of their kin we had saved, and whenever we announced a name to the crowd that had amassed around us, the family of that person invariably cheered with relief. However, there were many in the crowd who remained somber to the very end of the roll call, and judging by their reactions, their loved ones hadn’t made it.

“Thank you for letting us know.”

Despite their evident sadness, they still came over and thanked us for bringing them closure.



We reached Zudah Village by evening. I stood in front of the village boundary for a little while and took deep breaths to keep myself calm as the painfully fresh memories of my previous trip to the village floated up in my mind. I knew full well that the kind of welcome I could look forward to would most likely involve stones being thrown at me—or worse, something pointier that might prove fatal if it struck me—but I didn’t let that deter me. I *had* to see Kilpha and tell her everything was all right now, and that she could leave.

“Are you ready, Shiro?” Valeria asked.

“Stop fretting so much. I shall protect you,” Celes stated.

I exhaled deeply. “I’m ready.”

“That’s the spirit. Let’s go!” Valeria said cheerily, and we finally entered the village. She took a deep breath and announced her presence. “I am Valeria, head warrior of Lugu Village, and I am here to speak to your chieftain!”



Just as I'd expected, we immediately found ourselves surrounded by male cat-siths, all baring their fangs and claws at us, with some even carrying weapons. For a born-and-bred Tokyoite beanpole like me, this sight was one straight out of a nightmare, but Celes and Valeria didn't seem the slightest bit bothered by it.

"I have no business with the rest of you. Go fetch your chieftain," Valeria ordered, readjusting the battle hammer resting on her shoulder with a fearless smirk.

"And bring Kilpha to us," Celes demanded, her gaze icy and unrelenting. "If you refuse, I shall have no qualms killing all of you."

The cat-siths continued to glare at us, but they didn't make any move to attack. None of them were fighters—all the village's hunters were in Orvil—so they must have been a bit hesitant to engage us. Either that or they were just plain scared of Valeria and Celes.

After a few more seconds of tense silence, a voice called out from behind the cat-siths. "Out of the way, all of you."

The wall of people instantly parted to reveal an elderly cat-sith woman. It was Kilpha's grandmother, the tribe's chieftain. "It's been a while, Shiro," she said.

I greeted her with a polite nod. "It's good to see you again, chieftain."

She responded with a dismissive grunt before fixing her gaze on me. "Why are you here? And with the head warrior of Lugu Village, no less. Don't tell me you have come to see Kilpha."

"You guessed right. We came to see Kilpha. Or rather, to take her back with us."

I could literally *feel* the hostility of the cat-siths surrounding us rising as I said this.

"Good grief. Why is your timing always so bad?" the chieftain sighed. "Go home. I'm saying that for your own good."

"No. I'm not leaving until I've seen Kilpha," I said, refusing to budge.

Those words had barely left my mouth when another voice chimed in. "Is that

so? Well, I guess I have no choice but to kill you, then.”

The newcomer’s tone was mocking and unpleasant to listen to.

“Any last words, lousy hume?”

Yup, it was none other than Sajiri, Kilpha’s (real) fiancé.

Chapter Eighteen: A Critical Situation

“Heya, lousy hume. You dared to show your face in front of me again, huh?” Sajiri sneered as he approached me, a fierce smirk curling his lips upward. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment, you know. I’ve been absolutely *dying* to see you again.”

“Really?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“Really. You see, last time, I had no idea Kilpha was pregnant with your brat. The second I learned about it, I decided I would kill you whenever I next laid eyes on you,” he explained, unsheathing the dagger that was hanging at his hip.

Thinking back, I did remember Kilpha telling her grandmother she was pregnant with my child the first time we set foot in Zudah Village. She’d been lying, of course, but judging by Sajiri’s words, it seemed she hadn’t renounced that statement yet, which was less than ideal, to say the least. Sajiri’s eyes were filled to the brim with murderous intent, and he was clearly out for blood—specifically mine.

“Please wait, Mr. Sajiri! You can’t kill him!” Kilpha’s grandmother pleaded.

“Shut up, you old bag. I will kill him *and* his brat once Kilpha’s given birth to it.” He paused and thought for a moment. “Or perhaps I should just deliver a big old kick to her stomach and resolve the matter in the womb.”

“You mustn’t!” the chieftain interjected. “Some women lose the ability to conceive after a miscarriage, so if you do that, you might never be able to have children with Kilpha!” She spread her arms wide and stepped between Sajiri and me. “I promised this hume on my honor as Zudah Village’s chieftain that I would hand Kilpha’s baby over to him when it is born. You cannot kill him.” She was clearly doing everything she could to dissuade Sajiri from attacking me.

Valeria placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You don’t need to trouble yourself, chieftain. We won’t let this guy harm a single hair on Shiro’s head.”

And with that, she took up a position directly in front of Sajiri, as if trading

places with the chieftain.

“Who the hell are you?” Sajiri growled, his eyes narrowing.

“I am Valeria, head warrior of Lugu Village. Let me warn you, Sajiri of Nahato Village, that if you intend to follow through on your threat to kill Shiro, you will be making an enemy not just of me but of all the bearfolk.”

Sajiri scoffed. “You call yourself the ‘head warrior’ of your village, yet you’ve let yourself be tamed by a hume? Did he put a collar on you or something? Be careful or you may end up with a baby in your belly before you realize what’s happening,” he said, a provocative smirk curling the corners of his lips upward.

Valeria frowned. “I won’t stand by and let you insult Shiro.”

“Then come at me, you lousy bearwoman. You bearfolk are so slow. It’ll be easy to put you in your place.”

Sparks flew between the pair, and it was clear that one wrong move could cause an explosion. Both were incredibly strong warriors, and regardless of the outcome, neither would come out of a duel unscathed.

“Shiro, would you like me to shut this cat-sith up before Valeria gets even more riled up?” Celes whispered to me. As one of the demon king’s four lieutenants, Celes would certainly have no trouble taking Sajiri down, but I felt that escalating the situation would only make things worse.

“No, stand back. I’ll deal with this,” I said to her before taking a step forward. “Please stop this! We didn’t come here to fight.”

“Of course you didn’t. You came here to obediently let me kill you, didn’t you?” Sajiri replied, his usual smirk plastered across his face.

“No, I didn’t come for that either. I’m here to take Kilpha back with me.”

“Still singing that old tune, huh?” Sajiri scoffed. “Well, listen closely, lousy hume. Kilpha belongs to *me* now. She’s *my* bride!”

“She only agreed to marry you because Zudah Village was in a bad spot. But now that the crisis has passed, she no longer has any reason to marry you.”

“What did you just say?” Sajiri said, his smirk morphing into a look of confusion.

He wasn't the only one who had been caught off guard by my statement. All of the cat-sìths around us were exchanging bewildered glances, wondering what in the world I was talking about.

"The crisis has passed?" the chieftain repeated. "What are you saying, Shiro?"

Valeria was the one who answered her question. "Shiro has opened up a business in Orvil. He has hired all of the beastfolk in the city, and he's paying them all fair wages."

"Wh-What?!" the chieftain gasped in shock.

"And that's not all," Valeria continued. "You can now buy the grain you need to survive the winter at his shop for the same price as what the humes pay. And it's even *cheaper* for those who work in his store."

"Oh, that's just an employee's discount," I piped up. "It's totally normal where I'm from."

"Well, it's not normal to us," Valeria said. "You know that too, don't you, chieftain?"

The old woman was completely stunned. "If what you're saying is the truth, it's wonderful," she breathed, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"All of the beastfolk in Orvil are my employees now, including the hunters from your village," I said, causing murmurs of surprise to ripple through the crowd. "I'm paying them all a fair wage, and they can buy the grain that I'm selling cheap. You should all be able to survive the winter without any problems. So... So..." I took a deep breath and yelled, "Kilpha! Do you hear me? You don't have to marry Sajiri now!"

From what I could see, she wasn't here, but I knew she'd be able to hear me because she was a scout, and as such, had really sharp hearing. There was no way she wouldn't have noticed the commotion with how loudly I'd just yelled.

"Kilpha! Let's go home together!" I hollered.

"Shut the hell up, lousy hume!"

"Oh no you don't!"

Sajiri had tried to thrust his dagger into me, but Valeria had blocked the

attack.

“Get out of my way, filthy bearwoman!” he snarled.

“Not happening. If you want me to move, you’ll have to move me. Oh, but who am I kidding? You can’t even seduce a single woman, let alone sweep me off my feet,” she mocked the cat-sith.

“Works for me. If you want to die so badly, I’ll be more than happy to oblige!” Sajiri said as he crouched low, ready to pounce.

Valeria planted her feet firmly and readied herself to meet Sajiri’s leap with her battle hammer.

“Wait, meow!”

Before either of them could make a move toward each other, Kilpha appeared on the scene.

Chapter Nineteen: A Reunion, and...

Kilpha stared out through her window at the sunset, lost in thought. How many days had passed since she last saw Shiro? After that farewell, her heart had plunged into darkness and every day was spent reminiscing about her time in Ninoritch. She missed her old companions—Nesca, Raiya, and Rolf—dearly. Back then, Kilpha had really thought nothing could stop the four of them—that they could reach the summit of the world if they wanted to. Her partymates weren't the only people she missed, though. She missed the greedy bunny, Emille, and Ney, the (slightly scary) guildmaster. She missed Eldos, the hero who seemed to spend all of his days chugging booze in the guild's drinking hall. She missed Karen, the overworked mayor, and Patty, the loud but very cheerful fairy. She missed Aina, who worked harder than any of them in spite of her age, and Stella, her mother who was so kind and so gentle. And of course, she missed...

"Shiro..." she murmured without even noticing she had said his name. Every day in Ninoritch had sparkled and been full of joy.

My chest hurts, meow. Every time she thought about Shiro, she felt a tightness in her chest. She was born in Zudah Village, so she should have felt at home here, yet for some reason, she was feeling homesick for Ninoritch.

"It's only now that I can't go back that I realize how much I love that little town. I'm such a fool, meow," she said to no one in particular.

In five days' time, she would be wed to Sajiri. The two villages were to hold a common ceremony to celebrate their union. Kilpha didn't want to marry Sajiri. She hated him. But her grandmother had asked her to honor their arrangement.

"I beg of you, Kilpha. Please save our village," she had said. And she hadn't been the only one to plead with Kilpha to go through with it.

"Kilpha! If you marry Sajiri, we'll all be saved!" one of the elders of the village had said to her.

Her childhood friend had come to her with her baby in her arms. “I want to see him grow up. So please, Kilpha...”

She could save everyone in the village if she just married Sajiri. That was what everyone kept telling her over and over again. And to make matters worse, the ogres continued their attacks on the village. Every single time, Kilpha risked her life to fight them, but despite her efforts, there seemed to be no end to the beasts. There were simply too many of them. Cat-sìths were being wounded left and right, and dropping like flies, one after another.

It might really be the end this time, meow, Kilpha would invariably find herself thinking during each ogre raid. But it was always at that moment, when her thoughts had taken a grimly dark turn, that Sajiri—the man she loathed with every fiber of her being—appeared on the scene.

“Heya, Kilpha. I’ve come to save your sorry hides again.”

Sajiri had become a hero to the cat-sìths in Zudah Village, arriving just in the nick of time to save them whenever they were in trouble. He even used expensive medicine and ointments to tend to the wounded. Still, with each raid, more lives were lost—too many to be counted on both hands and both feet.

“I should’ve saved up more money when I could, meow,” Kilpha muttered to herself.

Even with everything in her coin purse, she couldn’t pay for any medicine, and the same went for the other cat-sìths. And if the village had still had money in its coffers, they wouldn’t have needed to send all of their hunters to look for work in Orvil in the first place.

Sajiri had saved the cat-sìths’ lives so many times, they would never have enough to repay him, no matter how hard they tried. On top of that, they needed food to survive the winter, protection against the ogres, and healing potions and medicine, which were three things Sajiri could provide them with. The cat-sìths of Zudah Village found themselves with no other choice but to give Kilpha to him, despite her reluctance. Of course, Kilpha wasn’t an idiot. She understood that marrying Sajiri was a sacrifice she had to make for her people. Yet deep down, she often found herself hoping Shiro would come to her rescue. She knew it was a foolish wish. After all, she was the one who’d told him she

needed to stay.

Closing her eyes, Kilpha allowed her mind to drift back to the night they had spent together at the inn in Orvil. She could still feel the warmth of Shiro's back against her own. Against her hand. Against her entire body.

"I'm fine, meow," she whispered to herself, trying to make herself believe it. "I'm fine, Shiro."

She once again found herself speaking his name even though he wasn't there with her. Those memories had given her the strength to endure her hardships, at least for a little while. But then...

"Kilpha! Let's go home together!"

Shiro's voice suddenly rang out in the distance, calling to her.





Before she'd even realized, Kilpha had bolted out of the house, disregarding her grandmother's warnings not to go out. She ran as fast as she could, until finally, she saw him.

"Oh..." she breathed in disbelief. Shiro was right in front of her eyes. Ten more steps, and she could touch him. Hug him. *No, I can make it in two.*

He was right there in front of her. But unfortunately, he wasn't alone.

"Kilpha, why are *you* here?"

