

FLUFFY PARADISE 5

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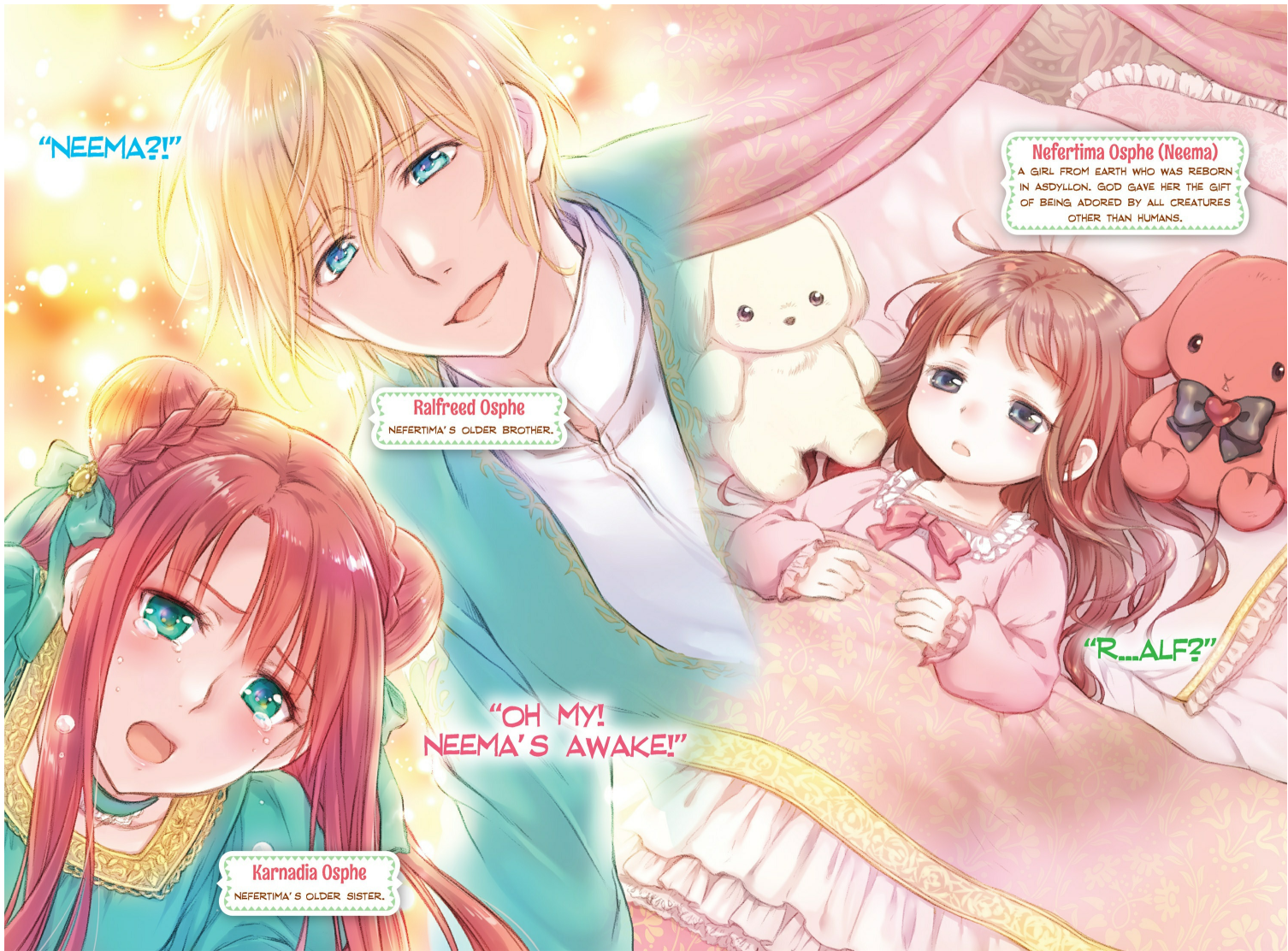
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"NEEMA?!"

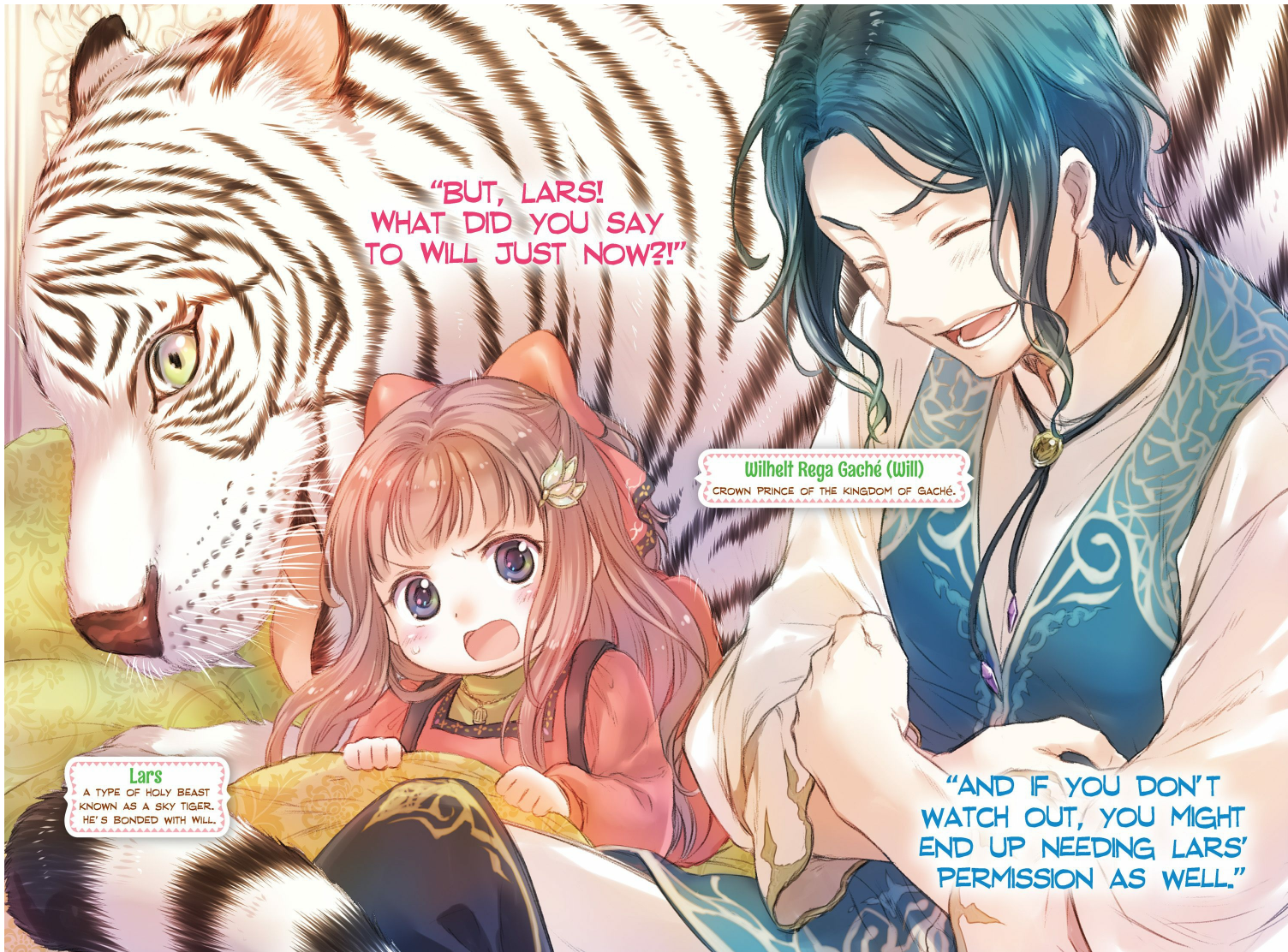
Ralfreed Osphe
NEFERTIMA'S OLDER BROTHER.

Nefertima Osphe (Neema)
A GIRL FROM EARTH WHO WAS REBORN
IN ASDYLLON. GOD GAVE HER THE GIFT
OF BEING ADORED BY ALL CREATURES
OTHER THAN HUMANS.

"R...ALF?"

"OH MY!
NEEMA'S AWAKE!"

Karnadia Osphe
NEFERTIMA'S OLDER SISTER.



“BUT, LARS!
WHAT DID YOU SAY
TO WILL JUST NOW?!”

Wilhelm Rega Gaché (Will)

CROWN PRINCE OF THE KINGDOM OF GACHÉ.

Lars

A TYPE OF HOLY BEAST
KNOWN AS A SKY TIGER.
HE'S BONDED WITH WILL.

“AND IF YOU DON'T
WATCH OUT, YOU MIGHT
END UP NEEDING LARS'
PERMISSION AS WELL.”



"THEY'RE ON COURSE TO
PLOW STRAIGHT INTO ME...
THEY ARE GOING TO
STOP, RIGHT? NO,
THEY'RE NOT!"

"WOOF, WOOF!"



Belgar Crius

LEADER OF THE
ORPHANED CHILDREN
IN THE SLUMS OF LENICE.

**"WHAT?! IT'S
NOTHING
LIKE THAT!
WE'RE JUST
FRIENDS!"**

**"BUT SHE'S MUCH
TOO FINE A FLOWER
FOR THE LIKES OF
YOU, BELGAR!"**

1 - I Overslept a Little...

“**NEEMA**, today, all the sheevi started blooming at once.”

“Let’s go see them together, okay? It’s almost summer, after all. What should we do while we’re there?”

I heard... the sound of cheerful voices.

They chatted back and forth, suggesting getting away from the heat at the vacation house or taking a trip to the beach since they knew how much I loved the ocean.

Hey, hey! Let me contribute to the conversation, too, please!

“R...alf?”

I opened my eyes, and a handsome, blonde-haired young man stood before me.

That is Ralf, right?

“Neema?!”

“Oh, my! Neema’s awake!”

There was a flash of vibrant red.

Before I could even identify her, she pulled me into a crushing hug.

This must be Karna.

“Karna, I... can’t... breathe...” I gasped.

“Oops, sorry! I was just so happy...”

When Karna finally released me, she was crying.

She must’ve been terribly worried about me.

“Father and Mother will be here any moment.”

While Ralf stroked my head, I worried whether Mama and Papa would be

angry when they arrived.

“Ralf, Dee went to be with the Goddess...”

“Yeah, Dee protected you with his life, Neema. As his brother and friend, I’m very, very proud of him.” Ralf must’ve also been sad, but you wouldn’t have known it from how he spoke. “In the end, Dee received the Goddess’s approval for his noble sacrifice. I’m sure he’s with her now.”

Yeah, that’s what the Goddess—Lady Creo—said. She said if he stays close to her, he’ll heal quickly.

“The Goddess said that she’d keep him close to her so that he can be reborn quickly,” I said.

“In that case, I’m sure we’ll meet him again soon enough! He’s our precious family member, after all,” Karna agreed.

Lady Creo had said it depended on us, but I’d taken that to mean that if our bond were strong enough, we’d meet again.

“In that case, we’d better prepare all of Dee’s favorite treats,” Ralf suggested.

Both Ralf and Karna seemed to believe we’d see Dee again someday. So I would believe it, too.

“Neema!”

Papa burst into the room without so much as knocking.

“Do you hurt anywhere, my little lovebug?!” Papa demanded, rushing to my bedside and peering down at me.

“Nope!”

I still didn’t feel fully awake, but I also didn’t feel sick and wasn’t in any pain.

“Thank goodness... I was so worried when you didn’t wake for two entire cycles...”

He wasn’t angry, far from it. It appeared he’d just been incredibly worried.

Wait... Two cycles?!

“T-Two... *Two cycles?!!*” I cried.

“That’s right. Two cycles have passed since you were kidnapped.” Papa looked almost pained as he said it, but I hardly paid any mind to that.

Two cycles is equivalent to two years, isn’t it?! I was sleeping for two entire years?!

...Which means I’m seven years old now?! No wonder I thought Ralf looked like a handsome young man. As for Karna... She’s as beautiful as ever.

“...What about Project Shiana?” I asked.

“We’ll discuss that later. For now, let me have a look at you and confirm that you’re in good health,” a familiar voice interrupted.

“Mother!”

Mama, too, had tears in her eyes.

I clung to Mama, and Papa patted the top of my head.