Sajiri's voice cut through to her ears, sharp and sounding enraged. He was standing face-to-face with Valeria, who had a very firm grip on a massive battle hammer.

"Kilpha! Come home with me!" Shiro called out, his gaze fixed on her as he extended a hand in her direction.

"Shiro did it, Kilpha! He saved our brethren from those rotten hume merchants," Valeria explained, her eyes never leaving Sajiri, standing ready to defend herself if he attempted to catch her by surprise. "He freed the hunters from your village too! Even Azif! He saved them all!"

"Even Azif?" Kilpha repeated, her voice barely even a whisper.

Azif was the village's best hunter and Kilpha's beloved cousin. The news that he was still alive caused quite a stir among the cat-sìths watching on.

"Yeah, even Azif. Once the hunters have returned to the forest, you guys won't need to fear those ogres anymore," Valeria declared, and she had a point. Azif was strong enough to take on an entire group of ogres by himself.

But despite this welcome piece of news, Kilpha couldn't bring herself to take Shiro's outstretched hand. "I'm sorry, Shiro, meow."

"Huh?" A look of confusion appeared on his face.

Kilpha stared back at him. Having spent so much time with Shiro, she knew him well and could easily imagine the crazy things he must have done in order to save the beastfolk in Orvil, which would in turn help her. Despite everything

—and even after he had learned that she had lied to him—he hadn't given up on her. He was *still* trying to take her back with him to that warm, happy place that was Ninoritch.

Oh, how desperately Kilpha wanted to take Shiro's outstretched hand in that moment. But she knew that if she did, she would end up causing even more trouble for him. Shiro was kind to a fault, and there was no doubt in Kilpha's mind that he would keep doing reckless things for her and the other cat-sìths if she accepted his help. *I don't want to be a burden on you, meow.*

You see, Kilpha had snuck out of the village a few days before to take a look at the ogres' base of operations, but her heart had sunk when she found out there wasn't one but *several* ogre colonies scattered around the forest, meaning the ogre threat was likely far greater than what she had anticipated. Thankfully, the beasts were rather disorganized, and each colony lived in its own camp with minimal interaction with any of the others, but even so, there were so many of them that if they were to ever unite under a powerful leader like an Ogre King, they'd easily be able to lay waste to even fortified cities.

The beastfolk living in the Dura Forest couldn't leave Orvil's jurisdiction and weren't allowed inside the city walls either, meaning they had no choice but to stay in their villages and live in fear of the ogres. Even with Azif and the other hunters, Zudah Village's days were numbered if they forfeited Sajiri's protection. That was just how dire the situation was.

Perhaps Dramom would be able to kill all of the ogres and destroy their bases if Kilpha asked, but that wouldn't get to the root of the problem. Shiro and the others would soon return to Ninoritch, meaning if a new threat appeared in the forest, there would be no one nearby to protect the cat-sìths of Zudah Village. For that reason, Kilpha *had* to stay and marry Sajiri, no matter how much she loathed the idea.

Shiro came to bring me back. Kilpha felt her heart swell with happiness at this realization. The mere fact that Shiro was still thinking of her and still trying to save her was enough for her. She couldn't carry on causing trouble for him. She couldn't keep being a burden to him.

"I'm fine, Shiro. You can go home, meow," she said. And this time, she meant

it.

“But why? Why, Kilpha, *why*?!” Shiro exclaimed, his face contorting in despair.

“You hear that, lousy hume? Kilpha told you to scram!” Sajiri sneered, his grating laugh echoing all around the forest.

Chapter Twenty: Heavy Burdens Are Meant to Be...

Left with no other choice, we returned to Orvil. Once back in the mansion, I let myself fall onto my bed and let out a frustrated groan. “Damn it.”

I had thought I could save Kilpha. I’d thought I *had* saved her. But in reality, I hadn’t.

“I’m fine, Shiro. You can go home, meow.”

Kilpha had looked on the verge of tears when she’d uttered those words. Sajiri’s snide comment kept playing on a loop inside my head. *“You hear that, lousy hume? Kilpha told you to scram!”* I didn’t think I would ever forget that triumphant smirk he’d had on his face in that moment, as if taunting me that Kilpha was *his* now.

Three days passed. Kilpha and Sajiri’s wedding was to be held the day after next, yet all I could do was lie in my darkened room and brood.

“Damn it,” I muttered, frustrated both at the situation and how pathetic I was.

There was a knock at the door. “Mister Shiro, it’s Aina,” said a young-sounding voice on the other side of the wood. “Can I come in?”

“Aina?” I mumbled, barely comprehending.

“I’m opening the door, okay?”

The sound of the key turning in the lock echoed around the dark room, and a moment later, in stepped Aina with a worried look on her face.

“What are you—”

I had been about to say *“What are you doing here?”* but before I could finish the question, Aina dashed over to my bed and grabbed me by the hand.

“Come on, Mister Shiro!” She spun around and dragged me out of the room by my arm.

“Whoa! A-Aina?”

“Come on! Everyone’s waiting for you!” the little girl insisted.

“Everyone?” I repeated, confused.

The little girl led me along the hallway, down the spiral staircase, and into the entrance hall, where the main entrance was. All of my friends were there.

“What took you so long, Amata?” Shess pouted with her hands on her hips and a sour look on her face.

“Stupid Amata! How *dare* you make the princess wait!” Luza exclaimed, her beautiful brow furrowed in irritation.

The always-handsome Duane was standing beside them. “Hi, Shiro. We’ve been waiting for you,” he said, flashing me a warm smile.

Dramom and Suama, the dragon mother-and-daughter duo, were the next to greet me.

“I too was awaiting your return, master.”

“Hewwo, pa-pa!”

“Did Aina have to drag you all the way here? Pathetic,” Celes harrumphed, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

Even Valeria—who was supposed to have returned to Lugu Village—was here, with Gugui standing beside her.

“I heard your girlfriend dumped you, chief,” the latter said with an amused smirk.

“C’mon now, Gugui. Don’t tease him,” Valeria admonished.

And it wasn’t just my companions who were here.

“Boss!”

“You sure took your sweet time, didn’t you?”

“We’ve been waitin’ for you, master.”

“Hey, our favorite hume’s finally here!”

The entrance hall was absolutely packed with beastfolk, including dogfolk,

high cat-sìths, apefolk, foxpeople, and even cat-sìths. Needless to say, I was flabbergasted by the sight of them all crammed into the hallway. *What are they all doing here?*

“Mister Shiro, they’ve all been waiting for you,” Aina said as if she’d read my mind. She looked up at me. “They say they want to help you.”

“To help me?” I echoed.

She nodded. “Well, you saved their lives, right? So they want to help you out in return.”

My brain didn’t seem able to compute what Aina was telling me. While it was true that I had technically saved the beastfolk, I had done it in the hope of helping Kilpha, only for her to ultimately tell me she didn’t want my help.

Valeria chuckled at my clear confusion. “Shiro, all of us residing in the Dura Forest had a little discussion.”

“Wait, *all* of you?” I said.

“Yeah. Well, our chieftains did, at any rate. Kilpha intends to marry that louse, Sajiri, in order to protect her village, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a smart decision on her part,” she continued. “After all, no matter how strong a village’s warriors might be, their numbers are limited. That’s especially true of Zudah Village, since they have no hunters or fighters at present.”

“I suppose so,” I said.

“So we, the residents of the forest, have decided to form an alliance.”

“An alliance?” I repeated, my head tilted to one side in confusion.

A young cat-sìth stepped forward. “Yes, an alliance, master.”

I recognized him. “Wait, you’re...”

“Azif, master. I’m a hunter from Zudah Village, and Kilpha’s cousin.”

Taking a good look at his face, I could see a bit of a resemblance to Kilpha. If I recalled correctly, she had said this Azif guy was their village’s strongest hunter, who’d be able to defeat a whole load of ogres, no problem.

“Miss Valeria summoned us all to discuss the current state of the forest, and we’ve agreed to form an alliance. Now, whenever a threat appears in the forest, we will all work together to address it,” he explained.

“So you mean you’ll all cooperate to help the other villages?” I queried. “Even if it has nothing to do with you?”

“Exactly, master. The forest might be teeming with ogres right now, but if all of us hunters and warriors join forces, we should be able to kill them and protect the other beastfolk, no sweat.”

“So *that’s* why you’ve decided to form this alliance,” I said, slowly putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

Azif nodded. “At the end of the day, helping out the other villages means helping our own people in the long run. By overcoming racial barriers and working together, we can become even stronger. And the one who taught us that lesson”—he paused and flashed me a grin—“was you, master.”

“Me?” I said, bemused.

“Yeah. Not only did you save us from those wretched merchants, you also helped our brethren in the forest fight off the Lamentation of the Forest. Miss Valeria told us all about it. Even when beastfolk were throwing rocks at you and insulting you, you refused to give up and helped them until the end.”

“All I did was give them medicine. It was no big deal,” I said. I genuinely didn’t feel like I’d done anything special. After all, it had just been over-the-counter medicine—the kind anyone could buy at their local drugstore in Japan.

“Don’t be so modest, chief,” Gugui chimed in. “We owe you one, big time. I’d still be without a left arm if it wasn’t for that healer lady of yours,” he said, thrusting his chin in Dramom’s direction.

“That was all Dramom, though. I didn’t do any—” I started, but Dramom interrupted me.

“I only did it because you asked me to, master,” she said before sizing up Gugui. “Be thankful for master’s kindness, bearman.”

Gugui chuckled. “Well, you heard her, chief. Even your healer says it was all

you.”

A weak “Wow,” was about all I could muster.

“You saved us, and all of our brethren too,” Gugui continued. “So this time, we’re gonna return the favor and do something for you. We’ve got to follow your example and overcome racial barriers, just like the cat-sith lad said. It’s time for us all to band together.”

“Mr. Gugui’s right,” Azif agreed. “And if we can rid the forest of those ogres, we should be able to return Kilpha to you.”

“Guys...” I whispered, unable to find my voice because of how stunned I was.

I looked around the room, and every time I locked eyes with one of the beastfolk, I had a grin flashed at me followed by a lot of vigorous nodding. I felt tears prickling the corners of my eyes, so overwhelmed was I by their kindness. But I suddenly realized there was a slight flaw to their plan.

“Hang on a minute,” I said. “You guys can’t leave Orvil. The city officials still haven’t given you permission to leave the city, have they?”

“Oh, I took care of that,” Shess piped up, still standing proudly with her hands on her hips. She exchanged looks with Luza.

“Silly Amata,” the swordswoman chuckled. “While you were moping in your room, the princess has been working hard. Take a look at this.” From the chest pocket of her shirt, she produced a document which she dramatically unfolded in front of me.

“Wait... That’s the release permit I asked for!” I mumbled in shock. “Huh? But how? Shess, how did you—”

“A date,” the little girl interrupted me.

“A d-date?” I repeated, confused by what she meant.

“I promised Orvil IV I’d go on a date with him—just *one*—if he let you release the beastfolk,” she said, her face turning as red as a tomato.

“Huh? What do you mean?” My brain was having a hard time processing this bit of information.

“I... I... Argh! Aina, explain it to him!” Shess said, handing the baton over to the other little girl.

“Okay,” Aina said with a nod. “Mister Shiro, Shess went to find the king, and...”



To sum it up, knowing that Orvil IV was in love with her, the little princess had decided to sacrifice herself for the cause of negotiating the liberation of the beastfolk, offering him a single date in exchange for his help. And indeed, the document written and signed by the boy king that Luza held in her hand confirmed that he had accepted her proposal.

“It was a real ordeal,” Shess added. “We had to make sure the prime minister didn’t catch him writing the permit.”

“You...” A grin broke out on my face. “Thank you, Shess!”

“There’s no need to thank me. Besides, I was the one who said I wanted to save the beastfolk in the first place. And you’re always indulging my whims, so I just thought I could be the one to help you out for a change...” she said, turning her face—which had gone even redder—away from me.

“Shess...” I could feel my composure slipping from my grasp, and for a moment, I feared tears might start spilling from my eyes.

“Shiro,” Valeria chimed in. “Stop trying to shoulder all of it on your own. Heavy burdens are meant to be shared with friends. And besides...” She paused, her lips curling upward into a teasing smirk. “You’re gonna break those scrawny arms of yours if you try to keep that up.”

Everyone seemed to find her comment rather witty, especially the beastfolk, who were laughing so hard, they had to hold their stomachs. They weren’t mocking me, of course. They were simply emphasizing that I shouldn’t try to handle everything on my own and I should instead rely on them a bit more. I recalled saying something similar to Shess not all that long ago.

Still, aren’t they laughing a bit too much? If you’d told my past self, the star of the college wrestling team, that people would one day be doubled over with laughter at a joke about how scrawny my arms are, he’d probably have stared at you like you’d grown a second head.

“Let’s go, chief,” Gugui prompted.

“We’re all ready to go, master,” Azif added.

“C’mon, Shiro. Let’s go kick some ogre butt. Then, we can all try and persuade

Kilpha to go back home with you!”

This last remark made me realize something. “Huh. Right. Why did I think I would be able to convince Kilpha to come back to Ninoritch?”

If anyone could persuade her to return, it wouldn’t be me. It’d be...

“Dramom!”

“What is it, master?”