Even though I hadn’t gone anywhere, the feeling of having “come home” struck me.

I was meant to be here.

“The Goddess protected you this entire time,” Mama said.

It seemed I had the Goddess to thank for suffering no ill effects despite sleeping for two years. I resolved to say a prayer of thanks later.

“I’m sorry for making you all worry,” I said.

“It’s fine. All that matters is that you’re okay,” Papa responded.

“I’m sure you must be upset about Dee, though...” Mama added, looking a bit worried.

Mama and Papa both seemed concerned that I was probably very broken up about losing Dee.

“Dee was with the Goddess,” I said. “Before I left, I told him, ‘See you later!’ It was a promise!”

I firmly believed that Ralf, Karna, and I would get to meet Dee again someday.

Papa and Mama smiled happily at this.

I didn't know what form our reunion would take, but Papa half-jokingly suggested that Dee might be reborn as Ralf's child.

...Oh, I see. So there's a possibility that Dee might be born as a human in his next life! In that case, he really might be reborn as Ralf's child! Ralf, I have no intention of ever getting married, so please do your best to conceive Dee, please!



ONCE Mama and Papa were finally satisfied that they'd doted on me enough, food awaited me.

Paul brought the meal in, wearing an unusually kind smile. The sight of Paul reminded me of something important.

"Is Shinki okay?" I asked.

That's right—Shinki collapsed after drinking the tea. I don't know if they put the same thing in his tea that was in mine. If they gave him a deadly poison, he could be...

"He's fine. Shinki's currently on Mount Reitimo. I've already sent word that you've awakened, so I'm sure he'll return shortly," Papa answered, filling me with momentary relief.

But then I was on to the next topic of concern—what about my other little friends? They were nowhere to be seen.

"What about Nox and the others? And what happened to the slimes that were inhabiting my body?"

Karna answered my slightly panicked question by pointing to the window. "Nox is playing in the garden. Of course, Haku, Gratia, and Pluma are all with him."

I peeked out the window and spotted Pluma in the garden. Haku and Gratia were too small to make out, but Nox was flapping his wings playfully—probably engaging in some crazy game—so I assumed they were somewhere close to him.

Phew. It looks like life is normal for all of them; nothing to worry about!

“As for the slimes inhabiting you, I’ve been taking care of them,” Ralf replied.

By “taking care of them,” does Ralf mean he let them inhabit his body instead?

“Are Hai, Silver, Charcoal, and Koku all there?” I asked.

“I don’t know their names, but the three gray slimes are inside me.”

Maybe I couldn’t sense them because Ralf was standing a few feet away. That gave me an idea. I closed the distance between us and wrapped my arms around Ralf’s torso, hugging him. *Then*, I could sense the slimes inhabiting his body.

“What about Koku?” I could tell that only Hai, Silver, and Charcoal were inside Ralf.

“I’ve got that one,” came the answer from a most unexpected source.

Mama?!

“It’s a deviation, after all. It was my pleasure to have the opportunity to study and observe it at my leisure.”

K-K-Koku! You’re still alive, right?! You weren’t harmed in any way? My face must’ve looked horrified. Ralf and Karna valiantly tried to hide their chuckling... Mama chuckled as well, but I wouldn’t be dissuaded that easily!

I knew very well that Mama’s idea of “fine” was often anything but!

“I know you’re worried about the slimes, but eat your food first. We’ll bring Koku to visit you after.” At Papa’s instruction, the food that Paul had brought in was placed in front of me.

They’d elected to give me just a simple soup to avoid upsetting my stomach after two years of not being used. The soup was made of vegetables stewed into a soft, thick broth. It smelled so delicious that my stomach gave an involuntary growl.

“Come on, open up,” Papa said, bringing a spoonful of the soup to my lips, and I obligingly opened my mouth wide.

The vegetables seemed to melt in my mouth, and the way the broth and

vegetables complemented each other was exquisite. I finished the entire bowl without my stomach protesting one bit.

While I ate, Paul went to fetch Nox and the others. He waited until I returned to my room to bring them to me.

“Lady Neema, I’ve brought everyone in to see you.”

Gratia was the first to move. He leapt from his perch atop Paul’s shoulder, landing in front of me.

“Gratia!”

I think he’s about doubled in size? I guess frost spiders take a while to mature because he’s still pretty tiny.

Gratia waved his front legs like always, as if saying, “Sup!”

Haku jumped up on my bed, too, all but shoving Gratia out of the way. Gratia clicked his fangs together in complaint at Haku’s sudden intrusion, so I picked him up and set him in his usual spot on my shoulder. Then I picked Haku up, using both hands to enjoy its unique body texture. Haku was just as soft and squishy as ever.

This elusive juxtaposition between softness and springiness was like a baby’s cheeks, a fat cat’s stomach, or the mounds of a generous set of breasts—absolutely perfect and somehow supremely comforting.

“Mew!” Haku rubbed itself against the palms of my hands, seeking attention.

My monster and animal friends are all so gosh-darn cuuuute!

I was stroking Haku affectionately when, all of a sudden, it went flying. Before I could even process what had happened, Koku suddenly appeared in Haku’s spot in my hands.

Hey, hey! Is that any way to treat your “older sibling” in the family hierarchy?!

“Bad Koku!”

After being scolded, Koku vibrated strangely and attempted to convey something to me.

“Mew, mew!”

I realized this was the first time I'd heard Koku speak aloud.

Koku's complaining about Haku "hogging" me, but Koku's the one who was inhabiting my body for ages! Don't blame me for the human failing of being unable to pet you while you're inside my body!

"Mew, mew!"

"Fine, fine! If you insist, I'd be happy to pet you—you don't have to tell me twice!"

I gently squeezed Koku and was surprised to discover it was firmer than Haku. Koku was like a beanbag—my hand sunk into its side, but there was a certain degree of resistance.

"Koku, hurry up and get big as quickly as possible! Then, you can be my own personal beanbag chair! The slight chill from your low body temperature is just an added bonus; it'll keep me cool in the summer!" I prattled.

Pluma leaned his head toward me, begging me to pet him, too. Apparently, they'd made a special exception today and let him into the house.

I stroked Pluma's head and let out an unconscious moan at the glorious texture of his feathers.

What is this heavenly softness?! The generally stiff outer layer of feathers was so soft it could easily rival the downy texture of his inner layer of feathers. Ayle, what kind of sorcery have you been weaving here?!

"Screech!" Nox cried from where he rested on his perch, and Koku hopped up onto my head.

Pluma also took a small—exceptionally minuscule—step back.

Haku seemed to be in shock from his mistreatment at Koku's hands, and Gratia was attempting to comfort the slime.

...They really are cute!

While I was distracted by watching them interact, Nox flew over to me.

"You're such a good boy, Nox."

Aware of his position as an "older brother" in the family hierarchy, he'd kindly

let the “younger siblings” go first, even though he’d wanted attention as well. I stroked Nox’s feathered breast and closed my eyes reflexively in sheer bliss at the transcendent sensation that met my fingers.

Clearly, the servants had taken good care of him while I’d been sleeping. I was relieved that the feathers damaged during his long-distance flight training mission had all returned to normal.

What’s this? The muscles around his chest seem significantly more pronounced than before. Curious, I ran my hands all over Nox’s body, checking his musculature. Thankfully, Nox didn’t mind the invasion of his personal space.

In the end, I determined that Nox was trim all over, with a bit more firm muscle packed around his thighs than I’d remembered. In short, Nox was in the best shape of his life.

“Nox, were you doing some kind of training while I was asleep?” I’d addressed the question to Nox, but Karna answered.

“I should’ve known you’d notice with just one touch!”

Apparently, Nox had refused to leave my side for a long time after I fell asleep. Fearing that Nox would lose muscle mass and his abilities would grow dull from disuse, Lestin had strongly recommended enrolling him in training.

No matter how much Papa and Ralf tried to convince Nox, he refused to leave my side. But in the end, all it took was a single sentence from Shinki to get him moving.

What on earth did Shinki say to him?

“You did so good, Nox!” I praised Nox for all his hard work.

Then Haku came bouncing over, saying, “*Me too!*” So, of course, I had to pet it as well. I was just glad that Gratia had been able to console Haku, and it now seemed to be back to normal.

“All right, Neema; it’s time for you to rest a little more,” Mama said. “When Shinki gets here, we’ll discuss Project Shiana.”

I seriously doubted I’d be able to fall asleep again so soon after just awakening from a two-year-long nap, but... When Mama began patting my

chest rhythmically, amazingly, I felt sleepiness steal over me.

Nox and the others each found somewhere comfortable to settle down, and we all took a nap together.

I hope Shinki gets home soon...



I had drifted off to sleep at some point because when I woke next, it was almost dusk.

Let's keep it a secret just between us how much the sight of Shinki standing right next to my bed startled me.

"Miss..."

"Welcome home, Shinki."

Usually, the proper greeting to use right after waking up would be "Good morning," but it was already evening.

Shinki knelt on one knee, lowered his head, and apologized gravely. "I'm sorry for failing to protect you."

Knowing Shinki, he'd probably been beating himself up over it this whole time.

I reached out and stroked the top of Shinki's head.

"I'm just glad you're okay, Shinki," I said, meaning it with all my heart. If I'd also lost Shinki, I don't know what I would've done...

I might not have been able to go on.

"...You're a very kind-hearted person, Miss."

I threw my arms around Shinki in a hug—not because emotion overcame me or anything, but to confirm for myself that he was really okay.

Yeah, that's it.

How human-like Shinki had become in expressing himself impressed me. He must've had a hard time while I was sleeping. I patted his head again comfortingly.

Just then, a pointed throat-clearing from across the room snapped me back to my senses.

Oops. This probably looks a little inappropriate. But you're not blameless here either, Paul! You should've stopped us the moment you came in.

I slowly released Shinki, and Haku, Gratia, and Koku all jumped over to him.

I only had a moment to wonder what they were up to before Gratia settled down on top of Shinki's head, and Haku and Koku perched on his shoulders and rubbed their bodies against his cheeks. In their own way, the three of them were trying to comfort him as well.

Shinki didn't say anything but let them do as they liked.

I'm happy to see them all still getting along so well.

"Thank you too, Paul."

Paul tilted his head to the side, confused at my sudden expression of gratitude towards him.

"When I was kidnapped, it must've caused you a lot of trouble as well, right?"

"It was no trouble, but... I should be apologizing to you, Lady Neema, for being unable to rescue you," Paul said, bowing deeply.

Based on the nearly 120-degree angle of his bow, I could tell just how guilty he felt about this supposed transgression. He was all but kotowing on the ground. I'd never done it before, but I'd heard it was difficult if you weren't particularly flexible.

"I forgive you, Paul. In exchange, will you promise to continue devoting yourself to serving the Osphe family?"

"Of course, my lady."

I knew Paul would never raise his head until I said, "I forgive you."

"If you're feeling up to it, I was instructed to bring you to the dining room... Do you think you can make it?" he asked.

Why the dining room? Does it have to do with Project Shiana?

"I'll be fine. Please make the necessary preparations."

The thought of bathing, dressing, and doing my hair sounded daunting, but after being asleep for so long, I desperately needed a bath.

While I bathed, I noticed something unexpected while looking down at my body—it hadn't changed at all.

How could I not have grown a single inch in two whole years?!

After I got out of the bath, I had the maid fetch a mirror, but looking into it only confirmed that my face looked exactly the same.

In short, I was still in the body of a five-year-old.

As you can imagine, this came as quite a shock.

I wasted two whole years of my most crucial growth period! Ooooh, I'm so angry with myself for sleeping so much time away!

I was still fighting back despair as I made my way to the dining room, where I was surprised to find my whole family and all of our household servants gathered waiting for me.

"Come here, Neema." I sat in the seat beside Papa as he'd directed. "As you can all see, our Neema has recovered. That is due to the support of each and every one of you. You have my sincerest gratitude."

Papa put one hand over his heart and bowed his head. That was the common gesture for expressing deep gratitude, but even so, it was unheard of for the patriarch of a ducal house to bow his head to his *servants*.

The servants all appeared shocked. Some even shed a few tears.

"Please raise your head, my lord. We only did what anyone would do. There is no need to thank us," our steward Marjace said as the representative of the servants.

I strongly felt I was only here now due to the support and assistance of so many people.

"Marjace and everyone else, truly, thank you. It would please me if you would accept not only Father's but my gratitude as well," I said, copying Papa and performing the customary gesture of gratitude.

At this, silent tears rolled down Marjace's face.

"Lady Neema, thank *you* for your kind words. On behalf of the servants in this household, please let me say what a pleasure and honor it is to serve the Osphe family."

"Don't cry, Marjace." I pulled out my handkerchief and attempted to wipe away Marjace's tears but couldn't reach them.

My precious growth period...!

With a smile and a doting "Thank you," Marjace accepted the handkerchief and quickly wiped away his tears.

There was still one thing that was bothering me, though...

"Father, why am I like this?" I asked.

"Like what, darling?"

"Look at me; two cycles have passed, and I haven't grown at all..."

I could swear I heard Papa mutter under his breath, "But you're cute like this!"

As a father, you're supposed to look forward to seeing your children grow up! Give me a break, will you?! I have no desire to stay five years old forever!

"I think it must be an effect of the Goddess sustaining you while you slept. There are records from long ago where a princess from a foreign country fell into a long sleep like yours, and it was said that she didn't age a single day the entire time she was sleeping."

Oh, I think I remember reading a picture book about that... I thought it sounded similar to Sleeping Beauty, but it turns out it was the work of the Goddess, not a curse, huh?

"It will all work out," Ralf interjected. "Now that you've awakened, I'm sure you'll start growing normally again."

I'm going to pin my hopes on your prediction, Ralf! All right, come on, growth spurt! I'm ready and waiting! Anytime now, please!

"I think Neema's adorable just how she is now, though!"

So Karna's in the same camp as Papa, is she? There are a lot of inconvenient things about being so small, you know!

“That’s enough idle chatter for now. Let’s move on and discuss Project Shiana next, shall we?”

Thanks to Mama’s conveniently timed interruption, Papa and the others wisely kept any further thoughts about my size to themselves.

As Papa explained, the site of Project Shiana had been named “the Shiana Special Region.” Likely due to the influence of the Shiana Special Region, Zigg Village had grown into a town, and many people wanted to move into the area.

However, to uphold the original residents of Zigg Village’s wishes to maintain their current way of life, a separate migrant district was set up bordering the Shiana Special Region. Zigg Village, the Shiana Special Region, and the migrant district were collectively referred to under the new official jurisdiction of “Zigg Town.”

As for the monsters and the adventurers, Mama had successfully invented a magical item to prevent anyone from dying. At first, she and Elder Salzar had focused their efforts on finding a way to block attacks, but when Mama saw how the Goddess’ power was protecting me, she’d gotten the idea to create a magical item that initiated a healing spell once the user sustained a specified degree of damage.

The magical item stored the precast healing spell in stasis for a certain time but needed to be recharged periodically, as well as after each activation by a healer. They’d assigned the task of charging the magical items with healing spells to the kobolds’ Healer Family.

When a monster’s magical item was activated, it would represent them “dying,” and they would have to give their drop items to the adventurer they’d been fighting.

When an adventurer’s magical item was activated, it would trigger a transportation spell that would take them straight to the covenant brokerage.

No matter how much of a fuss they kicked up, no one could worm their way out of the penalty for being defeated because they were required to sign

contracts agreeing to abide by the monsters' requirements if their magical item activated before ever setting foot on the mountain.

As for the content of these "requirements," the goblins had requested the adventurers they defeated choose between serving as reproductive donors or paying a ransom.

For women who chose to serve as reproductive donors, their service would be considered fulfilled with the birth of one child, whereas men would be required to inseminate three female goblins. If a female adventurer attempted fertilization for ten days and still failed to fall pregnant, her service would be considered fulfilled, and she would be released immediately.

The kobolds had requested that the adventurers they defeated choose between participating in the hunting families' "festival," becoming a bondsman, or paying a ransom. The ransom price was set at one gold coin, and a system was in place to pay the ransom in installments.

As you can probably imagine, all the women goblins had defeated had chosen to pay the ransom, most in monthly installments.

Surprisingly, though, more than a few of the defeated men had chosen to serve as sperm donors.

As for the adventurers defeated by kobolds, several had chosen to remain with the kobolds even after completing their term of contracted service. Instead of their previous occupations as adventurers, they pursued new careers as craftsmen and women.

There are all kinds of people in the world, each with their own special interests.

"Currently, we're setting up another site just like the Shiana Special Region along the border between our country and Icoux."

If it was on the border with Icoux, that must mean it was in the Mieuxga Province.

Thank goodness Uncle Sanrus agreed!

"Uncle Sanrus agreed to set up a site in his province as well?!" I asked.

“No; the Special Region in the Mieuxga Province will be under national jurisdiction.”

Um, the Shiana Special Region is under the jurisdiction of the Osphe family... Does this mean the country recognized its positive effects and took it on officially?

“But isn’t it kind of a risky undertaking for a government project?” I asked Papa and was surprised by his answer.

Incredibly, it had been scientifically confirmed that monsters were the keystone species crucial to maintaining the fragile balance of the ecosystem, and not only the Kingdom of Gaché but also the Linus Empire and Milma were working to protect the monsters.

For that reason, our government decided to carry out a test case in the Kingdom of Gaché. If it succeeded, they would sell the perfected method to other countries.

I hope this all works out.

“But won’t it also be a problem if the monsters’ population grows *too* large?” I asked.

If humans interfered, even in the form of protecting the monsters, it might disrupt the balance of nature by tipping things in the opposite direction. It would be fine for now while the monsters’ population was much smaller than it should be. But what about when their populations eventually return to normal?

“We’ve created a Healers’ Guild with Velcia as its leader and had her train all of the members in the use of the birth control spell.”

Huh? They’re going to use the birth control spell to reduce the population size?

“From what I’m told, those who can use the birth control spell will receive a ‘sign’ when a species has grown too large.”

That “sign” would inform the healers which species needed to be decreased. If that happened, the protection order would be temporarily suspended, making it permissible to kill monsters of that species who harmed humans rather than just driving them off, as was the standard procedure when the

protection order was in effect. Once the balance was restored, the protection order would be reinstated.

That will allow adventurers to avoid becoming obsolete, so I guess it's like killing two birds with one stone? But this whole thing has really taken on a life of its own, hasn't it?

"In any case, I want to go to Zigg Village right away!" I chirped.

"I know how you feel, but there are many other things you should be doing," Mama said. Initially, I was doubtful about what else there could possibly be, but when she went on to list these many, *many* other things, I felt myself falling into despair again.

2 - Well, Isn't This a Hot Mess?

I'D expected to have lost some muscle and become weaker after sleeping for literally years, but I was pretty much as strong as ever.

I played in the yard with Nox and the others for hours and hours and didn't feel any more tired than I had when I was five. I was also forced to brush up on etiquette and practice dance, which I *had* become a bit out of practice on.

Thankfully, it wasn't too bad since Ralf and Karna worked with me.

"Neema, don't forget that we'll be visiting the royal palace tomorrow."

That's right, one of the items on the very long list of plans Mama had dictated to me was a visit to the royal palace. We'd have an audience with the king and queen to let them see for themselves that I was okay.

There was also the teeny tiny matter of the house that had burned down, although it *was* abandoned, and I wasn't exactly to blame for that. Although... Sol appearing in the middle of the royal city, the Goddess' descent, and the general pandemonium caused by all of these things... Yeah, I supposed those fell directly on my shoulders. I'd have to apologize *very* profusely.

"I'm sure you'll be asked about your kidnapping, but if it becomes too distressing, please say so; there's no need to push yourself."

Oh, that's right. I'll need to make an eyewitness report, even if it is two years after the fact.

...Hold on. How can I give a report when I can barely remember what happened?

Deciding that wouldn't do, I initiated a telepathic connection with Sol.

"Sooooool! I'm awake!"

"So the elemental spirits informed me. You certainly did sleep for a long time."

"I was so surprised to wake up and learn that two years had passed... But, um,

I was hoping you could tell me what happened. I don't remember much..."

According to Ralf, I'd unconsciously accessed Sol's magic through the dragon orb, which overwhelmed me. I had a hard time believing that, though, considering I couldn't use magic.

"Very well. There's not much to tell, though; you used my magic, that's all."

I used Sol's magic?

"How can that be? I don't have any magic, so how can I use it?"

"You reached through our bond and grabbed mine to use. Unfortunately, you don't know how to handle magic, so you lost control of it."

So, what? Essentially, I misfired a weapon I'd never been properly trained to use? That's freaking dangerous!

"Thank you so much, Sol!"

"For what?"

"You came to the rescue, protecting me and everyone else from being injured if the fire had spread."

I wasn't surprised he'd protected *me*, but he'd gone the extra step of stopping the fire from damaging the surrounding houses and endangering lives.

"Well, it was my power, after all. I just came to collect it, that's all."

Ho, ho, ho! Sol, are you blushing over there?!

"Hehe, you're cute when you're embarrassed, Sol."

"What?! If there's nothing further, I'm hanging up!"

The telepathic connection cut out then, but I couldn't help imagining Sol's embarrassed face and snickering at the image I'd conjured in my head.

In any case, I understand the basic gist of what happened now.

Overcome by the anger I felt in the aftermath of Dee's death, I picked up the murder weapon: Sol's magic.

That's right, the murder weapon.

I'd been so angry and full of hatred that I'd wanted Dee's killers to suffer and

maybe even die. Those feelings took over, and I reached for Sol's magic but couldn't control it.

My family wouldn't say anything about it, but I knew that I'd killed those two men.

Strangely enough, I didn't feel much of anything about the fact that I'd *killed* someone. That was unexpected, considering how horrified I'd been by the battle between the kobolds and the adventurers...

The house where I'd been held had burned to the ground, and I'd spent two years being healed by the Goddess.

...I seriously underestimated Runohark.

Even though I'd been the one saying the church was shady, I'd foolishly let my guard down. If I'd only been a little more careful, Shinki and Paul probably would've been able to handle the situation on their own.

I need to become stronger so I can use these regrets to avoid making the same mistakes next time.

Yeah! I can do this! I'm gonna do my best!



THE following day, I gathered my thoughts and prepared for a formal outing, and then Mama and I made our way to the royal palace.

Mama surprised me by announcing that we'd be bringing Shinki along as well, but since he'd received an all-access pass to the royal palace (with the requirement that he had to accompany me), I figured it was fine.

When we arrived at the royal palace, for some reason, Gwynn and his men came out to greet us.

"We've been awaiting your arrival. At His Majesty's order, we will escort you to your audience."

This pleasant smile and sincere greeting...

Who are you, and what have you done with Gwynn?! The Gwynn I know is much more cold and aloof—a true "ice beauty!" This version of Gwynn kinda

gives me the creeps...

Gwynn led us through the palace, stopping outside the throne room.

Wait, it's a public audience?!

I hadn't been to a public audience in the throne room since that first time, right after I met Sol.

"As instructed, I've brought the members of the Osphe Ducal house: Duchess Cerulia, Lady Nefertima, and bodyguard Shinki to meet with Their Majesties," Gwynn said to the royal guards flanking the large double doors leading into the throne room.

In response, the royal guards slowly pushed the heavy doors open.

Urged forward by Mama, I was surprised to find myself surrounded by only familiar faces upon stepping into the room. That helped me relax slightly. Just like the last time we'd come for a public audience, a booming tenor voice announced Mama and me loudly enough for all to hear. I suppose they omitted Shinki because his social status was on par with that of a commoner.

We approached the dais where the thrones were, and Mama and I paid homage. Thanks to my brush-up etiquette lesson, I was confident in the gracefulness of my deep curtsy.

Someone had taken it upon themselves to train Shinki in etiquette while I was sleeping because he executed a beautiful example of prostration.

"You may rise."

When the king's permission came, I raised my head and covertly glanced around.

Atop the dais, the king and queen sat on their thrones, looking much the same as always: a well-suited couple consisting of a handsome middle-aged husband and a stunningly beautiful wife.

I would like to say that Will and Lars were also their usual selves, but that would be a lie. Will seemed to have matured much more than two years' worth, transforming into a devastatingly handsome young man.

Furthermore, he wasn't wearing his usual mischievous smirk but instead a

charming “princely smile,” further adding to the weirdness of the situation.

It’s not just weird; it’s downright creepy...

“Cerulia, Nefertima, thank you for coming.”