“Can I ask something crazy of you?” I said, locking eyes with her.

“Of course. Please command me as you wish,” she replied, a gentle smile on her face.

“Thanks! Okay, so I’m gonna need you to...”

Even after hearing my absolutely insane request, Dramom agreed to carry it out without a hint of hesitation.

Intermission

The twin moons had begun their ascent into the night sky, signaling that it was nearly time for the wedding. Kilpha had come to Nahato Village, which was to be the venue for the ceremony, since Sajiri was the village's future chieftain.

"Let's go, Kilpha," her mother called out to her as she entered the hut that was serving as the waiting area for the bride.

After a short pause, Kilpha acquiesced. "Okay."

A soft smile curled her mother's lips upward as she took in her daughter's appearance. "You look beautiful."

Kilpha wasn't really the type to fuss over her appearance, preferring comfort and practicality over elaborate styling, but on this particular day, she was a bride and had to look the part. Her lips were colored red, her cheeks had been adorned with symbols the same color as her lips, and she had traded her usual outfit that was easy to move around in for the ceremonial garb of her people. Another cat-sìth tradition was for the mother to fetch her daughter and escort her to the ceremony. The arrival of her mother signaled the moment was near, and that Kilpha would soon be Sajiri's wife.

"You look just like me when I was young," her mother said, flashing her a playful grin.

Kilpha could tell that her mother was trying to lift her spirits, even if only for the briefest of moments. After all, she knew how much her daughter loathed the idea of marrying a man she hadn't chosen for herself. Unlike when she'd left the village at thirteen, Kilpha was no longer a child, meaning she could tell what her mother was thinking.

"Your future husband is waiting for you. Come with me," her mother pressed her gently.

Kilpha nodded reluctantly and followed her mother outside. Much like in Zudah Village, the cat-sìths of Nahato Village lived in tree houses that were

connected together by rope bridges. Mother and daughter crossed over these bridges before taking the stairs down to ground level. Nahato Village was much, much bigger than Zudah Village, and Kilpha couldn't help feeling a bit bitter at how prosperous their settlement was when the rest of the beastfolk in the forest were struggling so much.

The wedding was set to take place in the village square, where cat-sìths from both villages had gathered for the ceremony. Tradition stated that the groom was expected to put on a lavish spread for his guests, showcasing his power and wealth by treating all attendees to a feast with free-flowing alcohol. Yet despite the distraction of this boozy buffet, when Kilpha and her mother arrived in the village square, every single cat-sìth turned their attention to them. Sajiri was standing in the middle of the square—only around thirty paces from Kilpha—and when their eyes met, he smirked, while she looked down because she didn't want to see his face.

"So that's the girl from Zudah Village, huh?" someone in the crowd commented.

"Yeah. She's the chieftain's granddaughter," another guest offered.

"Why does she look so miserable? She's marrying Mr. Sajiri!"

"Very impolite of her."

The gazes of five hundred cat-sìths were firmly fixed on Kilpha while they all whispered among themselves. She could hear them judging her and calling her foolish for letting herself be led astray by a hume.

"Go on, Kilpha," her mother said, giving her daughter a little push in the back.

"Fine," the bride-to-be mumbled dejectedly, then started walking toward Sajiri.

"Wait, Kilpha!"

Her mother's raised voice made her stop in her tracks, and she let out a quizzical meow as she turned around to look at her.

"I'm sorry," her mother uttered, a saddened look on her face.

Kilpha shook her head. "Don't be. I'm fine," she assured her mother.

“You are? You are,” her mother said, tears welling up in her eyes, but they weren’t happy tears. They were a sign of frustration, because she blamed herself for not being able to save her daughter from this fate. She wished there had been some other way to keep their village safe, but she knew this was the only solution. She had no choice but to hand her daughter over to that man.

“I’m going now, okay? Thanks, mom, meow,” Kilpha said, flashing her mother a smile before resuming her slow trudge toward Sajiri. He was waiting at the end of the aisle, watching her unhurried progress, one deliberate step at a time.

If it was Shiro waiting for me, I would’ve reached him in five steps, meow, she thought gloomily. Her legs felt heavy. One step. Two steps.

I’m fine. I’ll be fine, meow, she told herself. One more step. Then another. No matter how slow she went, if she kept walking, she would eventually get there.

“You took your sweet time, didn’t you?” Sajiri commented when she was finally at his side. “Do you really hate the idea of being my wife that much? Or was that your attempt to curb your excitement as you made your way toward me?”

Kilpha didn’t dignify his snide questions with an answer, simply turning to face the elderly priest who was officiating the ceremony. Sajiri clicked his tongue in annoyance before doing the same.

“We shall now begin the ceremony that will unite Sajiri of Nahato Village and Kilpha of Zudah Village,” the priest announced, his solemn words echoing around the square. “As the representative of the gods that dwell in Dura Forest, I shall officiate this union and bind them together as husband and wife.”

The priest continued with his speech, but his words quickly stopped reaching Kilpha’s ears. *I just want this to be over with, meow*. She had said goodbye to Shiro for a second time. He had come to take her back, but she had refused to go with him. Her world had seemed so bright back in Ninoritch, but here in this moment, everything was so dull and gray.

“As proof of your union, you may now kiss in front of the forest gods,” the priest prompted.

“Hey, Kilpha,” Sajiri said, trying to grab her attention. After deeming that she

was taking too long to answer him, he clicked his tongue again, grabbed her by the shoulder, and forced her to turn around and face him. “Look at me.”

Sajiri’s face was right in front of her eyes.

“Please exchange your vows with this kiss,” the priest urged.

Sajiri’s face drew closer and closer to Kilpha’s, and she suddenly realized she was about to have her first kiss right there and then. *Please just be over quickly, meow*, she silently pleaded before closing her eyes resignedly.

But out of the blue, a voice shattered the silence. “Hold it right there!”

It was Shiro.

Chapter Twenty-One: Intrusion

The wedding ceremony was well underway when we arrived in Nahato Village. We had cut it close—really, *really* close—but we had made it just in time.

“Hold it right there!” I shouted at the top of my lungs when I saw Sajiri leaning in to kiss Kilpha.

The cat-sìths that had gathered in the village square turned in my direction all at once, as did Kilpha. “Shiro...” she whispered, our eyes meeting. She looked extremely anxious and was on the verge of tears.

I stared her straight in the eye, and declared, “Kilpha. I’m here to take you home! And I’m not taking no for an answer this time!”

“Shiro...” she repeated, blinking in surprise. “But I—”

Beside her, Sajiri clicked his tongue yet again. “Shut up, Kilpha!” he raged, shoving her out of the way, which drew a little yelp from her. “You *again*, lousy hume? Don’t you understand what’s going on here?” he growled at me.

“Why? What’s going on? *Oh*. You mean how Kilpha’s being forced to marry an absolute *scumbag* because he’s using his leverage to pressure her into marriage?” I said provocatively. “Gotta say, I’ve never attended a wedding that had such a bleak premise. So anyway, what’s your point?”

“What did you just *say*?!” Sajiri exclaimed, turning red with anger. He took a step forward and the crowd of cat-sìths parted to create a path between the two of us. “Be careful what you say next, hume, or I will kill you for real this time,” he growled, squaring his shoulders.

The distance between us was about twenty meters, which was handy because if it had been two meters, I would probably have been laid out on the ground stone dead by this point.

“Kilpha is *mine*,” the cat-sìth seethed. “She *dumped* you. Can’t you get that into your thick skull? Just give up and go home already.”

“What are you talking about? The only reason Kilpha told me to go home was because she cares about me, unlike a certain *someone* who treats women like objects and can’t get anyone to marry him without using threats,” I said, riling him up even more.

“You filthy rat!” Sajiri roared, his eyes filled with fury. I could tell he was on the verge of totally losing it.

“Wait, Shiro, meow!” Kilpha interjected, likely fearing for my life, given how angry I was making the bridegroom. “I’m marrying Sajiri. So just leave me alone, *please!*” she begged.

“You’re only marrying him because of the ogres in the forest, right?” I said.

“That’s part of it, but it’s not the whole reason, meow,” she replied. “Even if we managed to get rid of all the ogres, what if another threat appeared in the forest? Our village isn’t strong enough to fend for itself, meow. I...” She paused as her emotions briefly got to her. “I don’t have a choice, meow.”

“So that’s why you’re marrying Sajiri even though you don’t like him?” I queried.

She nodded weakly. “Yeah.”

Sajiri scoffed. “Hear that, lousy hume? Kilpha’s gonna marry me, and it’s all of her own volition. Unlike the spineless wuss that you are, I can protect her and her village from any threat!”

“Then, how about if we take care of any threat that rears its head in the forest?” Valeria interjected, stepping forward with thirty bearfolk warriors standing behind her. They weren’t clad in furs and pelts like on our first meeting, but in proper leather armor, and all of them were wielding their weapon of choice, resulting in a sea of hand axes, maces, flails, and so on. They had originally sold their equipment to buy food for their brethren, but I’d bought it all back from the merchants before coming here. The sight was quite intimidating, and the cat-sìths visibly started to panic.

Sajiri, on the other hand, looked completely unfazed. “Are you saying you and your warriors are going to kill all of those ogres? There’s only a few dozen of you! What can you bears do against those hordes, huh?”

“Always so quick to snap. You really have no patience, do you?” Valeria said, clearly totally unbothered by Sajiri’s attempts at provoking them. “Anyway, don’t worry. It won’t just be us.”

This was the signal for more beastfolk to flood into the village square, including dogfolk spearmen, demonwolf swordsmen, apefolk spirit magic users, foxpeople sorcerers, and more.

“Kilpha! We’re here too,” Azif called out, joining the other beastfolk who were piling into the square, and with the other hunters from Zudah Village following closely behind him.

“Azif!” Kilpha cried, her eyes widening in surprise at the sight of the cousin she hadn’t seen in years.

“Well? What do you think? We make for a pretty impressive group, don’t we?” Valeria said to Sajiri, a smirk curling her lips upward. And she was within her rights to be so smug, for there were presently around three hundred warriors packed into the village square, all of whom were now a part of the newly formed Dura Forest Alliance. Despite their many, many differences, their unity overcame anything else. Even Sajiri was speechless at the sight, as were the cat-sìths attending the wedding.

A quiet chuckle escaped Valeria’s lips. “Shiro, explain the situation to these longtail morons, will ya?” she said.

“Gotcha.” I scanned the crowd of cat-sìths before making my big announcement. “As you can see, the other tribes that reside here in the Dura Forest have decided to form an alliance, and they have sworn to defeat the ogres—no, to defeat *any* creature that threatens the harmony of the forest.”

This news caused quite a commotion among the cat-sìths, to say the least.

“All the warriors here have made every effort to overcome racial barriers in order to protect the forest. And that includes the hunters of Zudah Village,” I noted.

Azif and his gang nodded at this. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the chieftain of Zudah Village shedding tears over the return of their hunters.

“Race doesn’t matter,” I said. “At the end of the day, you’re all residents of

Dura Forest. That's why..." I paused and looked the chieftain of Zudah Village straight in the eye. "The cat-sìths of Zudah Village and Nahato Village have been invited to join the alliance."

For the third time that day, the crowd of cat-sìths started muttering among one another.

"Is... Is this true, Shiro? They'll protect us too?" Kilpha's grandmother asked me.

"We will, grandma," Azif replied in my stead. "We were all divided before, but our master—I mean, Mr. Shiro has brought us together."

"Just incredible," Kilpha's grandmother breathed, her eyes as wide as saucers.

The cat-sìths of Zudah Village had forfeited the trust of the other beastfolk by hunting in the bearfolk's territory, breaking the biggest taboo of the forest. But that didn't matter anymore. The Dura Forest Alliance's mission was to protect *all* of the beastfolk in the forest, and they counted cat-sìth hunters among their ranks. From that day on, they would fight as one, protect their brethren as one, and live as one.

"Kilpha," I said, my gaze firmly fixed on her.

She met my gaze. "Shiro..."

"Amazing, isn't it? The warriors of the forest are so strong, I'm sure they'll make short work of those pesky ogres." I paused, but after getting no reply from Kilpha, I resumed. "The Dura Forest is finally united. You don't need to fear the ogres any longer."

Once again, Kilpha remained silent.

"It means you don't have to marry Sajiri now if you don't want to. There's no need for you to sacrifice yourself for your village anymore. Besides..." I paused as a mischievous smile tugged the corners of my lips upward. "Everyone would be really, *really* mad if you stayed here."

"Huh?" Kilpha uttered, shooting me a look of sheer incomprehension.

"Isn't that right, everyone?" I called over my shoulder, prompting Aina and Shess to step forward.

“Miss Kilpha, let’s go home together!” Aina pleaded.

“Enough is enough now, Kilpha! You’re coming back with us!” Shess demanded.

Next came the scatterbrained Luza and the always-handsome Duane.

“You heard them, Kilpha. If you don’t return to Ninoritch, the pri—ahem, *my lady* will be very sad,” Luza said.

Duane flashed a dazzling smile. “Heya, Kilpha. I came with Shiro to bring you back.”

Chuckling could be heard as Dramom came forward next, accompanied as always by Suama and Celes.

“Just so you know, Kilpha, if my master orders it, I will drag you back to Ninoritch myself,” Dramom declared airily.