“We are Your Majesty’s loyal servants. It is our pleasure and honor to be granted an audience.”

The cabinet ministers and Grandpa Gouche were seated on a raised platform one tier below the dais containing the thrones. Although Papa was among them, Mama made no move to acknowledge him.

These were all of the usual members one could expect to be present for a public audience.

But for some reason, commanding officers of multiple divisions of the royal knighthood and the royal guard were seated along one wall, including Captain Nahal, Gwynn, Dan, and Lestin.

That really adds a heaviness to the atmosphere!

“Nefertima, I’m glad to see you in good health. Now then, can you please explain what happened to you?”

Since I’d been permitted to speak, I went for it, laying everything out as logically as I could manage.

First, I explained what made me suspicious of the Church of Divine Creation.

While I’d been trying to determine who had the most to gain by igniting a war, I’d stumbled upon the realization that should war break out, the number of people who flocked to their local churches to pray to God, seeking hope, would increase dramatically.

If that happened, the church’s pockets would grow heavy with donations, and in some countries, they might also gain political authority if the government relied on them.

However, it had never occurred to me that Runohark would be lurking in the royal city—least of all in a church in the upper-nobility district. So we’d been slow to react, and I’d gotten kidnapped.

Dee had tracked me to the manor where I was being held, but in protecting me, he was injured and made the journey home to be with the Goddess.

Intense rage and loathing for the criminals overcame me, and I unconsciously used the dragon orb to access Sol's magic and attack them. However, I couldn't wield the magic properly, and it raged out of control. Thankfully, Sol swooped in to suppress the magical flames.

I didn't remember the Goddess' Descent. I also wasn't sure if I was supposed to talk about my conversation with Lady Creo over tea, so I kept that part to myself.

"I don't remember much of this myself, so it's based heavily on what Sol told me..." I finished.

"I see. I'm sorry for making you relive all of that," King Gauldi said sympathetically.

"I'm so relieved to see you looking healthy, Neema," Queen Relena added.

It looked like I'd really worried the king and queen.

"But why does she still look the same as before?"

Will, you jerk! Don't rub salt in my wounds! That's a sensitive subject!

"According to Ralf, it's due to the Goddess' protection. While Neema was asleep, the Goddess preserved her physical form in its original state," Mama explained.

This phenomenon had occurred a handful of times throughout the history of this continent, so everyone seemed content with the rather vague explanation.

"Dayland informed me that it had been confirmed that Neema is one of the God of Creation's 'beloved children.' Is this true?" His Majesty asked.

Papa, you spilled the beans to King Gauldi? More importantly, is it really okay to discuss this here, in front of all these strangers?

"Everyone in attendance has already taken vows upon their name not to reveal anything they hear in this room," King Gauldi explained, clearly picking up on my hesitancy.

In that case, I suppose it's fine.

"According to Lars, it seems I am a beloved child," I admitted.

I can't very well tell them what I learned from the Goddess about beloved children all being from other worlds. Lars growled once as if confirming my words. *Oh man, I really, really, really want to pet Lars after so long not being able to!*

"Don't worry, Neema; I'll let you play with Lars later," Will said, as if to answer the words I'd been screaming inside my head.

It's almost as if he can read my mind...

"Really?!"

"Yes, but only after we've finished discussing everything."

...What else is there to discuss?

Hmm... Whenever Will's being nice, it's usually because he's up to something.

But if it means I can pet Lars' fluffy fur as much as I want, I'll just have to bear it...

"The Runohark agent that Dayland captured confessed. He seemed to somehow already know that Neema is a beloved child," His Majesty said.

Huh?! How did Runohark know that?!

"Holy beasts and elemental spirits can recognize beloved children with a sense that can only be described as instinct," he continued. "So it would make sense for Runohark to possess this information if they have an elementalist working for them."

Oh, that's right...

So, were the elemental spirits the source of this information? But not even Will and I knew until Lars told us...

"Does that mean we should assume all our secrets have been leaked?" I asked.

It was Will who answered, "No, not necessarily."

Even though the king had extensively researched elemental spirits, Will was probably still the most knowledgeable person in the room when it came to them. Bonding with a holy beast gave a person the ability to see elemental spirits, and Will had also visited the Elemental Palace where the elemental kings lived.

“Being an elementalist doesn’t give someone the ability to see all elemental spirits, only the ones they have an affinity with. If those elemental spirits were advanced-level, it would be more dangerous. But according to the wind spirits, there aren’t currently any elementalists who can command advanced-level elemental spirits.”

Are they not counting Shinki because he’s not an elementalist? Or do even Shinki’s abilities not extend to advanced-level elemental spirits?

I glanced at Shinki, but he seemed bored with everything. For some reason, his gaze was fixed upwards, staring off into what appeared to me as nothing more than thin air.

I’ll ask him about it later. But elementalists and the bonded masters of holy beasts aren’t the only ones who can interact with elemental spirits...

“Could it be an elf?” I asked.

“That’s highly unlikely. Elves revere the God of Creation, the Goddess, and elemental spirits. Why would they ever do anything to harm a beloved child?”

I guess that’s true.

Ardo and Vel, at least, seemed to respect the elemental spirits very highly. I had a feeling it wasn’t a beloved child, but rather, the elemental spirits they would care more about not upsetting.

To summarize what we knew at this point, there was a high likelihood that Runohark had an elementalist among their ranks, and this was how they’d learned I was a beloved child.

There’s no guarantee this elementalist won’t turn out to be a serious threat, either. I wonder if it’s possible to ask the elemental spirits to keep information we don’t want anyone to know a secret?

“For that reason, I’ve discussed the matter with Dayland, and we’ve decided to send Neema to the Linus Empire.”

...What did you just say, King Gauldi? Huh? Huuuh?!

No, no, no—hold it right there! Where did this come from all of a sudden?!

“Your Majesty, may I have permission to speak?” Papa interjected suddenly.

“Granted. Neema seems quite alarmed, so this explanation would probably be best received if it came from you.”

Papa and the king were calmly exchanging social niceties, but I was more than eager to get to the aforementioned *explanation* part!

“Neema, let me begin by saying this: the decision to send you away, while making the most sense, was very difficult to come to.”

Papa looks like he’s going to cry. But based on what I know of Papa’s personality, his first reaction would be to straight-out reject such a proposition and insist, “I’m going to protect Neema myself!” So, the fact that he agreed to this shows how extreme the situation is.

“Currently, three members of the imperial family of the Linus Empire are bonded with holy beasts.”

“Queen Relena’s parents and the current emperor?” I speculated.

“That’s right. Their Imperial Majesties, the retired emperor and empress, as well as His Imperial Majesty, the current emperor.”

That’s a lot of majesties...

I have a feeling I’m going to have a hard time keeping their formal titles straight...

“We’ve ultimately concluded that the imperial city where the three holy beasts reside is the safest place for you to be right now.”

“But Lars and Sol are here, is that not enough?” I asked.

“This incident has clearly proven that Lars and the fire dragon’s protection is insufficient,” Will said, mercilessly striking down my attempted objection.

Waaagh! I don’t want to leave my family!

“It’s not going to be right away. We’ve been planning for some time now to send Karna to study abroad in the Linus Empire, so you will join her as a companion.”

At this, I raised my head swiftly and fixed Papa with a trepidatious gaze.

“...Karna’s going too?”

“That’s right. There’s no way I could send you off on your own...”

Now that he mentions it, I suppose I should’ve realized it would be something like this. I’m too young to be allowed to travel all the way to a foreign country by myself. But I still really, really don’t want to part with Papa, Mama, Ralf, our servants, and all my monster friends!

“I don’t want to be apart from you, Father!” I pleaded.

“Oh, Neema...!”

Uh-oh... Papa’s crying now. Um... Crap, what should I do now? I turned to Mama, hoping she could help somehow, and was surprised to find her smiling. *Is it just me, or is it always a little scary when Mama smiles?*

“Dayle.”

Out of nowhere, a chill filled the air, and Papa stopped crying almost instantly.

Way to go, Mama! You always know just how to handle Papa!

Sensing the awkward tension in the room, King Gauldi cleared his throat and attempted to salvage the situation.

“The Linus Empire has said they’d like to introduce a system similar to that of Project Shiana, so I’d like to appoint you as my unofficial emissary on this matter, Neema.”

...What?!

“On paper, you’ll just be accompanying Karnadia and acting as her companion while she’s studying abroad, but...”

But my secret mission will be to lead the Linus Empire in establishing their own version of Project Shiana?! There’s no way I can handle such an important task!

“That is why I’d like to introduce you to some people, Neema,” Queen Relena

interjected smoothly.

For what reason?! What possible connection could there be between this and that?!

An attractive, ethereal-looking middle-aged man and an androgynously beautiful younger man joined the royal family on the dais containing the thrones.

I'm pretty sure those two are men. Based on the loose fit of their vests, they seem to be flat-chested, and they're wearing traditionally male clothing.

Even from this distance, I could see their familial resemblance to our queen.

"This is my younger brother and my nephew."

I thought so!

...But don't tell me this nephew is the son of the current emperor... the Imperial Prince?

"It's an honor to make your acquaintance. I am Dayland Osphe's wife, Cerulia."

I had no idea which bow was appropriate for this situation, so I stole a glance at Mama, intending to copy whatever she did.

The second-rank official greeting, huh?

That bow was used by all members of the nobility when greeting state guests from other countries.

Unfortunately, it was one I was terrible at.

You were supposed to face the palms of both hands toward the other person while bowing or curtsying, depending on your gender, then bring your hands back to chest level in front of you, but whenever I did this, it usually just looked like I was doing some kind of goofy dance.

Thank goodness I don't have to use this bow often. Hopefully, I don't look too ridiculous this time!

"And I am their daughter, Nefertima Osphe."

"Please rise."

Once we'd been given permission, we both rose from our low curtsies, and I looked back at the two men's faces curiously.

"We're traveling incognito, so please forgive us for skipping formal introductions at this time. You can call me Louis," the attractive, middle-aged man said. Although I referred to him as "middle-aged," he was probably around his mid-thirties.

He had similar coloring to Queen Relena but was overall paler than her. But that just made him look all the more ethereal.

"I'm Theo. Nice to meet you," said the beautiful younger man, who I guessed was around twenty years old. He didn't necessarily have a feminine face, but he didn't exude masculinity, either. He seemed almost genderless, somewhere in the middle.

I guess if they're traveling incognito, they can't reveal their full names, either? Being of such a high social status sure seems inconvenient!

"I'd like you to show them around the Shiana Special Area," Her Majesty said.

I wouldn't dare to refuse a direct request from the queen, but are they serious about recreating Project Shiana in the Linus Empire?

"As you wish. May we assume you will inform us of the date and time of this tour at a later time?" Mama asked.

"Yes. If it would be okay with you, why don't we take tea together after this audience concludes, and we can discuss the particulars then?"

Plans involving me were once again being decided by adults without my input.

Queen Relena must be happy, though, to see her younger brother and nephew. I wonder if I'll also have to join them for tea...

Yeah, I bet I will. I really wanted to pet Lars, though... I wonder if he'll join, too? Maybe Will can lend Lars to me for the duration of the tea party...

"Very well, then, let's end the audience here for today. I will assign you a room to rest in while tea is prepared. Those who wish to greet Neema personally may do so there."

King Gauldi's giving me time to speak with everyone I haven't seen since

before my long sleep. He's so considerate!

"Thank you, King Gauldi!"

I thanked him wholeheartedly with a broad smile, and the king responded by gesturing for me to "come here."

Huh?

I cautiously approached and found myself swept onto the king's lap, where he whispered something in my ear that caused me to freeze.

Oh, my...

I do owe him a great debt for all the trouble I've caused, and if that's all he wants in exchange, I should probably acquiesce, but...

"...Uncle Gauldi," I obediently repeated.

The king's request had been to call him by this name.

"Oh, Your Majesty! That's not fair! I want her to call me Auntie Relena, too!"

Oh no! Now the queen's saying strange things, too!

"...Your Majesty, are you certain you're prepared for the consequences?" For some reason, the way Papa's deadly serious tone seemed to slither over the ground made the king smirk.

"Do you want me to tell Neema about *you-know-what*?" King Gauldi countered.

At that, Papa fell silent.

Now, this is a rare sight indeed! Not only did Papa directly defy the king, but the king neutralized him in a single breath!