“Kiw-pha, we go home now?” Suama babbled.

“If you want freedom, then fight for it,” Celes stated. “That is the way of a true warrior.”

“Guys, meow...” Kilpha breathed, tears pooling in her eyes at the sight of her friends that she had thought she’d never see again.

“Come on, Kilpha. Let’s all go home together,” I said.

She was still hesitant, though. “But, Shiro, I...” she mumbled. “I lied to you...”

I could tell she was almost convinced. One more push should do it. Just one *teeny-tiny* push. And I just so happened to have one last ace up my sleeve. You see, Aina and the others weren’t the only people I’d brought along to convince Kilpha to come back home...

“He’s right, Kilpha. Stop dillydallying and come home with us, yeah?” a warm-sounding masculine voice piped up from the crowd behind me.

A gasp escaped Kilpha’s lips. “Raiya?”

“Yup, that’s me. The one and only leader of Blue Flash. The *great* Raiya, at your service,” he said as he leisurely strolled into the village square.

“What...” Kilpha uttered, her jaw hitting the floor. “What are you doing here,

meow?”

“Shiro came to fetch us on Dramom,” he explained. “He told us you were thinking about leaving Blue Flash, and he needed our help to convince you to come back to Ninoritch. You should’ve seen his face. The poor guy was so desperate. Anyway, as the leader of Blue Flash, it’s my job to keep the crew together, so I didn’t hesitate for a single second before hopping aboard to come here.”

“Raiya...” Kilpha breathed.

“Well, did you really think we’d let you leave Blue Flash without us putting up a fight?” he said with a cheeky smile on his face.

Tears started streaming down Kilpha’s cheeks. She must have thought she was never going to see him again. “Meow?” she said after a moment. “Wait. You just said ‘we,’ didn’t you, meow?”

“I sure did,” Raiya confirmed. “I’m not the only one who came back for you.”

“If Raiya’s here, naturally, I am too,” came a lethargic-sounding voice from behind Raiya, and an instant later, Nesca poked her head out.

“Nesca!” Kilpha exclaimed.

“I am also here, Miss Kilpha, ma’am.”

Her eyes grew even wider. “Even Rolf came!”

Yup, that’s right. My super genius plan had been to go get the other members of Blue Flash to help me convince Kilpha to come back to Ninoritch.

“C’mon, Shiro. Let’s go kick some ogre butt. Then, we can all try and persuade Kilpha to go back home with you!”

Valeria’s words two days before had sparked a realization in my mind. By myself, I would never be able to convince Kilpha to return to Ninoritch, but her friends and companions in the Blue Flash adventuring party that she had known for years most certainly could.

“Why, meow? Why have you all come here just for me, meow?” Kilpha asked, her face damp with tears.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? It’s because you’re our friend, Kilpha,” Raiya said.

His words must have hit her deeply because the dam broke and she started full-on sobbing.

“You cry far too easily, Kilpha,” Nesca chided her with a sullen look on her face. “Raiya was about to ask my parents for their blessing when Shiro turned up.” She puffed her cheeks out angrily.

By “their blessing,” I guessed she meant Raiya was just about to ask her parents if they were fine with him marrying her—probably the biggest and most important milestone in any couple’s life.

“But he didn’t get to talk to them about it, and it’s all *your* fault,” she continued with an accusatory tone. “I’m going to give you the harshest lecture of your life when we get back to Ninoritch. You won’t sleep for three days and three nights. *Then*, you’ll want to cry.” I could tell from the look in her eye that she was dead serious about that too. She fully intended to lecture Kilpha for three days and three nights straight. After all, Nesca wasn’t the kind of person to make empty threats.

Rolf chuckled. “I intended to lecture you myself, but it seems that Miss Nesca has beaten me to the punch. In that case, I shall cast my healing magic on you to ease your exhaustion after Miss Nesca has completed her lecture, Miss Kilpha, ma’am.”

“Okay, I’ll be on drinking party duty, then,” Raiya chimed in. “I’ll enlist Shiro and we’ll take Kilpha to get drunk as a reward for enduring Nesca’s superlong lecture.”

“What a splendid idea, Mr. Raiya, sir,” Rolf said. “I shall join you as well.”

“I will too,” Nesca muttered, still pouting.

They were all talking as if it were a given that Kilpha would be coming back to Ninoritch with them.

“Guys...” Kilpha hiccuped between sobs. “You guys, meow...” She kept wiping her eyes, but the tears just wouldn’t stop flowing.

I took a step forward. “Kilpha,” I said, holding out my hand to her. “Let’s go

home. We're heading back to Ninoritch."

This time, Kilpha nodded without any hesitation, then broke into a run and dashed toward us.

"H-Hey, Kilpha! Wait! Don't go!" Sajiri called after her, but she didn't even slow.

The distance between us was a couple dozen meters, but Kilpha cleared it in a mere five steps. "Shiro!" she cried out as she threw herself into my arms.

I let out a strangled cry and nearly toppled over, but I *refused* to fall. I couldn't! I'd ruin the moment and look like a real idiot. *C'mon, legs and core muscles! You can do it!* I might have been a human beanpole, but I was still a man, and what kind of man can't even keep his balance when a woman jumps into his arms? I grunted and successfully caught Kilpha without falling backward.

"Shiro! Shiro!" she cried.

"Welcome back, Kilpha," I said.

She gave one big nod and I lowered her to the ground before turning my attention to Sajiri.

"You rat! You filthy, stinking rat!" he roared at me in anger, his eyes aflame with loathing.

A mischievous smile appeared on Raiya's face. "So this is Kilpha's former fiancé, huh? He looks like a real piece of work to me."

"What?! What did you just say, you lousy hume?!" Sajiri bellowed.

"Ooh, scary," Raiya drawled, his smile unwavering, before addressing me. "C'mon, man. Show him what you're made of."

"You bet I will," I said, my gaze locked on Sajiri. "Hey, Sajiri. Remember what you said to me on our first meeting? You told me to show you my strength."

"So? What of it?" Sajiri barked back.

I turned around and took a look at all of my friends behind me: the three hundred beastfolk that made up the Dura Forest Alliance; Aina and the others;

the Blue Flash crew; and not forgetting Kilpha, who was beside me, hugging my arm to her chest. I gave them all a nod, and they all nodded back at me. I then turned back to Sajiri, and wearing the most triumphant look that had ever graced my face, I said:

“This is my strength.”

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Decisive Battle

“Damn it! Damn that lousy hume!” Sajiri yelled, tearing at his hair in a mix of frustration and anger. “Do you really mean that, Kilpha? Are you seriously choosing a damn *hume* over me?”

Raiya blinked in confusion. “What’s this guy talking about?” he said before Kilpha had a chance to reply. “Kilpha never planned to choose him in the first place.”

I quickly shushed him. “You don’t have to say it out loud, you know.”

“Shiro’s right,” Nesca said, nodding sagely. “It might be true, but you shouldn’t say it to his face.”

“Indeed, Mr. Raiya, sir,” Rolf jumped in. “This poor fellow has just had his heart broken, after all.”

This little exchange only seemed to drive Sajiri further over the edge. “Shut up, shut up, *shut up*, you lousy humes! I’m talking to *Kilpha*!” His disheveled hair and wild eyes gave a good indication of the pure rage he was feeling. “Answer me, Kilpha! Are you really going to choose those humes over *me*, one of your own kind?”

“Yes, meow,” Kilpha replied without even a moment’s hesitation. “I’m choosing Shiro and my friends, meow.”

Sajiri’s shoulders shook with fury. “I see... I see. Well, don’t come crying to me when your village gets wiped out by ogres. The ‘Dura Forest Alliance,’ huh? You ‘swear to defeat any creature that threatens the harmony of the forest,’ do you? Hah! You’re all just a bunch of losers. That’s what you are. What even makes you think you can kill those ogres in the first place?”

“What makes *you* think they can’t?” I retorted. “Is it because *you’re* the one controlling the ogres?”

Sajiri’s eyes grew wide with shock. “What? You’re accusing *me* of controlling the ogres? You stupid, lousy—”

“You see, one of my friends carried out a little investigation in the city,” I interrupted. “Turns out a certain cat-sìth bought up a large supply of Collars of Domination.” I glanced at the knight standing beside me. “Isn’t that right, Duane?”

He nodded. “Collars of Domination are banned in most nations, so very few workshops produce them in this region, and even fewer can make them powerful enough to control monsters as large as ogres. It wasn’t difficult tracking down your supplier.”

Since the prime minister and most of the big-shot merchants in Orvil used Collars of Domination to have total control over the beastfolk in their private armies, it didn’t take long for Duane to uncover their channels of distribution. It seemed they had been ordering them all from an alchemy workshop in another nation, then smuggling them illegally into Orvil. But when Duane was investigating the movements of the custom-made collars, he had noticed something strange. About a tenth of the collars went to the prime minister, fifty percent went to Orvil’s big-shot merchants, and forty percent went to someone else altogether.

“Sajiri, I know it was you who bought these collars,” Duane said, thrusting the Collar of Domination he was holding in the cat-sìth’s direction. Thanks to his good looks, he managed to look effortlessly cool as he said it, but in truth, he had only found out about it earlier that morning. As such, Duane and I were the only two people who knew that Sajiri had been controlling the ogres in the forest this entire time.

Sajiri remained silent, but the enraged look on his face confirmed that Duane was right on the money. He had orchestrated all of the ogre attacks on Zudah Village with the intention of arriving at the last minute and saving everyone like a hero.

“No way, meow. Sajiri, *you* were controlling the ogres all along, meow?” Kilpha asked, her voice trembling in disbelief. “*Why*, meow? Why would you *do* such a thing, meow?”

“Mr. Sajiri! Is this hume speaking the truth? Answer me, Mr. Sajiri!” demanded the chieftain of Zudah Village, her tone nakedly accusatory.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on Sajiri as they all awaited his response with bated breath.

Eventually, his shoulders started shaking, and an instant later, he burst out laughing. "That's right! I *have* been controlling the ogres this whole time!" he declared triumphantly. "I made a deal with those lousy merchants in Orvil. They gave me food, medicine, and money in exchange for attacking the other villages."

"What? So you're the one who..." Valeria said, her eyes narrowing to slits. "Say that again!"

And a quick glance around told me it wasn't just her who was seething at this new information. Gugui, Azif, and the other beastfolk of the Dura Forest Alliance, as well as the cat-sìths of Zudah Village were all glaring at Sajiri.

"Sure thing. I'll say it as many times as you want. I have been controlling the ogres this whole time. I'm the one who instructed them to attack the other villages." He punctuated his final sentence with more high-pitched laughter that echoed around the village square.

Judging by the evident confusion on the faces of the cat-sìths of Nahato Village, it seemed they had also been in the dark about Sajiri's involvement in the ogre attacks.

"Those lousy merchants wanted beastfolk as slaves, so they came to me for help," he said, a smug grin curling his lips upward.

To summarize his story, several years ago, a man who had introduced himself as a messenger from the Merchant League had paid a visit to Sajiri and asked him to attack the other beastfolk villages in Dura Forest using the collared ogres. They had provided him with the tools to control them and promised him supplies in exchange for his cooperation. Yup, it was the Merchant League that had supplied the ogres to Sajiri. He jumped at the idea, and together, they snuck the ogres into the forest, whereupon Sajiri started merrily attacking village after village with them. This caused poverty to run rife among the beastfolk, leaving them with no choice but to travel to Orvil to look for work, much to the delight of the Merchant League. This was how Nahato Village became more prosperous than ever, while the rest of the beastfolk in the forest

were abused and exploited.

I hadn't expected Sajiri to actually be in cahoots with Orvil's merchants, and his confession left me momentarily speechless. "Did you seriously attack the other villages just because the merchants dangled money and supplies in front of you?" I eventually asked, my voice trembling.

Sajiri glared at me and sneered. "Of course not. Do you really think I'd let some humes boss me around?" He produced a wand from his pocket and held it high in the air. A faint light began to glow at its tip. "Ogres! Time to hunt!" he called out.

An instant later, roars echoed around the forest as ogres stomped their way toward Nahato Village, toppling any tree that stood in their path. I concluded that the wand in Sajiri's hand must have been the thing that activated the Collars of Domination. The instant the first ogre set foot in the village, the civilian cat-sìths who had come for the wedding scattered in panic, scrambling to hide from the threat bearing down on them.

"Prepare for battle!" Valeria ordered the warriors of the Dura Forest Alliance. "We'll give these ogres the welcome they deserve."

"Right!"

The ogres marched into Nahato one after another and lined up behind Sajiri. There were a *lot* of them—maybe even more than the entire Dura Forest Alliance combined.

"There's so many of them, meow..." Kilpha breathed beside me before nervously gulping down her saliva. Raiya had brought her daggers with him and she now clutched them with an underhand grip as she eyed the ogres up and down apprehensively.

"Behold my army! My ogre army!" Sajiri exclaimed triumphantly. "What do you think, Kilpha? Impressive, isn't it? With all of these ogres, I can wipe the city of Orvil off the map. They don't stand a chance!"

"Destroy Orvil?" I repeated.

"That's right!" Sajiri confirmed with a nod. "I never had any intention of obediently doing what those lousy hume merchants wanted me to do. Those

idiots have no idea that I've been secretly breeding the ogres to increase their numbers, so that I can attack and destroy their precious little city!"

That explained why Sajiri had so many ogres under his control. If his goal had simply been to attack the beastfolk, there would have been no need for such a massive army.

"Then, once there is nothing left of it, I'll create a new kingdom—the kingdom of the cat-sìths—and become *king*! The ogres will lead me to victory!"

So that was Sajiri's plan all along, huh?

"Kilpha, this is your last chance," he said.

"Sajiri..." she mumbled.

"Join me," he demanded, his eyes locking with hers. "Become my wife and you can be the queen of my new kingdom. If you agree, I won't destroy Zudah Village."

Kilpha glanced across at me, then looked back at Sajiri. "Never, meow!" she said, pulling down her eyelid and sticking out her tongue in a quite magnificent imitation of Emille's signature gesture.

Sajiri clicked his tongue. "I see. So be it. If you refuse to be mine..." He held up his wand and flicked it downward in our direction. "...then you can die with the others! Ogres, kill them! Kill them all!"

"Ugaaah!" Compelled by their master's command, the ogres directed their fury at us.

"Well, well. It looks like our little vacation's over. Time to get back to work, Blue Flash," Raiya said, drawing his sword from its scabbard. At his signal, Nesca readied her staff, and Rolf gripped his mace tight. The warriors of the Dura Forest Alliance also quickly got into position, weapons at the ready.

"We're waiting for your signal, man," Raiya said to me.

"Huh? Who, me?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, you're the one who brought us all here, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

“So it’s your job to give the signal. As our *leader*,” Raiya added with a teasing grin.

“The hume’s right, Shiro,” Valeria chimed in. “We’ll move on your signal. You’re the leader of the Dura Forest Alliance, after all.”

I blinked in surprise. “This is the first I’m hearing of it,” I said.

“C’mon, chief. We’re all waiting for you,” Gugui interjected.

“Please, master,” Azif joined in.

Behind them, the other members of the Dura Forest Alliance were nodding away, seemingly all awaiting a signal from me. For some reason, they all saw me as their leader.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “I really don’t think I’m the most qualified for this, but I guess I’ll take the lead and signal the charge.” I cleared my throat and fixed my gaze on Sajiri and the ogres, who were already marching toward us. “Everyone, *charge!*” I yelled, perhaps with a tad more enthusiasm than was strictly necessary. But can you really blame me? *Everyone* and their mother wants to shout that iconic battle cry at least once in their life, right?

The beastfolk warriors roared in unison as they surged forward, ready to engage the ogres.

“Let’s go, Rolf! Nesca, support us from the rear with your magic,” Raiya ordered.

“All right,” the taciturn mage replied.

“And me? What about me, Raiya?” Kilpha asked eagerly.

“You stay back and protect Shiro,” Raiya said. “It’s because of you that he got roped into this situation, so you’d better make sure you keep him safe, you hear?”

“Yessir, meow!”

The Blue Flash crew checked their formation one last time before heading off into battle. The only ones to stay behind were Kilpha, who was protecting me, Dramom and Suama, who had started casting healing spells to support the warriors, and Celes, who was standing near Shess and Aina.

“Luza!” Shess called over her shoulder to her bodyguard.

“What is it, pri—my lady?” Luza said.

Shess pointed at the ongoing battle in front of them. “Go fight the ogres!” she ordered.

“Huh? B-But I have to protect you—” Luza tried to argue, but Shess interrupted her.

“Celes will protect us. And I’m offering a reward to everyone fighting: one gold coin for every ogre they defeat,” the little princess announced.

Luza gasped. “*G-Gold* coins?!”

“Well? Are you going over there or not?” Shess said curtly.

Luza turned to Celes. “M-Miss Celes! Can I really entrust you with my lady’s safety?” she asked.

Celes harrumphed. “I am not fighting any ogres. They would bore me senseless. You can leave Aina and Shessfelia with me.”

“A-All right!” the swordswoman said, nodding vigorously. “In that case, I’m leaving my lady in your care. I really am, all right? Now I’m off to fight the gold coins—I mean, the ogres!”

“Do your best, Miss Luza!” Aina said, cheering her on.

A manic laugh gurgled up and escaped Luza’s throat. “Prepare yourselves, gold coins—I mean, ogres!”

A smile curled Duane’s lips upward. “You are a very interesting woman, Miss Luza. Well then, I too shall join the battle.”

The two of them entered the fray, protecting each other’s backs as they swung their swords at the ogres.

“Hey, lousy hume!” Sajiri said, stomping toward me. “I’m gonna do you the honor of killing you myself.”

“Oh no you don’t,” Valeria interjected, stepping between Sajiri and me. “If you want to harm Shiro, you’ll have to go through me.”

“Bring it, lousy bearwoman! I’ll kill you first!”

“Stop all the blathering and come at me!”

Sajiri was stronger than a gold-ranked adventurer, but Valeria was still wielding Gugui’s mighty battle hammer, Mountain Crusher. They were perfectly matched in terms of skill, and their duel was a back-and-forth struggle where neither seemed able to get the upper hand. Meanwhile, fighting had broken out all over Nahato Village, and everywhere you looked, trees fell, houses came crashing to the ground, and roars echoed around the whole forest. The ogres were certainly strong, but at the end of the day, they were being forced to fight together due to the Collars of Domination they were wearing, and they didn’t stand a chance against the solidarity of a *real* army. More and more ogres bit the dust until Sajiri was eventually the only one left standing.

“It’s just you left now,” Valeria jeered, a smirk dancing across her lips. She was bleeding in various places where Sajiri’s attacks had found their mark. “Well? Still wanna keep fighting?”

Sajiri wasn’t in much better shape. He had felt the full force of a pretty nasty blow from Mountain Crusher and his left arm was at a weird angle.

“Or...” Valeria continued. “Are you ready to give up yet?”

Sajiri hurled his wand down to the ground and groaned. “Damn it all!”

And that was it. The Dura Forest Alliance had won. They had eliminated their first threat. As their leader, I felt an obligation to celebrate the moment, so I thrust my fist skyward and was just in the process of bellowing out a triumphant cry, when all of a sudden, a voice piped up from behind me.

“Oh my. Who would have thought that you would actually *defeat* the ogres?”

I turned around.

“Ah, and I see you are here too, Princess Shessfelicia. It is an honor to see you again.”

Magath Onir, the prime minister of Orvil, was standing there with an entire army standing behind him.

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Prime Minister's Plan

"This forest stinks of beasts. It is most unpleasant," the prime minister sniffed, treating us to a scornful look from up on his black horse. "We really should just burn the whole place down, if you ask me."

His aides and the big-shot merchants who had participated in the tournament were standing in a row behind him, and farther back, an army of over a thousand soldiers were standing to attention.

The prime minister's gaze shifted to Shess once more. "Don't you agree, Princess Shessfelia?"

"Why are you here, prime minister?" Shess said.

He shrugged. "I was informed by my subordinates that the beastfolk of Dura Forest were planning a revolt, so as prime minister, I came to deal with the matter."

"A revolt?" the little princess repeated.

"Indeed, princess. A revolt. That cat-sìth..." He paused and indicated Sajiri with his eyes. "...was planning a revolt, was he not? I heard him yelling something about 'destroying our nation,' and all that."

Judging by his comment and the timing of his arrival, he must have been observing us for quite a while.

"Unlike the Giruam Kingdom, our nation is solely composed of one city. To us, revolts are a terribly *serious* matter, and as such, I—in my capacity as prime minister—have come to nip it in the bud. Although I didn't expect you to have already taken care of it for me, I must admit."

Wicked smiles spread across the lips of the big-shot merchants on either side of him.

The prime minister's gaze once more settled on Sajiri, who was crouching on the ground behind me. "You, cat-sìth. Oh, deary me, what was his name again?"

One of his aides immediately rushed to his side. “It’s Sajiri, Your Excellency,” he supplied.

“Ah, yes, of course it is. I’d forgotten. Beastfolk names are hardly worth remembering, you see.” He focused his attention on Sajiri again. “Sajiri, I am rather disappointed in you. You had a battalion of ogres at your disposal, yet you have somehow contrived to lose to a group of *beastfolk* of all things.”

“And just who the hell are *you*, acting so high and mighty?” Sajiri spat, getting to his feet and glaring back at the prime minister.

“I am Magath Onir, the prime minister of Orvil.” He paused, then added with an amused expression, “I am the one who provided you with the ogres.”

Sajiri’s eyes widened in shock. “*What?!*”

Judging by his reaction, it was clear he had never even heard of the existence of the prime minister before, implying that he must have been pulling the strings from the shadows while the big-shot merchants did all the talking, perhaps even issuing the trusting cat-sith with instructions. My attention shifted to the merchants and I unwisely ended up making eye contact with one of them.

“What a shame it is that we meet again under these circumstances, Mr. Shiro,” he said, a smirk curling the corners of his lips upward.

“You should’ve followed the rules. We *did* warn you, didn’t we?” another cackled.

A third nodded. “You’ve brought this on yourself.”

“You shouldn’t have set all of our beastfolk free.”

Shess’s face was red with anger. “So it really *was* you, Magath. *You* were the one making the beastfolk suffer the whole time.”

“Are you seriously taking offense on behalf of a race as inferior as the beastfolk? It would seem there is some truth to the rumors claiming the first princess of the Giruam Kingdom is friendly with these beasts, after all.” The prime minister shook his head in feigned exasperation. “Yes, that is correct,

Princess Shessfelia. I used Sajiri to force the beastfolk to come to the city to look for work.”

I couldn’t hold back my anger any longer. “Please hold on a minute, Your Excellency,” I said, stepping forward.

“Oh, look who it is,” the prime minister said. “Hello, Amata.”

“You said you were the one who gave Sajiri the ogres, right? That means you are the root cause of all of the suffering the beastfolk have gone through.”

“The ‘root cause’ of their suffering?” the prime minister scoffed, his tone dripping with disdain. “Mind what you say, merchant. I did it for the sake of Orvil.”

“Oh, really? So abusing and exploiting the beastfolk was purely ‘for the sake of Orvil,’ was it?” I asked sardonically.

“Don’t be foolish. That’s not what I meant,” he sneered back at me. “No, my objectives are far more intricate than that.”

I had a bad feeling about where this was going. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you have interacted with His Majesty yourself, so you must have noticed how very young and, quite frankly, how very foolish he is. Despite being the ruler of the most prosperous trading hub this side of the continent, he lacks any of the necessary qualities to be a *true* king.”

Well, I hadn’t expected him to start dissing the king in front of all of us, but here we were.

“That’s why”—he paused and pointed at Sajiri—“I gave those ogres to Sajiri. Of course, I made sure to provide him with both males and females, because I knew an idiot like him would immediately think of breeding them in order to build an army of ogres that he could attack the city with.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. All along, he had been *hoping* that Sajiri would attack Orvil? That was what his wording suggested, at least.

“For a time, everything was going according to plan. The more ogres he bred, the bolder and more impudent Sajiri became. He must have thought it was all his doing. Typical of a foolish beast like him.”

“You rat,” Sajiri seethed, his teeth gritted in anger.

“All I had to do was sit and wait for him to attack the city, storm the royal palace, and kill the king,” the prime minister continued, a sinister glint in his eyes. “Once that was accomplished, I would swoop in with my knights and personal army, defeat Sajiri, and seize the throne for myself!”

“Magath... That’s monstrous...” Shess whispered, her voice trembling in horror at his greed and hatred.

“But *you* had to come along and ruin my plans, Amata! And you will pay for it!” the prime minister said sharply, his bloodshot eyes glaring at me.

But I wasn’t about to let myself be intimidated and returned his glare right back. “I see. So let’s assume for the sake of argument that I *have* gotten in the way of your amazing, oh-so-incredible ‘Great Usurpation Plan,’” I said, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “Why are you telling us all this? Oh, and just so you know, I’ve been recording this entire conversation on my video camera.”

In fact, the moment the prime minister appeared, I’d secretly slipped my smartphone to Aina with the instructions to record everything. In the age of social media, it was just common sense to document conversations when you suspected foul play.

“I don’t mind. It’s not like that recording will ever see the light of day.” A smile flashed across his face. “After all, none of you will take one step outside of this forest ever again. You’re all going to die here!”

“Do you really mean that, Magath?” Shess asked. “Do you seriously plan to kill me, the first princess of the Giruam Kingdom?”

“Yes, I do, Princess Shessfelia. I am very serious when I say that.”

With his Great Usurpation Plan (in my mind, I imagined the title with a little star next to it) off the table, the prime minister nonchalantly revealed his next simply marvelous scheme: the Assassination of Princess Shessfelia.

“You see, your presence here today is actually quite a stroke of luck for me, princess,” he continued, a cruel smile spreading across his face.

“What do you mean?” Shess asked with a frown.

“Picture the scenario: driven by her desire to become friends with the beastfolk of Orvil, the young princess of the Giruam Kingdom sneaks into the Dura Forest without authorization. But in a cruel twist of fate, the beastfolk of the forest loathe humes. I, the heroic prime minister, rush to the forest with my army to save her, but alas, it is too late. The beastfolk have already killed the princess.”