I wonder what all this undertone between them is about...

"Father, that's more than enough of your teasing," Will intervened, rescuing me from his father's embrace.

When I'm around the king and queen, I really need Will to keep them in line! Thank goodness he was here this time...

"Please pardon my lack of decorum in the presence of our esteemed guests,"

the king apologized with only a hint of petulance, directing those words to the queen's two relatives.

"Not at all; it was a heart-warming sight," Theo said graciously.

"You are clearly beloved by your subjects. And it puts my heart at ease to see my sister enjoying herself so," Louis added.

You said it! They are both enjoying themselves—far too much if you ask me, especially considering the important guests present.

"Lord Louis and Lord Theo, if you'll please follow me, I'll show you to the reception room now," a maid, who'd been hiding out of sight, said as she stepped in to lead the two of them away.

"Your Majesty, thank you for today. Sister, let's meet again soon."

Once the two bowed and left the room, Will quickly ushered the king and queen out as well.

"Good grief, I suppose it can't be helped. Relena, shall we leave Will to take care of the rest here?" His Majesty asked his wife.

"Excellent idea, dear."

The two of them sure do get along well.

In a most gentlemanly gesture, the king held out his elbow for the queen to hold and led her out of the throne room. Everyone seemed to breathe a sigh of relief and relax visibly now that all the royals had left the room.

Well, there is still a prince here...

"Will and Lars, thank you for coming to save me when I was kidnapped," I said.

I still hadn't had a chance to thank them for coming to my rescue when I was in danger, so I took this opportunity to do so, paying homage at the same time for good measure.

"Don't worry about it. In the end, I wasn't able to do much, anyways," Will said.

I'm assuming you mean it as a signal that it's okay to rise from my curtsy, but

will you please stop ruffling my hair like that?! He has grown into quite a handsome young man, though, huh?

From the queen, Will had inherited an unquantifiable allure that I could only describe as a *shine*, but he also possessed the king's fierce countenance.

"What is it?" Will asked me.

"It's nothing; I was just thinking you've gotten handsome."

"Heh, have you fallen madly in love with me, then?"

"...As if! Ralf is still *way* more handsome!"

With such a handsome, almost angelic boy—or rather, young man—around me all the time, there was no way I'd fall in love with someone like Will!

Especially not when I know firsthand that on the inside, he's a perverted demon black-heart... Er, no, wait. I don't think that's the right order...

In any case, he's no good on the inside!

"...You haven't changed one bit," he said.

As if agreeing full-heartedly with this sentiment, Lars let out an emphatic growl.

"Lars!"

Just as I was about to leap at Lars for a long-awaited hug, he beat me to the punch by licking my face, rubbing his large head against my cheek, and purring low in his throat...



Lars made the first move?!

It was highly unusual for Lars to be the one to seek attention, so it surprised me.

"It looks like Lars was really worried about you. I bet he's relieved to see for himself that you're okay," Will explained.

"Sorry for making you worry, Lars." I hugged Lars tightly, and his heavenly fur tickled my skin for the first time in far too long.

Ahhh, I can't get enough of this fur!

"Looks like the room is ready now; let's get going," Will announced after receiving a signal from a maid.

Lars crouched down as if inviting me to climb onto his back, and I didn't hesitate to comply.

Inside the room that Will led us to, Papa and Mama, the cabinet members, and Grandpa Gouche were all already gathered.

Dan and the others aren't here, so I'll have to visit them soon. How are all the dragons and beasts doing?

"I'm so relieved to see you're really okay, Neema," Auntie Olive immediately said, tears shining in her eyes.

Uncle Sanrus patted the top of my head, smiling kindly, and Uncle Gene gave me a hug, saying he was glad I was okay.

It was an emotional reunion, but one thing Auntie Olive said particularly emphatically caught my attention.

"It was *really* rough for a while there while you were sleeping."

She forcefully emphasized the "really" in this sentence, but what on Earth had happened?

"It was one for the history books, that's for sure. The Osphe Family's wild explosion..." Uncle Sanrus said, staring off into the distance.

"The knights were so scared I think some of 'em probably wet their pants!" Grandpa Gouche guffawed.

I don't think that's a laughing matter!

“What we’re going to discuss next will probably be painful for Neema to hear,” Mama said gravely, and based on her attitude, I knew that whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

What happened while I was sleeping?!

3 - A Side of Me That Neema Doesn't Know (POV: Ralfreed)

NEEMA is probably at the royal palace about now, learning about what happened. I'm a little nervous about facing her when she gets home...

"Brother, why the long face?" Karna asked.

"It's nothing, I'm just worried about Neema."

"Could it be you're worried how she'll react when she learns about that day?"

That day...

The day Karna and I killed people.

Although it couldn't compare to the fiery emotions I'd felt at the time, the embers still smoldered inside of me even now.

"It'll be fine! Knowing Neema, I'm sure she'll be surprised to see an unexpected side of her beloved big brother, but ultimately, she'll say you're cool and strong!" As if imagining Neema's response, Karna muttered to herself, "She's so cute!"

Karna... From the outside looking in, anyone who witnessed your sister complex would be in danger of mistaking you for some kind of creeper, so I wish you'd tone it down, at least when we're out in public!

"You're probably right. But what I'm more worried about is what *doesn't* seem to bother Neema."

Karna seemed to have no idea what I was referring to because she tilted her head to the side and furrowed her brows as if asking, "*What do you mean?*"

"Neema must've realized by now that she killed the kidnappers. Based on her personality, I would expect her to be upset by this, but she doesn't seem to be."

"...Come to think of it, you're right."

What will Neema think after hearing what we did?

But, Neema...

I don't feel guilty, nor do I regret it.

Are you the same as me?

Or...



FATHER had summoned Karna and me to his office. He was the only one there; I could tell it was about something serious.

"We're going to destroy Runohark's foothold within this country."

Meaning it's already decided, and the servants are already moving into position as we speak?

"What I'm about to say cannot go further than the four dukedoms and the general. Will you vow upon your names to hold this matter in confidentiality?"

Only the Osphe family, Wise family, Dierta family, Mieuxga family and Zelnan family can know of this...?

"Meaning the royal family must not hear of it?"

"Exactly."

Is it really okay to hide things from the royal family? I was under the impression that not only Father but the members of the other houses were loyal to the royal family...

"Isn't that bad?"

I didn't expect my father to be secretly scheming behind the king's back to steal the throne or anything like that, but at the same time, if it was something that would harm my best friend, I didn't want to know about it.

"No, this idea originated with our ancestors, the 'founding heroes.' In accordance with the first king's wishes, we can't inform the royal family."

"Very well. I swear upon my name, Ralfreed Osphe, that I will not speak of this matter to anyone other than those you have specified."

Karna took the same vow upon her name, and then Father nodded, seeming satisfied, and began telling us about the founding of the Kingdom of Gaché.

The five companions who'd devoted themselves to helping the first king found the Kingdom of Gaché took a vow upon their names without telling their king. For his descendants to be able to rule the country even better, they vowed to use all the power they possessed and every method at their disposal to protect the country at any cost.

Every generation since the descendants of those five companions took the same vow.

Father explained that he'd taken the vow when he took over the title of duke, as I would one day when my turn came to inherit the title.

I was shocked by what Father said next.

“Are the two of you prepared to get blood on your hands?”

It was easy enough to talk about “protecting the country,” but it was quite another matter to actually step up and put those ideals into action, I realized. Once you decide to stand for something, you will defend it with your life, and should you be defeated, another will step up to take your place. Normally, that was enough.

But when you were protecting something *especially* precious, sometimes that required you to be the one to make the first move. Like Father was doing now.

I've still got a lot to learn if I didn't realize that right away...

“I've been prepared all along. I have to be so I can stand by Neema's side and protect her!” Karna declared.

Karna's changed.

I wasn't sure if it was because she'd gotten her first taste of real battle or if it was due to the training she'd received from Uncle Phillip, but I felt that she'd become stronger.

Not only her skills but also her heart.

That might just be part of what it meant to grow up, but either way, as her older brother, it made me a little sad but even more proud.

For the sake of my little sister and best friend and this precious thing that so many people depend on, I, too, need to change.

“I’m prepared as well,” I replied.

“Is that so? Very well, then. Starting tomorrow, I’m putting you two through the wringer.”

True to his word, Father worked us hard, mercilessly having us practice fighting until we were both worn ragged.

I’d never dreamed the servants working for us were *that* strong. I knew they must be at least passably capable fighters since they sometimes doubled as bodyguards for family members, but clearly, I’d underestimated them.

One of the primary objectives of the intensive training was to strengthen our skill at silent spellcasting. We worked on increasing the number of spells we could cast without chanting the spell words out loud. We also practiced maintaining concentration no matter what occurred around us and quickly pouring the necessary magic into the spell.

Even though it was “practice,” the servants didn’t hold back; they struck out at us with real, bladed weapons and lobbed spells at us one after another.

I’d probably never been so grateful in my life that I could use healing magic as I was then. But our magical skill and swordsmanship improved dramatically thanks to their ruthless training.

Of course, it was at the cost of countless scrapes and bruises.

Once we completed this training regimen, we were dragged into a strategy meeting.

Runohark’s hideouts within the Kingdom of Gaché were mostly located inside churches, but more than a few also masqueraded as inns or private homes.

“This is their largest base, the church in the upper-nobility district.”

It was the same place where Neema had been kidnapped.

“I’ll take this one,” Father said. “Ralf, you’re in charge of the church in the residential district’s fourth ward.”

Personally, I wanted to get my hands on the culprits directly involved in Neema's kidnapping, but unfortunately, it looked like I'd have to leave that pleasure to Father.

"Karna, you've got the inn in the residential district's first ward. Cerulia, I'd like you to take on the shop in the commerce district."

Runohark had been importing illegal drugs from some unknown source and had been operating this "imported knickknacks" shop as a front to hide their illegal dealings.

"Paul, you go with Karna. See to it that you don't let anyone lay a hand on one of my girls ever again."

Paul bowed once, accepting the assignment from Father.

It was clear to everyone that should anything happen to Karna, Paul's life would be forfeit.

I, too, was counting on him to protect her when I couldn't be there to watch her back.

"Marjace, I'd like you to come with me. Aurphan will take point in the Osphe Province. Josh will take point in the Mieuxga Province, Feio in the Wise Province, and Leah and Yodar in the Dierta Province," Papa continued, assigning critical roles to his personal butler, Aurphan, mother's personal butler, Feio, my personal butler, Josh, and Leah—the head maid as well as Neema's personal maid—and her husband Yodar, the cook.

He's throwing the full force of the Osphe family into this.

Father went on to assign servants to each of the other primary hideouts and explained that members of the royal knighthood had been assigned to each of the smaller hideouts. I'd assumed this was a covert operation, so I was surprised to hear that the royal knighthood had been included in the plan.

The locations delegated to the royal knighthood would be authorized searches under suspicion of human trafficking, so the knighthood's role would remain above board and legitimate. Furthermore, the knighthood's movements would serve as a diversion for our own.

“One more thing; you mustn’t harm any of the followers being manipulated by brainwashing,” Father said.

“How are we to know who is brainwashed and who is a true believer?”

Mother makes a good point; without employing forbidden forms of magic, there’s no real way to tell them apart.

“Using these,” Father answered, holding up two unfamiliar magical items.

“Oh, my! Those are...!”

Mother seemed surprised for a moment, but in the next instant, her eyes shone as she regarded the items in Father’s hand.

I took this to mean that they were especially rare magical items.

“I requested aid from Milma, and they lent us these magical items: one that can snap a person out of a brainwashed state and one that destroys the magical structure itself.”

He thinks of everything...

Milma was ahead of all the other countries in developing magical items.

Furthermore, I’d heard that only a few rare individuals were capable of using the forbidden magic related to brainwashing and enchantment.

“I’m very impressed you were able to get your hands on something like that,” Mother remarked.

“The former king’s younger brother, Lord Edward, helped.”

The previous king of our country had a younger brother named Edward, who married the then-Queen of Milma and became king consort.

It would seem that, even all these years later, he’s still watching out for his home country.

“Oh, dear. What did he demand in exchange, I wonder? Lord Edward is not someone you can afford to let your guard down around.”

“I believe he requested a discounted price on mineral resources. Olive handled the negotiations, so I’m sure it went fine.”

Father made it sound like no big deal, but I took that to mean that he felt we had no choice but to prioritize the threat posed by Runohark over a minor economic disadvantage.

“How do the magical items work?” Karna asked, eyeing them curiously.

The answer turned out to be that you were supposed to use the magical item that brought the victim out of their brainwashed state, then use the item that broke the magical formulation.

“I don’t know much about the brainwashing spell myself, but according to the expert from Milma that I communicated with, it’s typically cast using a large magic circle to brainwash multiple people simultaneously, and the spell engraves markings on the afflicted individuals’ skin that keep it continuously active.”

“Meaning that even if we’re able to bring the afflicted person out of their brainwashed state, as long as those markings remain, they’ll eventually fall back under the spell’s influence?” Mother asked.

“If you’re that curious about it, I’d be happy to show you the official report from Milma later.”

You’re in for it now, Father. Mother and Karna have caught the scent of prey; they won’t let this topic go until they understand it completely. Although, I’m also interested in magical formulation, so I might join them in learning more about it later when we have the time.

Once we concluded our strategy meeting, Mother and Karna, possibly inspired by the magical items they’d never seen before, spent all their free time making something.

As for me, I prepared for the mission by learning to use the magical items and devoting every other waking minute to training.

During that period, something alarming happened with the magical item Mother and Karna had been working on. While they were carrying out an experiment in the experiment building affiliated with the Magical Research Center where Mother worked, they somehow accidentally caused a massive whirlwind of flames that ultimately required Lars’ assistance to put out.

Even after this near-catastrophe, Mother and Karna still seemed to be puzzling over the fine-tuning of the item that had produced too much fire, giving me the distinct suspicion that they hadn't learned their lesson and given up on it.

I'd be willing to bet they'll try again.

Finally, the date of the mission loomed near; we would put our plan into action the following night.

Unconsciously, my eyes strayed to a certain spot...

That had become a habit of mine.

I always found myself glancing at where Dee used to sleep in my room.

Although his bed would never be used again, I still hadn't been able to bring myself to get rid of it. I knew he was satisfied with his choice and wouldn't wish for me to seek revenge, but I needed to do this for myself.

I wasn't the kind of man who could be satisfied with dealing with the murder of a dear friend and member of my family by simply lying in bed crying all day.

I know you're probably going to worry while watching over me, Dee, but this is something I need to do.



THE day of the mission arrived at last.

Accompanied by several of our servants, I'd made my way to the appointed location.

The church in the residential district's fourth ward was a bit old but had been well-maintained. I knew this meant that the church was important to the faithful residents here, which only filled me with further loathing for Runohark, who'd used these people's faith for their own ends.

"Lord Ralf, how shall we proceed?"

We'd been instructed to wait for Father's signal before entering the building.

I cast a special Search spell that Mother had taught me.

The original, water-magic-based Search spell had the benefit of not producing

much of a magical signature, meaning it was unlikely to be noticed, but it obscured the caster's vision.

But the improved-upon spell Mother had devised used wind and water magic. It produced a fog that would be carried upon a barely discernible breeze. In this way, you'd be able to search as far as the wind could travel, and the dispersal of the fog would keep your line of sight clear.

"First, let's see what's going on inside."

I made the fog as thin as possible so our enemy wouldn't notice it and began to Search.

First, I mapped out the layout of the building on a piece of paper, noting down the numbers and locations of the people inside. There were approximately thirty people inside the church, and at least half were magic users.

Then, I began assigning each member of my team an area to cover once we infiltrated the building.

There was a suspicious area in the basement, so I and one of the stable hands would head there. He was an advanced-level wind magic user and was more skilled with a sword than I was, so I was happy to have him covering my back.

"Lord Ralf, how should we handle the brainwashed followers?"

"We don't have time to question them now, so for the time being, let's put them to sleep. You all know how to determine who's been brainwashed, right?"

The magical item that brought people out of a brainwashed state had an area of effect, meaning it worked on a large area. Once they were out of their brainwashed state, the victims wouldn't immediately regain their senses; for a time, they would appear zoned out. We would take advantage of that opportunity to put them to sleep. Although, rather than "put them to sleep," it would be more accurate to say, "knock them unconscious."

Those who continued to attack even after we employed the magical item were operating on their own initiative and, therefore, easily identifiable as enemies. We were instructed to capture them alive if possible, but if that wasn't feasible, we were authorized to use deadly force as necessary.

After securing the church, we would use the second magical item to break the magical formation and permanently free the people we'd previously rendered unconscious from the brainwashing spell.

Once we were able to question all of the brainwashing victims, the mission would be complete.

"It's almost the appointed time."

I looked up at the sky.

All the servants took up their assigned positions and prepared the spell that would break the barrier around the church. It was a high-level barrier, but I was confident it stood no chance against them.

There! The night sky, which was the same color as Neema's eyes, was suddenly lit up by a powerful flash of bluish-white light. That spell, Supernova Flash, which only an elite-level fire magic user could use, was Father's signal.

"Let's go!"

Perfectly in sync, the servants surrounding the church let their magic fly.

I was already running toward the building when I felt the faint impact of the barrier breaking. As I stepped inside, I activated the magical item to dispel the brainwashing spell's effects temporarily.

As I headed toward my assigned location, I could hear fighting from somewhere in the distance.

As soon as I entered the basement, I spotted a man with unfocused eyes stumbling around. The servant accompanying me quickly knocked out the man and bound his arms and legs.

We left the tied-up man lying on the ground and pressed forward.

Ahead of us, a sight came into view that made me doubt my eyes.

An enormous magic circle was on the ground and a mountain of dismembered bodies.

The cloying reek of blood made me feel sick.

I'd seen something like this in a book once.

“Are they trying to extract people’s magic?”

It was theorized that magic users possessed an organ responsible for creating their magic. The magic created in this organ entered their bloodstream and, from there, cycled throughout their body.

There was a method—a forbidden and illegal method—for extracting magic from a person’s blood. If you spilled a magic user’s blood inside a magic circle, the magic could be extracted from the blood and transferred into a magical stone.

The sight before us resembled that too closely for comfort.

“Lord Ralf!”

While I was distracted by the horrible sight in front of me, I failed to notice the naked blade of a sword heading straight toward me.

I reacted instantly, silently casting a wind spell that knocked the blade off course and gave me time to draw my sword and strike out at my opponent. I felt my sword sink into flesh and heard my opponent cry out. Then, I took a step back to get a look at the person I was fighting.

He was a man I’d never seen before, dressed in the robes of a priest. I’d scored a hit to the left side of his torso, but he was still breathing.

The servant was engaged with another enemy, and armed men poured out of a room further into the basement.

Before they got any closer, razor-sharp wind gusts sliced straight through their legs. The front row of men fell to the ground, unable to walk, but their comrades stepped right over them and kept coming.

I immediately prepared another spell and raised my sword.

I traded blows again and again with the attackers, but I wasn’t as strong as our servants.

Even thinking that was probably a moment of distraction that I couldn’t afford.

“Ah!”

One of the men whose legs had been amputated suddenly grabbed onto my leg. When I tried to shake him off, I slipped in a puddle of his blood.

Another enemy swung his sword down at me, and despite throwing my body out of the way at the last moment, I wasn't able to avoid a graze on my left arm.

"Water Needle!"

I cast the spell I'd been holding ready. A wickedly sharp shard of water flew through the air, piercing the right arm of the enemy who'd grazed me with his sword. The man reflexively dropped his sword, but he just as quickly drew a short sword, which he brandished with his uninjured left hand.

Fortunately, the moment I'd earned had been plenty.

That wasn't the only spell I had prepared.

I also had a magical stone with the written spell Blowing Wind attached to it. All I needed to do was fling this stone at my enemy and say the activation word.

"Cast!"

The magic exploding out of the runes destroyed the stone, and then the fire appeared. The flames fed on the Blowing Wind, becoming more powerful, then raced for the enemies like a living, reasoning creature.

The Blowing Wind pelted our enemies before being set ablaze by the furious flames. They ended their lives screaming in agony.

I let out a shaky breath and looked around to see that the servant and I were the only two left standing.

"What shall we do with the men whose legs were amputated?" asked the servant.

"I suppose they don't need legs to speak," I mused in response.

We walked over to a man who was attempting to drag himself across the floor, moaning in pain. He looked up at me with hateful eyes full of murderous rage.

"Who do you serve?" I asked.

But the man said nothing.

“That’s unfortunate. If you won’t speak, I’ll be forced to do something terrible...”

I stabbed my short sword into the man’s thigh.

The man shrieked, spittle flying from his mouth, and was about to lose his grip on consciousness.

“Recul Cresiolle.”

I cast the weakest healing spell on the man lying on the ground before me. It was enough to stop the man’s bleeding and prevent him from slipping into blissful unconsciousness.

“I can use healing magic, so if you don’t talk, we can keep doing this all night long...”

Staring up at my face, the man began trembling.

“I-I don’t know, I swear! We just call him the Holy Master...”

“I see. And who might be able to tell me more about this ‘Holy Master,’ hm?”

Still looking absolutely terrified, the man pointed to one of his associates.

I gestured to the servant with my eyes, and he knocked the man in front of me unconscious.

The man he pointed out was unconscious, but I brought him around quickly enough with a few hard slaps.

I brandished my shortsword and demanded the man tell me the name of their leader, but he didn’t seem to feel like talking.

“You leave me no choice, then,” I lamented before reaching down and breaking one of the man’s fingers.

The finger broke with a *CRACK!* like the sound of a tree branch snapping, and the man howled in pain.

I broke another finger. And another. Before long, I found myself starting on his other hand.

“H-His name is Calum Asdyllon!”

“Calum Asdyllon, hm? ...It’s clearly a fake name, but he certainly did choose a shamelessly lofty name for himself, didn’t he?”

Asdyllon was the name of this world in Celestian, the holy language.

The God of Creation’s given name has not survived in our legends, but some speculate that Asdyllon might actually be his name.

And Calum meant “power.”

In short, this name essentially meant “The power of the God of Creation.” But did he mean it as “I will serve the God of Creation, becoming a force in his name,” or did he mean it as “I possess all the power of the God of Creation, a force unto myself?”

Either way, it was sacrilege for any servant of the God of Creation to go around calling themselves Asdyllon.

“And what are your plans?”

“We will create a world where people can live happily! That is the mission we were given by the God of Creation!”

“I see, and that’s why you wanted the beloved child... But isn’t harming a beloved child equivalent to a personal attack against the God of Creation?”

If they had a beloved child, they could use the power of the God of Creation that existed abundantly in this world.

Holy beasts were known to prioritize beloved children over even their bonded master occasionally, and even the elemental kings would probably cooperate with the wishes of a beloved child.

However, if the beloved child were targeted or brainwashed, the perpetrator would undoubtedly incur the wrath of the God of Creation.

If that happened, mankind would be in danger of being wiped out.

“And what about the people sacrificed here? Where did you get them? The purpose of this magic circle is to steal the magic from their blood and put it into magical stones, right?”

Falling silent again, eh? Fine, if you want to play it that way...

This time, I moved on from his fingers and stabbed my short sword straight through the back of his hand.

Probably due to the pain, the man spilled forth an abundance of tears, snot, and drool that made his already hideous face even more filthy.

“...We bought them from the Icouxian traders!”

So that's where the connection comes in. This is related to the human traffickers from Icoux that Will's been investigating.

“I see. And you're going to be a good boy and tell me all about those traders, aren't you?”

I was forced to bleed him countless times, repeatedly healing him so he wouldn't die in the process, but in the end, I got everything out of him.

I knew it was unforgivable to use healing magic for something like this, but to protect something so precious, I would happily do the same thing a hundred times over.

In the end, we decided to take just this man captive and transfer him to another location.

There were still many things we needed to do.

First, we gathered the brainwashed victims and used the second magical item to break the magical formulation of the spell cast on them.

Once they awoke, we questioned them and then handed them over to the royal knighthood according to plan.

We also recovered all of the documents Runohark had left behind and brought them back to go through at a later date.

Father probably gathered the most valuable information of anyone that night, though.

“Excellent work, Lord Ralf.”

“I guess it was worth being put through the wringer by all of you, huh?”

I was certain that it wouldn't have gone nearly this well if not for the servants'

harsh but effective training.

In any case, my job is done for now.

I wonder how Karna made out? I'm worried about her, so I'd better hurry back to the manor.