As if stricken by grief, he buried his face in his hands and theatrically shook his head. He was clearly reveling in his own performance.

“Naturally, I order my soldiers to kill the beastfolk responsible, but no amount of retribution will bring the princess back. And how should our nation make amends to the Giruam Kingdom for our negligence?” An amused chuckle escaped his lips. “The princess may have come to this place of her own volition, but she still lost her life in our territory. The young king would have no choice but to take the blame and abdicate to attempt to patch things up. No doubt we would need to pay a substantial sum to the Giruam Kingdom’s royal family as compensation for our lapse, but that would likely cost far less than, say, repairing the city after an ogre attack.”

“It is exactly as His Excellency says,” one of the big-shot merchants chimed in, rubbing his hands together.

The prime minister resumed. “His Majesty is young and has yet to sire an heir. He has no living blood relatives either. Which means if he were to abdicate, the person with the strongest claim to the throne and the most suitable ruler would be—”

“You,” I said, finishing his sentence for him. “Is that what you’re trying to say?”

He clearly didn’t appreciate me stealing his line if the glare he was treating me to was anything to go by. But he quickly pulled himself together. “Amata, don’t you think that is quite a good script for something I have had to come up with at the very last minute?”

I brought my hand to my chin and hummed, pretending to seriously think the question over. “I’m not so sure...” I said. “After all, this plan of yours is based on the assumption that we’ll lose the battle and die as a result, correct? But what

happens if *you* lose? Have you considered that possibility?”

“Lose? *Me?*” the prime minister repeated before bursting out laughing again. “What an amusing joke. Do you truly believe you can win again, just because you’ve managed to defeat a handful of cyclopes?” He snapped his fingers. “How conceited of you!”

As these words left his mouth, a roar reverberated around the forest and the ground trembled. An immense beast raised its head, and it was so massive, it could easily have been mistaken for a mountain.

“Mister Shiro, that’s...” Aina started, then trailed off.

“Yeah. I’m not totally sure what kind it is, but it most definitely is *that*.”

The two of us stared up at the creature. Its fierce eyes glimmered, its fangs and jawline were sharp and menacing, and it was covered in jet-black scales with wings the same color. Yup, there was no mistaking what it was.

“A black dragon,” Nesca stated. “One of the most troublesome kinds.”

“Got it in one. Yes, it’s a black dragon, and a full-grown one at that! Those cyclopes were *nothing* compared to this beauty!” the prime minister informed us before laughing triumphantly. It was quite clear from his demeanor that he fully believed he had already won. And why wouldn’t he think that? After all, in fantasy worlds, dragons were pretty much at the top of the food chain, so his braggadocio was understandable. And you only had to look at the reactions of the beastfolk to see how dragons were viewed in general in this world. They were absolutely terrified.

“Aw, crap. What do we do, Valeria? Should we retreat for now?” Gugui asked.

“Don’t be stupid, Gugui. You’re a warrior of Lugu, aren’t you? You can’t just hightail it out of here when a tough enemy shows up,” Valeria berated him.

“But this is a *dragon* we’re talking about here,” he protested.

“Yeah, I do have eyes. But this is *our* battle. It’s in our territory. We can’t just leave now.”

But while Valeria was ready to stand her ground and fight, the other beastfolk looked like they were debating whether running away was a better course of

action. Not that I could blame them, of course. They might all be strong warriors, but dragons were in a different league altogether. From what I'd heard about them previously, a single adult dragon was powerful enough to wipe out a nation's entire army. That was just how strong they were.

"A black dragon, huh? Looks kinda cool," I remarked.

"Look, Mister Shiro. It has a Collar of Domination around its neck too," Aina pointed out.

"Oh, hey, you're right. That's a pretty big collar, isn't it? I wonder how much that thing cost," I mused.

The prime minister laughed maniacally again. "So what do you think of my black dragon? Are you scared? Lost all hope? Regretting your decisions?"

"Hey, man," Raiya said to get my attention.

"What's up?"

"Black dragon materials go for an absolute fortune, so if we help you out, could you spare us some of the loot?"

"Even if you regret your choices now, it's much too late!" the prime minister said, continuing his spiel. "I've already given the beast the command to kill all of you!"

I gave Raiya's question some thought. "Well, I don't know about that. I'd feel a bit bad killing a dragon in front of Dramom, you know?"

"Any creature that dares to bare its fangs at you should be eliminated, master, dragon or not," Dramom interjected.

"Hey, you heard the lady, man," Raiya said.

"Wow," was all I could say in response.

Celes made an amused noise. "This is perfect. I have never tasted black dragon flesh before. If you make up your mind to kill it, I will lend you a hand."

"You too, Celes?" I said, taken aback by her eagerness.

Needless to say, none of Team Ninoritch felt particularly intimidated by the black dragon. The prime minister was still rambling away in the background, but

we were too busy chatting among ourselves to pay him any attention. After all, why would we be scared of a mere black dragon when we had the Immortal Dragon on our side?

“Do it now, black dragon!” the prime minister commanded. “Kill Princess Shessfelia and all of the beastfolk!”

The beast roared again and stomped toward us, each step making the earth tremble like in all those giant monster movies. Its full length—from the top of its head to the tip of its tail—must have been around thirty meters, while it was easily over ten meters high.

“We’re gonna do this!” Valeria commanded, and the beastfolk readied their weapons.

The black dragon looked down at them and opened its maw.

“Watch out! It’s breathing fire!” Valeria yelled.

Flames began to gather in the beast’s throat.

“Master,” Dramom said.

I nodded. “I’m leaving it to you, Dramom.”

“Understood,” she said. An instant later, she had changed back into her white, fluffy dragon form.

“Come on, black dragon! Burn them all to a—huh? A-A *white* dragon?!” the prime minister exclaimed, gawking at the transformed Dramom. And he wasn’t the only one. All of his followers were staring in shock at her. Even the black dragon itself seemed taken aback, its eyes wide as if it were thinking, “*No way! This can’t be happening!*” It seemed even reptilelike dragons were capable of showing surprise.

“D-Don’t falter, black dragon! You’re the same species, right? There shouldn’t be that big a difference in power between—” The prime minister tried to encourage the black dragon, but Dramom didn’t let him finish.

“You are an eyesore, inferior dragon,” she said, then breathed a laser at the other dragon. The concentrated heat ray hit its abdomen, causing the black dragon to immediately lose consciousness and collapse to the ground. I noted

the laser hadn't pierced its body, clearly because Dramom had held back. She was just nice like that.

Silence descended on the forest. The prime minister, his aides, the big-shot merchants, and all of the soldiers lined up behind were frozen in shock. The beastfolk of the Dura Forest Alliance were also completely still. Even Valeria and Sajiri stood with their mouths agape, unable to utter a single word.

I scratched my head and let out an embarrassed chuckle. "Um, sorry about that. It looks like my dragon's just a little bit too strong. So what's the plan now? Is it time for you to rewrite your script again?"

"I... I..." The prime minister was speechless.

"Oh, plus we still have that recording of you saying you were planning to assassinate the king. Or well, planning to get Sajiri to kill him. Right, Aina?"

"Yup! I recorded everything!" the little girl said, proudly holding up my smartphone.

The prime minister's face contorted in frustration.

"Oh, and also..." I flashed him a radiant smile. "I seem to recall you confessing to being the ringleader behind the suffering of the beastfolk. You surely aren't expecting to be able to skip out of this forest without facing any real consequences, are you?"

"He tried to kill the princess too!" Luza chimed in. "Add that to his list of crimes, Amata!"

"Sure. I plan to make him pay for that too. Okay, ready?" I pointed at the prime minister and the huge army behind him with an outstretched hand and yelled, "Chaaarge!" Yup, that's right. I'd gotten to do a battle cry for the *second* time that day!

The beastfolk warriors surged forward with a roar. It was also their second time fighting that day, though they didn't seem to mind that. At least, not with a dragon on our side now. The prime minister's army didn't even attempt to fight back, instead choosing to flee immediately, and feeling empowered by Dramom's presence, the beastfolk warriors immediately started chasing after them. They looked like they were having the time of their life. But I'd told

Valeria and the others beforehand that I didn't want anyone to be killed. After all, they were all accomplices in the prime minister's assassination attempt of the king, and rather than a quick death, being forced to live the rest of their lives behind bars seemed a much more fitting punishment in my opinion. Well, I didn't really know *exactly* what kind of punishment they would face for their involvement in his scheming, but I was against the idea of the beastfolk sullyng their hands with blood just for the sake of revenge. Their hands were for helping their brethren, not needless violence.

The prime minister's horse reared up in fear as the warriors charged toward it. He cried out as he was thrown from his mount and sent sprawling to the ground. None of his aides made any move to help him. The root cause of all of Orvil's problems was lying on the ground just a few meters away from me. This was my chance.

"Prime Minister Magath!" I roared as I ran toward him.

He let out another cry of terror as he scrambled to his feet, turned around, and tried to run away. But it was too late.

"Face the wrath of the beastfolk and of Princess Shessfelia!"

Another strangled cry escaped his throat.

"And of Aina, of Kilpha, of me, and everyone else you've wronged!"

I kicked off from the ground and leaped toward the prone prime minister. My body soared through the air, and as it did so, I made a mental note of just how surprised I was at the height I'd managed to get on my jump. I supposed one of the perks of being a human beanpole was that I could naturally jump higher than anyone else. I maneuvered my body in midair until I was completely parallel to the ground, then extended both legs forward and aimed directly at the prime minister's face.

"Dropkick!" I yelled as I delivered a full-force kick to the prime minister's face, sending him rolling across the ground once more. His body eventually crashed into a nearby tree and he stopped moving, seemingly having lost consciousness.



Looking around, I saw that the beastfolk warriors had successfully captured the prime minister's soldiers, and judging by the fact they were hitting them with their fists instead of their weapons, it looked like they had taken my instructions not to kill them to heart.

I balled up a fist and raised it high above my head. "We won!" I yelled victoriously.

"Yeaaah!"

The beastfolk's triumphant cry reverberated all around the forest.

Final Chapter: For the Future

Having captured the prime minister and his cronies, we promptly headed back to Orvil and made our way to the royal palace to tell the king about what had happened. Like on our previous visit, our group consisted of Shess, Aina—once again playing the role of Shess’s maid—Luza, Duane, and myself, acting as Shess’s royal purveyor. Since the little princess was with us, the guards let us pass without asking any questions, and we were quickly ushered into the parlor. Orvil IV arrived mere minutes later, and I couldn’t help noticing that his glances in Shess’s direction were even more passionate than before. But when I told him about the prime minister’s “Great Usurpation Plan” and presented him with the video evidence we had recorded, his face instantly dropped.

“I-I cannot believe it. Magath wanted to *kill* me?” he whispered, the shock causing him to stagger. His guards rushed forward to catch him, then guided him to one of the sofas.

I hated the idea of twisting the knife when he was already reeling, but I had no choice: I *had* to inform him of the other atrocities the prime minister had committed—namely, the abuse he and the other merchants had subjected the beastfolk to, and his attempt to kill Shess. It was all too much for the boy king to take, and he reacted to what he was hearing with a strangled cry before losing consciousness. Hard to blame him for that reaction. After all, he had just learned that his closest advisor had been plotting his murder, before finding out that the beastfolk—whom he had believed were living happily in the forest—were being mistreated right under his nose. And if that wasn’t enough, as a final, crushing blow, he had been informed the girl he had a crush on (and who just happened to be the princess of another nation) had narrowly escaped an assassination attempt that had been orchestrated by that same advisor. The boy was only ten, so the weight of these revelations must have been too heavy for his young heart to bear. He had trusted Magath with the well-being of his people ever since ascending to the throne, and years later, he was discovering that he had been deceived from the very start. I wouldn’t be too surprised if the

boy grew up to be a misanthrope after everything that had happened. Someone fetched the court physician, who examined the young king and managed to rouse him.

“Princess Shessfelicia, how can I ever apologize for the disrespect Magath has shown you?” he said as soon as he had regained consciousness.

“*What?!*” Shess exclaimed, the “perfect princess” mask disappearing entirely. Before anyone else could react, she marched up to the boy king and slapped him across the face with such force, the sound reverberated around the room.

As soon as she realized what the little princess had just done, Luza’s eyes rolled up into her head and she passed out where she stood, so horrified was she that she hadn’t been able to stop Shess from carrying out her violent act in time. Mr. Handsome—or Duane, as he was better known—caught her before she hit the floor. “Miss Luza? Miss Luza!” he called out, trying to wake her.

I didn’t have time to wonder if Luza was all right, because my own mind was still reeling from what Shess had just done. I mean, she’d just slapped the *king* of a friendly nation, for pity’s sake! Worst-case scenario, it could lead to a war between Orvil and the Giruam Kingdom!

“P-Princess Shessfelicia?” Orvil IV mumbled in shock, cupping the cheek Shess had struck.

But Shess wasn’t finished with him yet. “It’s not *me* you should be apologizing to! It’s the beastfolk!” she snapped.

Orvil IV blinked repeatedly at her in confusion. “Huh? But—” he started arguing, but Shess cut him off.

“You’re the *king*, aren’t you?!”

Orvil IV was too stunned to reply.