4 - Making Our Move (POV: Olive)

EVERYONE knew their roles, and we got a little help, but I hadn't expected things to go *this* well.

Yes, the results exceeded all expectations in many senses.

The day after the Osphe family's secret mission, I was left clutching my head at the contents of the reports I'd received.

The church in the upper nobility district that Dayle had been in charge of was half-destroyed. In fact, it was deemed liable to collapse at any moment, and a contingent of magic users had been emergency-deployed to secure the area and preserve what they could.

Cerulia's situation hadn't been much better.

She'd been assigned a shop in the commerce district being used as a front for the import and distribution of illegal drugs. It was also suspected that underhanded dealings were going on in its basement.

From what I heard, the moment Cerulia set eyes on the scene, she coated everything and everyone except for the innocent victims in a thick layer of ice.

Based on reports from the scene, responders had used magic to melt the glacier enveloping the former shop to a degree but couldn't risk employing any more magic than they'd already used without starting a fire, so they were left with no option but to wait for it to melt naturally.

As for the inn in the residential district's first ward, things had gone smoothly up to the point where they'd rescued all the brainwashing victims, but everything fell apart after that... Fighting broke out with the Runohark agents, and Karna accidentally activated a magical item, resulting in the inn burning to the ground.

At least it was confirmed that all the Runohark agents had burned to death in the fire.

Probably the biggest success was Ralf's handling of the church in the residential district's fourth ward.

All the brainwashing victims had been saved, and although many of the Runohark agents were killed, they'd successfully captured someone who possessed valuable information. Because the building and scene were preserved in excellent condition, they'd even determined the identities of some of the victims that had been discovered as dismembered bodies, though sadly not all.

Once *he'd* finished cleaning up the fallout from their actions, he had the nerve to show his face before the cabinet, looking just as cheerful and unphased as ever.

"So what's the next move?" I asked, glaring at Dayle—the criminal responsible for my pounding headache.

"Ideally, I'd love to get my hands on this so-called 'Holy Master,' but..."

All the bits of information each group had collected were spread out in front of us.

We finally had a name for the mysterious figure believed to be orchestrating Runohark's actions: the "Holy Master" who called himself Calum Asdyllon.

This guy sure has a lot of nerve, going around calling himself "the power of the God of Creation!"

"So I thought, but it's not certain we'll be able to catch him, right?"

"...What are you trying to say, Eugene?"

"As a country, our objective should not be just to capture this person, but more importantly, to put an end to whatever he's trying to achieve, right?"

Eugene does make a good point. We can't not capture him.

If Neema was correct and Runohark are trying to start a war, then we need to prevent that. There are also multiple natural disasters we need to avert.

But if there is any possibility of catching this guy, we've got to do it. It won't be easy, but it needs to be done.

“Does that mean you have a plan in mind, Eugene?” Sanrus interjected, seeming interested in Eugene’s statement.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to call it a plan, but...”

Despite this unpromising disclaimer, what Eugene described was unexpected.

The reason war was threatening to break out was because of natural disasters. Drought, flooding, food shortages... Most were terrible disasters focused in and around Icoux.

And why were these natural disasters occurring?

If Neema’s theory was correct, it was because the monsters had disappeared.

In summary, the current situation was already bordering on total continent-wide chaos and was only getting worse.

Following the historic Great Monster Extermination, natural disasters occurred one after another, and fighting broke out among the various countries, ultimately dragging the entire continent into an Era of Turmoil.

In the midst of all that, our country, the Kingdom of Gaché, was born.

According to His Highness Prince Wilhelt, the first king of our country was a beloved child.

The fact that all of these similarities lined up *could* mean that the God of Creation sent beloved children to put an end to the wars.

“From what I’ve heard, elementalists were common back then. So it wouldn’t be strange for the Church of Divine Creation to be well aware that the first king was a beloved child,” Eugene concluded.

Back then, the mainstream Church of Divine Creation’s beliefs still aligned with what has now been termed the “Ancient Divine Creation Faction.”

Primarily, the belief that the God of Creation created all things in this world and that the complex relationships between them made up the framework of the world.

For that reason, it was believed that nothing unnecessary could continue to exist, and therefore, nothing that existed was unnecessary.

Because of this, the Church of Divine Creation back then must have been opposed to the Great Monster Extermination, right? They'd probably been trying to do something to end the war.

"The clues lie with the first king and the Ancient Divine Creation Faction."

"I see... In that case, it's possible we still have some records in each of our houses."

The founders of our family lines had been the loyal vassals of the first king, after all. Hopefully, they'd left something behind for us to find.

"That's right. As for the first king, let's ask His Majesty to look into him," Dayle suggested.

Sanrus and Eugene nodded in agreement, but the other person rounding out our group scratched his cheek with a troubled expression.

"Err, you think it might be okay for me to assign this task to my son?"

Good grief, Gouche! When it comes to fighting, no matter how complicated and difficult a battle plan is, you understand it from all angles immediately, but you really are useless when it comes to things like this, huh?!

"Make sure you have him vow upon his name not to speak a word of any of this to anyone else," Dayle cautioned.

"...Of course, that goes without saying."

I'm a little... No, I'm very uneasy about this!

"I'll assist with going through Gouche's records," I finally volunteered.

"That would probably be a good idea."

Dayle and Sanrus were chuckling, but this was no laughing matter.

"Sorry..." Gouche apologized sheepishly.

"What about the Ancient Divine Creation Faction?" Sanrus asked, redirecting the conversation back on course.

Then Eugene said something truly shocking.

"I think we should go public with this incident and bag all of them at once."

Eugene's plan was to publicly announce what had been uncovered in the previous night's covert operation, dealing a huge blow to the Church of Divine Creation's reputation and drawing attention to them.

He reasoned that they would refute their findings and protest the arrests of their priests. That would allow us to push for a large-scale purge within the church's ranks, which they would likely agree to repair the damage to their reputation.

"The followers have no way of knowing which priests were involved with the crimes, so the upper ranks within the Church of Divine Creation will probably cast the blame on those who are in their way, taking advantage of the opportunity to drive them out."

"And you think the people they'll use as scapegoats—those who are 'in the way,' as you put it—are the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction?"

"Exactly. If you look into the teachings of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction, they focus on equality and coexistence among all the species. In contrast, the currently reigning Supremacist Faction promotes the idea of humans ruling over all the other species. They claim that humans are the intended stewards of this world."

They really are polar opposite ideologies. But will whoever's appointed as the next high priest of the Kingdom of Gaché go along with us harboring all the Ancient Divine Creation Faction members?

"What will we do about the new high priest?" I asked, and Sanrus answered.

"That one's easy. The Church of Divine Creation owes our country a huge debt due to this incident, so we can insist they appoint basically anyone we want. Even among the Supremacist Faction, there *are* a few good priests. Priest Calius, for example."

At the sound of this nostalgic name, everyone widened their eyes.

"Indeed... He's probably the most trustworthy of the priests we know," Dayle agreed.

Aside from Gouche, the rest of us had known Calius during our days at the royal academy. He was the kind of person who observed things with impartiality

and could be counted on to gravitate to followers who were troubled. He was the most deserving of the title of “priest” out of anyone I knew.

“Do you know Priest Calius, Gouche?” Dayle asked, curious to see Gouche also nodding in agreement with his previous statement.

“Yeah, my son received his guidance in the past...”

Ohh... That’s right, Gouche’s son went through a bit of a troubled period... I suppose it’s hard to be the child of such an influential parent.

“But if we’re going to play this in our favor, we’ll have to act quick. If they get the advantage, we won’t be in much of a position to negotiate.”

Essentially, he was saying that we needed to reveal the Church of Divine Creation’s wrongdoings before they got a chance to cover everything up.

“In that case, let’s get right to work. I’ll write up an official account of the plan we’ve just outlined,” I announced.

“I’ll prepare the public announcement so that it’s ready to be released once we obtain His Majesty’s approval,” Sanrus offered.

“Excellent, I’ll leave that part to you then,” I agreed, happy to divide and conquer to get things done faster.

“I will handle the preparations for taking in the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction who are likely to be driven out,” Dayle said.

Good idea. Dayle is the best choice for anything having to do with the intelligence department. I’m pretty sure he’s planning to contact the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction and warn them that they’re probably going to be scapegoated and driven out, then ask them to work with us...

Oh, but this won’t do!

When you think about it, it’s essentially our fault they’ll be driven out. For that reason, some will refuse to cooperate with us, and even for those who do, we’ll need to offer them a lifestyle comparable to what they’re used to.

Even if Dayle covers the damages he caused with this little operation, we’ll still need to find funding for the rest.

“Sanrus, regarding the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction’s livelihood...” I started hesitantly.

“You’re worried about funding, right? That’s no problem; we can use the money intended to be donations to the Church of Divine Creation. Besides, we’ve suffered damages as well. I would say we’re entitled to some compensation for that.”

That’s certainly true. Even if they were poor peasants from the slums, the victims were citizens of this country. I hope that this argument is successful, but...

“Well, I’ll see what I can do,” I concluded with all the optimism I could muster.

Once our conversation was finished, I immediately got to work preparing a petition to present to His Majesty.

As for His Majesty’s answer, well...

“Goodness, you all sure have been busy doing bad things! Well, it’s fine. They seriously underestimated our country this time, so they deserve a slap to the wrist.”

Personally, I thought His Majesty was the “bad” one for the wicked smile on his face as he said that, but I wisely kept that opinion to myself.

Besides, I knew more than he probably realized.

For example, I knew that because the captured high priest had been scheming to worm his way into the government, His Majesty would use this incident as justification for forcing the Church of Divine Creation even further away from government affairs.

I’m sure he’s thrilled the perfect ammunition fell right into his lap.

Once His Majesty granted his approval of our plan, Sanrus got right to work spreading the news throughout the country.

Since it was an official government announcement, the citizens were shocked and immediately began distrusting the Church of Divine Creation. The general sentiment among the populace quickly turned to anger with the news that their fellow countrymen had been murdered and the child of a noble family had been

kidnapped.

In any case, it looked like we'd succeeded in making the first move.

In no time, a letter arrived from the Church of Divine Creation, attempting to dispute the accuracy of the events reported in our official announcement.

Now comes the real battle! We'll make you regret underestimating the Kingdom of Gaché!



“**LADY** Olive, a representative from the Church of Divine Creation is here to see you.”

“Thank you. I'll take care of it from here.”

They've finally shown their faces. I wonder if this means they've finally accepted that this isn't something they can settle through an exchange of letters.

Eugene was waiting for me in the hall as I made my way to the audience room.

“I'll join you.”

“I'd be very grateful to have you, but are you sure you have time with all the other work you've got?”

Eugene must be busier than ever as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. We were *all* busy, of course, but none of us could hold a torch to the amount of work currently falling on Eugene's shoulders when it came to dealing with Runohark.

“Don't worry about me. I'm fortunate to have some very reliable people working under me.”

“In that case, I'll gladly take you up on your offer.”

With Eugene and a royal guard trailing behind, I made my way to the audience room, where a man dressed in the robes of a priest was waiting for us.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting.”

“Not at all; I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me.”

The priest was employing the social manners of our country, so I responded in kind.

“I am the current Minister of Internal Affairs, Olive Wise. This is the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eugene Dierta.”

“The Church of Divine Creation’s headquarters in Farshia dispatched me; my name is Eryst.”

The priest who’d identified himself as Eryst wore robes with blue embroidery, telling me he was a bishop. At the rank of bishop, he would be eligible to become a high priest, in charge of overseeing all the churches in a specific country.

Is that what he’s trying to achieve by coming here?

“Please, have a seat,” I graciously suggested, sitting beside Eugene, opposite the seat I’d offered to the priest.

I intentionally didn’t call for tea. I didn’t want to give the priest the mistaken impression we were welcoming any member of the Church of Divine Creation as a valued guest.

“Go ahead and say what you’ve come here to say, then,” I instructed. I forced a faint smile, and Priest Eryst’s face took on a suspicious expression as he began to speak.

“Why didn’t you attempt to consult with us regarding this incident before announcing it to the world?”

I didn’t let it show, but I was astounded by the audacity of this question.

He’s here as a representative of the Church of Divine Creation, right? Isn’t it common sense to start by offering a sincere and profuse apology?!