“It’s because you’re too *passive* that Magath tried to kill you! It’s *your* fault the beastfolk have suffered so much!” she continued, using this as a good opportunity to get all of her pent-up frustrations off her chest. “You’re the king, right? Are you the King of Orvil, yes or no?”

“Y-Yes. I am the King of Orvil.”

“Then, act like it! You don’t have time to mope around, nor the right to do so. You have to start rebuilding your nation right now!”

“M-Me? R-Rebuild the nation?” Orvil IV stammered in disbelief.

“Your father’s goal was to build a nation where beastfolk and humes could live together in harmony. Don’t you want to fulfill his wish?” Shess said.

“I-I do. I want to turn this nation into the one my father envisioned.”

“Then, get your act together and do what you must as king,” Shess said pointedly. “Do everything you can for your people, even if it kills you!”

A glint of determination appeared in the boy king’s eyes. It seemed the slap and Shess’s impassioned lecture had stirred something within him. “You’re right, Princess Shessfelia. I am Orvil IV, king of this nation!” He turned to his entourage. “Gather the ministers and the nobles and bring them all to the palace. We shall rebuild this nation that Magath has stained with his treachery!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” The king’s aides bowed to him before scrambling out of the parlor to carry out their orders.

“Thank you for reminding me of what my duties really are, Princess Shessfelia,” Orvil IV said to Shess.

“Hmph. Well, you’d better do your job properly now, or I’m not coming to have tea with you ever again,” the little princess said sullenly.

“That won’t do. Princess Shessfelia, please watch closely from now on. I promise I will become the king that Orvil deserves. And when I do...” His voice dropped to a whisper and I couldn’t make out the end of his sentence, but I noticed the passion in his eyes as he gazed at Shess had intensified tenfold.

I had a feeling that, in time, Orvil would become a great nation.



Once we had handed the prime minister and his goons over to Orvil IV to deal with, I returned once more to Zudah Village. Why there, you might ask? The answer to that question was simple: I had to see Sajiri. There was something I really needed to ask him. Kilpha and her cousin, Azif, had kindly offered to

accompany me, and Kilpha's grandmother—the village's chieftain—led the three of us to an underground room.

"We're keeping him locked up down here until we figure out what to do with him," she explained.

The room we were approaching was an underground granary that was typically used for storing grain but had been repurposed into a makeshift cell for Sajiri.

The chieftain paused at the door and turned to me. "Are you *sure* you want to see him, Shiro?" she asked. "We haven't put him in restraints or anything like that. He can easily kill you if he has a mind to."

I shook my head. "I have a feeling Sajiri won't be getting violent with anyone ever again."

After we'd defeated the prime minister and his cronies, I spotted Sajiri slumped to the ground on his knees with tears streaming down his face. "Damn it. Damn it all..." he was muttering over and over again, likely due to his frustration at the prime minister manipulating him for all that time. He hadn't even tried to fight back when the beastfolk warriors moved in to arrest him, and he had ended up obediently following them to the underground granary. Something had clearly broken inside his mind.

"I have no intention of atoning for what I did. Do whatever the hell you want with me. You can even kill me for all I care. I won't fight back," he had said to the beastfolk warriors, his voice laced with resignation, as if he had already accepted his fate.

"I'm thinking of going in to see him alone," I added.

"Meow? You *can't*, Shiro, meow! It's too dangerous, meow!" Kilpha protested immediately.

"P-Please don't, master," Azif pleaded.

"I'll be fine, I promise. Just trust me, yeah?" I said.

Kilpha sighed. "Fine, meow."

"Call us if he tries anything," Azif insisted.

I flashed them both a smile before stepping inside the granary. It was pitch-black, so I produced the LED lantern I'd brought with me and switched it on.

"What are *you* doing here, lousy hume?" Sajiri spat, clicking his tongue in annoyance and glaring at me. He was sitting on the floor with his back against a crate. My attention was immediately drawn to his arm, which didn't look broken anymore, unlike the last time I'd seen it. Perhaps someone had given him a potion or something to fix it up. "Seriously though, what do you want?" he said testily. "Did you come to gloat about your victory and mock me for letting that lousy prime minister use me like a puppet?"

"Nope. It's nothing major. I was just... Hold on a second." I paused and sat on the floor opposite him, setting my lantern down in front of me. "There, much better. I was just curious why you were so hell-bent on creating a nation for the cat-sìths."

He didn't respond, opting instead to once again click his tongue at me.

"You won't tell me?" I said.

"Why should I?" he scoffed, turning his face away.

But I wasn't the type to give up so easily. "You started a battle in the forest, and I ended it. Don't you think I've won the right to know your motivations?"

He clicked his tongue at me for a third time in the space of just a few minutes. "You humes are annoyingly good with words," he said before our gazes met again. "Fine, I'll tell you everything. I was bored out of my mind down here, anyway."

And with those few short words, he had finally agreed to tell me why he had wanted to become king so badly.

"Have you ever found yourself desperate to find food, lousy hume?" he started.

I shook my head. "No, never. I was blessed to be born in a nation where a minimum standard of living is guaranteed for all of its citizens."

"Must be nice." Sajiri scoffed. "Then you won't understand." A sad smile appeared on his lips before he continued. "You'll never know the horror of

witnessing a newborn baby being abandoned because her parents have just realized she's a girl, or the pain of having to watch as your own parents kill a weaker sibling of yours because it's one less mouth to feed and they hope to survive the winter by doing so."

A quiet gasp escaped my lips.

"How do you think my people felt when they were selling their daughters into slavery just so they could afford food? Or how they felt watching family members die because there wasn't enough money to buy medicine?" Sajiri added.

"I..."

"“Please give us food!’ ‘Please give us medicine!’ ‘Please have mercy on us!’ It was pathetic. We cat-siths have had to live our lives with our heads permanently bowed, begging humes for their scraps, because of how weak we were. That's why we kept losing loved ones. Family... Brethren... Hell, even our own lives were going to waste. That's why..."

Sajiri paused and clenched his fists, droplets of blood seeping from where his nails were digging into his palms.

"That's why I wanted to create a nation for cat-siths. Where the tables are turned and *we're* in control for once. We'd be the ones stealing from others, not the other way around. And none of us would be dying stupid deaths anymore!"

In the end, Sajiri had tried to seize Orvil's throne for the sake of his brethren. He had sacrificed himself and chosen to walk the path of evil in order to save his people. To protect them.

"So that's why you wanted to become king, huh?" I summarized softly. "You wanted the strength to be able to protect your people."

"I don't feel bad for what I did. My only regret is not killing you the first time we met." He punctuated his sentence by shooting me a glare.

"And do you still want to kill me?" I asked him.

Sajiri let out a dry laugh. "What good would killing you do now? My hands

already have enough blood on them as it is,” he said, gazing down at his hands. Small rivulets of blood were still trickling from where his nails had dug into his palms.

I was pretty sure that all his claims about not feeling bad for what he did were a lie. Countless beastfolk had lost their lives at the hands of the ogres who were under his control, and just like himself, they had been folk from the Dura Forest who had suffered the same hardships that he had, so I didn’t believe for one minute that he felt nothing for his victims. But it was sounding like he’d convinced himself that he’d had no choice, and that it had been the *only* way to save his village. Those rotten merchants would never have let him back out of the deal, so once he had taken them up on their offer, it was too late to go back. But for the sake of argument, let us assume for one second that he *had* refused to go along with the merchants’ scheme. They would have found another patsy to do their dirty work, and Nahato Village would have found itself on the receiving end of the ogre attacks. People were known for doing anything for their loved ones, even if that meant following the darkest of paths. Sajiri must have understood that too, which was why he’d never turned back.

I felt like I finally understood—at least, in part—why he had chosen to chase power so fervently. And perhaps also, why he had continued to pursue Kilpha. She was kind and warm like the sun, a beacon of light amid the darkness he had fallen into. That was why he had been so intent on keeping her by his side, even when he knew she was pregnant with my child (she wasn’t *really*, of course, but Sajiri had thought she was, and as far as I knew, still did).

“Anyway, we’re done here,” Sajiri said. “Get out, lousy hume.”

I nodded. “Okay, I’m leaving. Oh, but before I do...” I stood up and turned my back on him. “I’m just gonna talk to myself for a bit, if that’s all right with you.”

“What?” Sajiri sputtered.

“Well, I was just thinking that if you felt even the teensy-tiniest bit of guilt for what you’ve done, you should probably try to help people from now on.”

Even without looking at him, I could sense Sajiri’s confusion.

“You’re strong, Sajiri. Way stronger than me,” I continued. “You should use that strength to help others.”

“What are you—” he started to ask, but I carried on with my spiel as if I couldn’t hear him.

“So to atone for your sins, you should—no, you *must* save at least as many people as you currently have regrets over. Think of all the lives that were lost because of you, and endeavor to help countless more to make up for it. Then perhaps, one day, the person you hold so dear in your heart will forgive you.”

He didn’t reply.

“Well, give it some thought, at least,” I said, shrugging and heading for the door.

But just as I was reaching out for the handle, Sajiri’s voice stopped me in my tracks. “Hold it, lousy hume.”

I turned around and he stared me straight in the eye, a deadly serious look on his face. “You’d better take good care of Kilpha. If you don’t, I’ll come and kill you.”

I chuckled. “I’ll bear it in mind.”

“And...” He hesitated momentarily. “When your brat is born, make sure it never, ever goes hungry. You give it plenty to eat, you hear?”

“O-Of course,” I stammered, quickly averting my eyes. There was no way I could break it to him that the whole “Kilpha’s pregnant with my child” thing was a lie.

“Well then. See ya around, lousy hume.”

“I hope we cross paths again, Sajiri,” I said.

This earned me one final tongue click. “Get the hell out, lousy Shiro.”

That was the first time he had actually called me by my name. I walked out of the cell and found Kilpha and Azif outside waiting for me. The next day, we learned that Sajiri had slipped away from his cell during the night.



Ten days had passed since Sajiri’s disappearance, and in that time, things had been totally hectic in Orvil. The prime minister and his supporters—which

included all of the members of the Merchant League—were put behind bars in the dungeon, while the black dragon he had called upon in that final decisive battle was freed from its Collar of Domination and commanded by Dramom to make its home in the Dura Forest. Being a lower-ranked dragon, it had no choice but to do what it was told, and from what I'd heard, it had been spotted flying around the region night after night in search of forest wolves, which it subsequently released into the Dura Forest itself. It would take a few years, but with the black dragon's help, the forest's ecosystem might eventually recover.

Thanks to a helping hand from Shess, Orvil IV had managed to get several internal affairs officers from the Giruam Kingdom to join his administration, and he seemed determined to rebuild his kingdom, just like he had promised Shess he would. He vowed to no longer leave everything up to his advisors, and to personally tour the city on a regular basis in order to assess the conditions firsthand. Not only that but he also implemented a conciliatory policy toward the beastfolk to ensure they wouldn't be discriminated against anymore, and I had to admit, I hadn't spotted a single hume abusing any beastfolk in the streets since. Of course, the gap that existed between the two races hadn't been completely bridged, and there were still plenty of problems that needed addressing, but I hoped things would get better with time.

As for my shop in the city-state, it was doing incredibly well. With the Merchant League out of the picture, I barely had any competition, and my shop was heaving with customers all hours of the day. I had nowhere near enough employees to keep up with the endless stream of customers, so I sent a request for backup to the Eternal Promise, the merchant guild I belonged to. The guildmaster, Zidan, sent a few merchants over to assist me, and I was impressed by how efficient they were, which reassured me that the shop would be in good hands even after I'd left town. I'd given all of my employees a bonus the day before to celebrate the success of our shop—which they were understandably overjoyed about—but I wasn't done yet. My next plan was to buy up all the shops that belonged to the Merchant League, and slowly but surely, expand my business empire in Orvil.

Last but not least, something pretty huge happened. As a reward for thwarting the prime minister's scheme, Orvil IV offered to grant me the title of

baronet. Yup, I was about to stroll into the palace as a commoner and stride out as a noble. My natural instinct had been to decline it, but when I learned that my domain would be Dura Forest, I found myself in two minds over what to do, so I decided to ask my beastfolk friends for their opinions.

“It’d definitely bring us peace of mind if you were our lord,” Valeria said. “You *have* to accept the king’s offer. For us.”

“With you ruling over this land, we could finally rest easy,” Kilpha’s grandmother said.

Gugui and Azif seemed to be in agreement.

“You’re gonna become our lord, chief?” the bearman asked. “Well, that’s more than fine by me!”

“You would officially be our master,” the cat-sith pointed out. “I like the idea.”

Everyone was overwhelmingly in favor of going through with it, but I still felt uneasy about the whole thing. I really didn’t like the idea of being in a position where I held power over others. But something Kilpha said made me reconsider.

“You have to accept, Shiro,” she pleaded. “You’ll be in a position to make sure the beastfolk are safe, meow!”

These words struck a chord with me, and to honor the efforts of Valeria and the others in saving the beastfolk, I accepted the title. Things were moving in the right direction, and I was hopeful for the future. But first, there was somewhere I needed to be.

“Look, Shiro! This is it, meow! The Spring of the Dancing Lights, meow!”

That evening, just as she had promised me when we had first arrived in Orvil, Kilpha took me to her favorite spring in the forest. We sat together on the ground and admired the starlight that reflected off the surface of the water.

“Ah, I just saw something, meow! There, Shiro! Look, it’s a glowbug, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed, pointing excitedly at a single glowbug that had decided to make an appearance. Before long, it was joined by its companions, and together, they shone their light all around the spring.

“Wow, it’s amazing! It’s so beautiful!” I marveled as I watched the countless glowing creatures dancing in the air.

What a whimsical sight this is, I mused. The glowbug’s soft light was in stark contrast to the darkness of the forest around us.

“It’s so pretty, meow,” Kilpha commented.

I nodded. “It really is.”

The two of us were completely mesmerized by the fleeting yet enchanting spectacle.

“Thank you for bringing me here, Kilpha.”

“There’s no need to thank me, meow. I promised you I’d show you the spring, didn’t I, meow?”

“Well, that’s true, but even so...” I gestured to the spring. “It’s so beautiful, I still feel like I should thank you.”

“Is that so, meow?” she said.

“Yes, it is, meow,” I replied, mimicking her verbal tic with a little smile.

“Hey, don’t tease me, meow!” she pouted before slapping my shoulder repeatedly.

I couldn’t help an amused chuckle from escaping my lips. “Sorry, sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“Nope, meow! I’m not forgiving you, meow!” Kilpha informed me, her assault on my shoulder continuing unabated.

“What do I have to do to get you to forgive me?”

She let out a mischievous laugh. “Well, let’s see, meow...” She brought her finger up to her chin and pretended to ponder the question. “I know! I want you to use pet names with me every now and then, meow!” she said, flashing me a bright smile.



Epilogue

“We’re back!”

“Hey, everyone, meow!”

At long last, we were all back in Ninoritch. Well, *almost* all of us. On the way back, we had taken a quick detour, dropping Nesca and Raiya back at Nesca’s parents’ place so they could pick up where they’d left off, and depositing Rolf in his hometown. Kilpha was *very* glad that she would be spared Nesca’s lecture (slated to last three whole days and nights) for a little while longer.

“I’m not getting yelled at today, meow!” she had exclaimed happily as soon as Nesca was out of earshot.

Our first stop on our arrival back in Ninoritch had been to the town hall in order to inform Karen of our return. It was already pretty late, so we ended up leaving Aina with her before walking Shess back to her mansion, where we bid good night to her as well as Luza and Duane. Suama was also pretty sleepy by this point, so the little dragon child headed home with her mother too. This meant our group was greatly reduced to just Kilpha, Celes, and me, and we were all feeling pretty famished after the long trip back, so we made our way over to the Adventurers’ Guild to grab some dinner.

“Shiro! You’re home!” Patty exclaimed as soon as she saw us.

This comment caught the attention of Eldos and Baledos.

“So yer finally back, huh?”

“About time ye showed up, kid. Ye sure took yer sweet time!”

As always, the dwarf brothers were enjoying alcohol at the drinking hall.

Even Ney, the guildmaster, greeted us. “We have been eagerly awaiting your return, Shiro.”

And, of course...

“*Mister!* I’ve been waiting for you *forever!*” cried out Emille, the bunny girl

receptionist. She jumped over the counter and made a beeline toward me. “Come with me, mister! Let’s celebrate our long-awaited reunion in a dark room somewhere, just the two of us!” she said, staring at me with big, wide, glinting eyes.

“Hold on a—whoa!” I narrowly managed to dodge her attempt to hug me.

“Stop that, Emi,” Kilpha said, whacking the bunny girl on the back of the head.

“Ow. What did you do that for, Kilpha?”

“You’re scaring Shiro, meow. Isn’t she, Shiro?” Kilpha asked.

I nodded. “She was just about to drag me off to a dark room with her. You saved my life. Thank you, *Kilphums*,” I said, calling Kilpha by a pet name like we’d agreed to add a touch of dramatic flair.

Emille’s eyes grew wide. “Huh? ‘Kilphums’? ‘*Kilphums*’?! What? Huh? M-Mister... Did you just call her ‘Kilphums’?!”

I chuckled evasively. “Oh, you know. Things kinda happened in Kilpha’s village.”

“‘Th-Things’? What do you mean by ‘things’? Not *naughty* things, right?!” Emille exclaimed.

This time, it was Kilpha’s turn to let out a chuckle. “It’s like Shiro said. *Things* happened, meow. Besides, Shiro and I are friends, and friends give each other nicknames all the time, meow.”

“No *way*!” Emille exclaimed, burying her face in her hands. Apparently, me calling Kilpha ‘Kilphums’ had come as quite a blow to her. “Damn it *all*! I *knew* I should’ve come with *you*!” she wailed, her plaintive voice echoing all around the guildhall.

Yup, we’re definitely back in Ninoritch, I thought.



My return prompted a little drinking party at the guild. I hadn’t actually ordered anything yet, but countless alcoholic drinks were already being delivered to the table I was sitting at with Kilpha and Emille (who, like always, had invited herself to join us without even asking). One after another, the

adventurers in the drinking hall came up to me to clink their tankards against mine in celebration of my return, and I found myself downing drink after drink. *Yup, I'm definitely in for a nasty hangover tomorrow.*

Unbothered by the hubbub around her, Celes strode over to the table where Eldos and Baledos were sitting and set a large metal band down in front of them. "Take a look at this, dwarves," she said.

I immediately recognized it as one of the Collars of Domination the prime minister had used on the cyclopes.

"Huh? What's this weird ring-looking thingummy ye got there?" Eldos asked.

Next to him, Baledos hummed pensively. "I can feel mana waftin' off it."

"It is a Collar of Domination. It is a device that is used to control any creature it is placed upon," Celes explained.

"What did ye just say? That's a *forbidden* item! Why in the world would ye be showin' us somethin' so outrageous?" Baledos exclaimed, quivering from head to toe. Having once worked as a craftsman specializing in ornaments and trinkets, he seemed to have some level of knowledge about these Collars of Domination.

"I have questions for you about it," Celes continued, unfazed by the look of horror on Baledos's face. "You are a blacksmith, yes? Someone used that Collar of Domination on a cyclops. They even had one powerful enough to control a black dragon."

"*What?!*" he yelled, his eyes almost bulging out of their sockets. His gaze dropped to the Collar of Domination on the table and he inspected it closely. "A cyclops and a *dragon*, ye say? Cyclopes are gold-rank monsters, but a black dragon's at *least* platinum! And yer tellin' me these collars were controllin' 'em? Blasted nonsense!"

The adventurers around us must have grown curious about the ongoing conversation as a crowd had started to form around Celes and the dwarf brothers.

"That is what I have been told," Celes continued. "I asked Nesca about it. She said the amount of mana poured into a Collar of Domination on its creation

determines the type of creature it can subjugate.”

Baledos nodded. “Aye, that’s right. Now I’d believe ye if it were regular monsters ye were namin’, but a *cyclops* and a *black dragon*? I don’t know of a single hume or dwarf who’d have enough mana or be able to forge a collar sturdy enough not to snap under the strain.”

If I was remembering correctly, Duane had said the collars ordered by the prime minister hadn’t been regular Collars of Domination, but specially made to order.

“Baledos?” I said to grab his attention.

He turned to me. “What is it, kid?”

“If theoretically, no hume or dwarf could have made collars like this one powerful enough to tame a black dragon, then who do you suppose made them?”

Baledos hesitated a little before replying. “Well, ain’t that obvious? Demons, that’s who.”

I didn’t miss the way Celes twitched when he said this.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the ninth volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back to My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiiro Shimotsuki.

This was my first time writing a two-part story, and I find myself incredibly relieved to have finally released the second part successfully. I'm very sorry for how long it took for me to release this volume, but I hope you found all the waiting worthwhile.

Now, onto the usual acknowledgments:

To the illustrator, Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you as always for your beautiful illustrations! The artwork where Valeria, Celes, and Dramom step into the tournament arena is so cool!

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this series, thank you for your work. I always look forward to the new chapters you put out every month!

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, I'm so very sorry for making so many last-minute changes, and I thank you for your understanding throughout.

To my family, my friends, my dogs, and my fellow authors, thank you for everything, always.

And as always, the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point!

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book. This time, I have chosen a reconstruction fund to support the recovery efforts of the 2024 Noto Peninsula earthquake. So by purchasing this book, you are helping to contribute to those in need.

See you all in volume 10!

Hiiro Shimotsuki



**“I think
I get the
picture.
So that’s
why
you’ve
come
to me.”**

**“You
are our
savior,**

**I’d returned
to Lugu
Village, the
bearfolk’s
village in
the Dura
Forest.**



"I'm leaving
it to you,
Dramom."

"Understood."

"You are
an eyesore,
inferior
dragon."

"Black
dragon
materials
go for an
absolute
fortune!"

A night scene with a boy and a cat looking at a starry sky. The sky is dark blue with a bright, pinkish-purple nebula or galaxy streaking across it. The boy is sitting on a grassy hill, looking up at the sky. A cat is sitting next to him, also looking up. The scene is framed by dark evergreen trees on the left and right. There are several large, semi-transparent green circles of varying sizes scattered across the image, some overlapping the trees and the sky. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

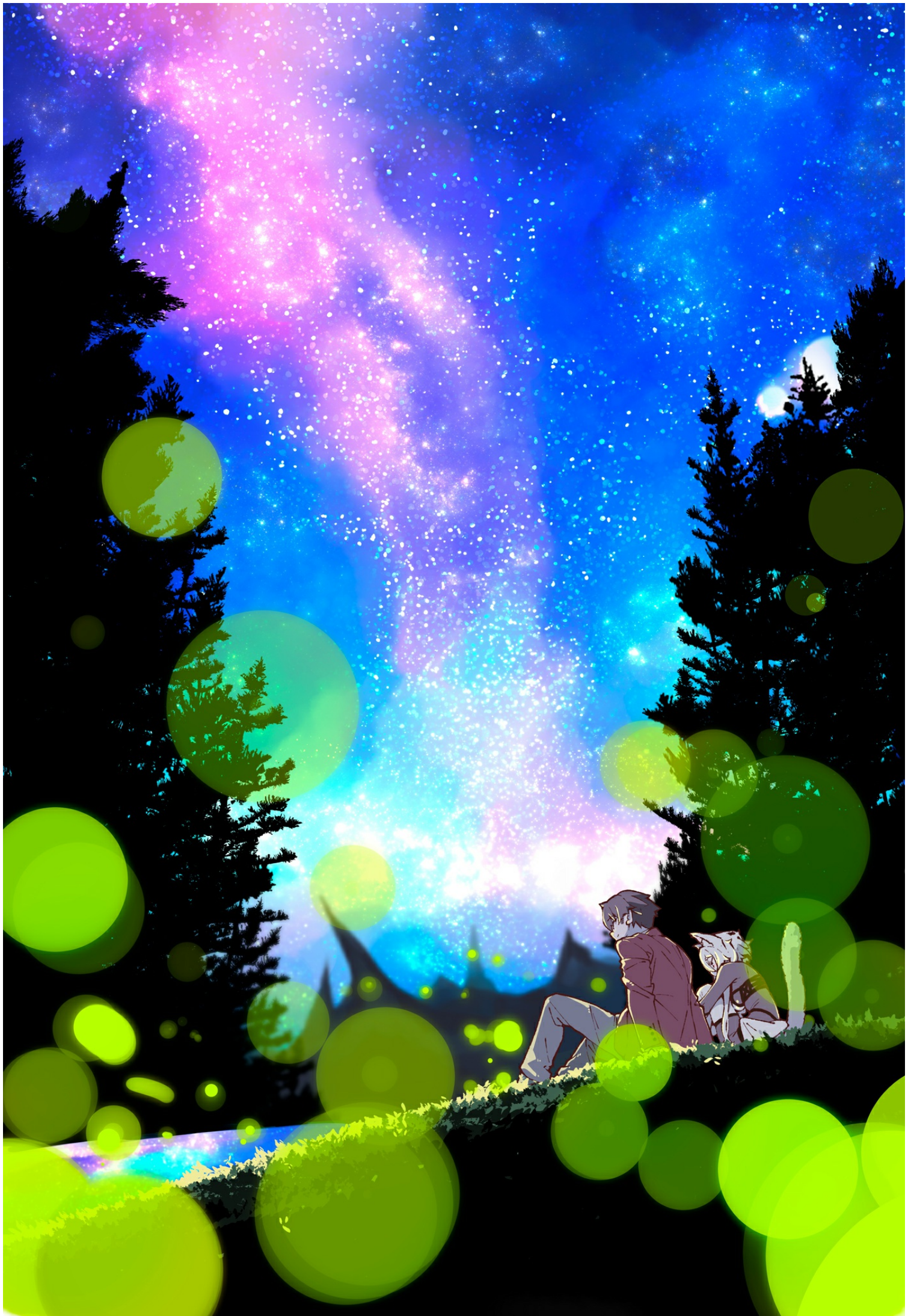
“Thank you
for bringing me
here, Kilpha.”

“There’s no
need to thank
me, meow.
I promised you
I’d show you
the spring,
didn’t I,
meow?”











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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 9

by Hiiro Shimotsuki

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon Edited by SMR

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