“Because our prime objective is to protect the citizens of our country. To prevent there being any more victims, we had no choice but to inform our citizens of the situation so they could protect themselves from harm.”

“Even so, isn’t this going a little too far? I understand arresting those who were involved in committing crimes, but why were the high priest and other ranking officials also arrested? And why was one of our churches defaced in

such a blasphemous manner?”

Irritated by the unnecessary hassle of laying out facts that we both knew full well, I nevertheless began explaining everything.

“First of all, in regards to the high priest and other ranking officials...”

The main reason we arrested them was to get information out of them, but conveniently, they’d committed a variety of offenses, including bribery and smuggling, that allowed us to justifiably hold them in the dungeon.

Internal church affairs were not subject to national laws, but public offenses such as embezzlement were grounds for prosecution.

Furthermore, in this case, the ranking officials could be viewed as accomplices.

We weren’t sure exactly what Runohark were up to, but it was apparent the church had been aiding and abetting Runohark and the mysterious “Holy Master.” At the very least by providing hideouts and funding.

Even so, everyone we’d questioned swore they’d never met the Holy Master in person, so there wasn’t much to go on.

It appeared that Runohark had its own sources of funding, making it a financially stable organization.

We could also assume from the fact that Neema had been kidnapped from the church in the upper-nobility district that members of the upper ranks within the church were involved with Runohark.

In short, it wouldn’t be surprising if it turned out that the Church of Divine Creation themselves were, in fact, a criminal organization.

“The criminals we captured were almost all priests of the Church of Divine Creation,” I concluded.

“The criminals must have been using our church as a cover, *pretending* to be priests,” Priest Eryst insisted.

“We aren’t stupid. You and I both know very well that the written magic embroidered on the priests’ robes is unique and nearly impossible to duplicate,” Eugene butted in, finally speaking up for the first time.

According to the reports we'd received from Ralf, some of the perpetrators had been wearing a style of robes that were unlike anything he'd ever seen before, but even so, these robes were embroidered with the Church of Divine Creation's trademark written magic.

...I'd like to see them for myself.

"We have more than enough proof that the criminals are priests of the Church of Divine Creation. Do you intend to continue making excuses and avoiding taking responsibility?"

"It's not our fault if those individuals got involved with criminal activity on their own initiative," Eryst protested.

"Don't you know anything? Those standing at the top are responsible for everything down below. If your subordinates commit crimes, it means that as a supervisor, you failed to monitor their actions," Eugene said sternly.

I do understand what Eugene's saying, but...

All criminals have different motivations for committing crimes, and even I couldn't say with absolute certainty that I would immediately notice someone working under me was involved with criminal activity if they had the right kind of twisted personality to be able to hide it.

Although, I would probably assign people to watch over them more carefully. The people we're talking about are worms dressing themselves up in the mantle of saints, after all.

Especially the high priest that we arrested; he seems to be under the delusion that he's a capable person. That's why he's so wildly ambitious and genuinely seemed to believe that his wicked actions would never come to light.

From Runohark's perspective, that must've made him the ideal disposable piece on their chessboard.

"And yet you still intend to make the Church of Divine Creation out to be the victims, all the while refusing to take any responsibility? *Our citizens* are the ones who've suffered the most here. If you ask me, it's the very least you can do to offer a public apology and launch a thorough investigation to ferret out everyone involved with these crimes and punish them so no one else is

harmed.”

Priest Eryst was rendered speechless by Eugene’s proclamation.

If they carried out a purge because of this, it would work out exactly as we’d planned.

“Oh, and I almost forgot! Regarding the church in the upper-nobility district...”

Eugene went on to explain that the daughter of a noble family—he was intentionally vague as to the girl’s identity so that no one would connect her to Neema—had been kidnapped. He then explained that the royal knighthood had managed to rescue the girl, but due to the trauma of the incident, she’d become unable to leave her room. In a fit of rage, her father had retaliated by unleashing his magic, leveling the church.

...That’s a load of crap!

Eugene then announced that our country would hold this girl’s father responsible for the cost of repairing the church but that due to the church’s destruction, there had been no possibility of keeping the incident quiet, and therefore, our country took no responsibility for anything that had happened as a result.

“Furthermore, for the time being, the country will no longer be making annual donations to the church.”

“...That is... Forgive me, but this goes far beyond the scope of my authority. Might I be allowed to bring this information back to my superiors and discuss it with them before giving you our formal reply?” Priest Eryst finally said, seeming gobsmacked.

“Certainly. We’ll be anticipating a merciful decision, befitting men who claim to serve God.”

Oh, my... Now, it really sounds like Eugene is threatening them. There’s no way they can continue to demand donations now...

“Thank you very much. While I’m aware that it isn’t nearly enough, please allow me to personally express my sincerest regrets and apologies for this incident.”

Oh, he's good. Despite offering a socially required and seemingly heartfelt apology, he also avoided admitting any fault or acknowledging any wrongdoing. His apology could be referring to the church's crimes or simply to his inability to render a decision on his own at this meeting.

I suppose he couldn't come right out and apologize for the crimes that occurred without essentially admitting the Church of Divine Creation is involved with Runohark, so he had to phrase it ambiguously.

Hmm, I wonder how the Church of Divine Creation will play this...

After Priest Eryst left, Eugene and I finally called for tea.

"He seemed pretty used to dealing with these kinds of situations, don't you think?" Eugene observed.

"Yeah, you might be right. But it still seems everything is going to plan. The information regarding all the crimes the Church of Divine Creation committed here has probably already begun to spread to the other countries by this point," I replied.

If that happened, the church's followers—not only here in the Kingdom of Gaché but also in other countries—would start to harbor distrust of the Church of Divine Creation.

The Church of Divine Creation would need to allay that distrust.

They'd proclaimed the news of the Goddess' Descent until they were blue in the face, but even the validity of this widely-reported event would possibly be disputed.

I could think of three possible routes the Church of Divine Creation might take.

They might parade out their Blessed Ones—sometimes referred to as holy maidens—and have them perform several miraculous healings.

They might announce a divine message that one of the oracles had allegedly received directly from the God of Creation. Although, if that message were disproved, there would be no recovering from the resulting fallout, so I doubted they'd risk going with this plan.

Which left only the most simple and effective solution: selective layoffs—aka scapegoating.

The average believer had no idea what went on within the borders of the Church of Divine Creation's headquarters in Farshia.

Heck, if I could get away with abusing my authority, I, too, would love nothing more than to surround myself with only the people I get along with and fire everyone else!

...Come to think of it, isn't it said that Farshia is considered "holy ground" because long ago, the Goddess Descended there? Oh, that gives me an idea!

"Eugene, I've got something I urgently need to take care of, so I'm going to leave now."

"Oh, okay. ...I'll keep myself entertained, then. Don't worry about me."

"Just don't get yourself into trouble, okay?"

After parting ways with Eugene, I returned to my office and got to work issuing orders to my subordinates.

Hehe, Neema will sure be surprised when she learns of this!



"I heard you were sent to the church in the upper-nobility district?"

"...Yeah. I've never seen such a terrifying sight in my life."

Inside one of the outposts of the royal knighthood in the royal city, men clustered together, discussing in hushed voices the events they'd witnessed a few days prior.

"Can you believe it? The moaning, burnt-out husks that were all that remained of his enemies were piled in mountains all around His Excellency, the prime minister. I heard that when the commander asked *him* if he'd been involved in the explosion, apparently, he responded that he'd been attempting to question a captive."

"By 'questioning,' he was referring to torture, right?"

"Yeah. Apparently, he burned off bits of the captured enemy's skin one piece

at a time until they talked. And I heard that the explosion occurred when he got to their head...”

The knight, who’d witnessed firsthand the complete lack of remorse on Prime Minister Dayland Osphe’s face that day, described the horrifying scene to his colleagues.

They’d all been forced to hurt criminals as a part of their job, but that seemed like child’s play in comparison to *this*.

Another of the colleagues recounted his own tale of horror from that day.

“I thought my eyes and ears were deceiving me at the location I was sent to, too. I never would’ve believed it if I hadn’t seen with my own eyes the sight of that delicate and beautiful noble young lady burning criminals to death, her eyes as cold as ice.”

Another of the knights had approached the young lady in question and been about to call out to her after seeing her gazing unblinkingly at the burning inn with that cold stare. But he’d been shocked by the words he’d heard a man standing beside her, dressed like a butler, say as he drew closer.

“Lady Karna... You intentionally set the magical item off, didn’t you?”

“We’re not going to get any more information here. I’m sure Mother and Father will gather enough anyways, so we don’t need these scumbags.”

That cute and harmless-looking young noblewoman, Karnadia Osphe, had burned the building to the ground with all the criminals still inside because she’d deemed them unnecessary.

“She’s still a child, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. But she seemed every bit as aware and determined as any of us.”

“You think the aristocrats all make their kids do things like that?!”

One after another, the gathered knights thanked their lucky stars they’d been born as commoners.

From that day forward, the Osphe Family would become an object of whispered tales retold fearfully amongst the knighthood.

5 - I Want to Be Soothed by Lars' Fur!

WHICH horror movie's plot is this that I've been forced to listen to?!

Explosions, people frozen in ice and burned to blackened husks... What in the fluffy paradise happened while I was sleeping?!

"I understand *Father*, but Ralf and Karna participated as well?" I asked skeptically.

"That's right. Ralf did his part very well."

Auntie Olive looked like she'd just bitten into something unexpectedly bitter.

Is she trying not to remember something unpleasant?

"...So, what happened to the Church of Divine Creation after that?" I wanted to hear more about what happened after that Priest Ery-something-or-other went home.

"What, do you think Eugene and I would fail or something?"

Apparently, the Church of Divine Creation publicly recognized that a criminal organization had taken over a portion of its clergy and issued an official apology. Then, calling it a "cleansing," they'd purged all the members they claimed had been involved with the criminal organization.

As Auntie Olive and the others had suspected, they targeted the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction and forced them out. Half of the ousted members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction had been taken in by our country, and the other half had gone to the Linus Empire.

My first reaction was to wonder, *Why the Linus Empire?* But as Uncle Gene explained, it was because a few elementalists were there, probably due to the holy beasts' presence.

"We got reparation money and were successful in *suggesting* they appoint Priest Calius as the next high priest of the Kingdom of Gaché. Now all that's left is to catch this 'Holy Master' person!"

I was thoroughly impressed with all they'd accomplished, though maybe I shouldn't have been surprised considering they *were* the highest-ranking officials in the land, responsible for the smooth running of the entire country.

"In the end, I wonder what Runohark's objective was?" I speculated aloud.

"The people we captured said they wanted to create a world where humans were at the pinnacle of the social structure. They claimed that this would lead to peace and happiness for all," Papa explained.

Isn't that identical to the beliefs of the Supremacist Faction within the Church of Divine Creation? Is this what you call an "extremist group?"

But to go as far as starting a war over differences in religious beliefs? ...Yeah, I suppose that's not unheard of either. But I wonder what the other species think about this. From what I've heard, demons are a hedonistic species; their main priority seems to be enjoying the present, so I'd guess they aren't terribly phased by things that don't immediately affect them.

But what about beastpeople and elves? I couldn't bear it if they took an opposing stance against humans and fighting broke out. If beastpeople began hating humans, my dream would never become a reality!

"What were the other species' reactions?" I asked.

"Hm? There wasn't much of a reaction, as far as I'm aware..." Papa replied, seeming a bit confused by the question.

I wonder if that's true... I glanced at Uncle Gene doubtfully, and he confirmed what Papa had said.

"There seems to be no change, good or bad, from the beastpeople or the elves."

I would count my blessings, then, that at least things hadn't gotten worse.

"It'll be okay. We're working hard so it won't turn into the kind of thing I'm sure you're worrying about."

The fact that they, as the cabinet ministers, were working on it meant that this was a large-scale operation. To avoid souring interspecies relations, they might even be manipulating the flow of information...

"I know you'll be getting busy from here on out, Neema, but if you're ever in trouble, don't hesitate to lean on us," Uncle Sanrus said kindly, but his words confused me.

I'm pretty sure Ralf is the one who's going to be busy, not me...

"I'll be getting busy?" I asked.

"That's right. Your schedule is packed for the foreseeable future," Mama confirmed, but I still had no idea what she was referring to. "At Olive's request, we'll visit with the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction tomorrow. The visit to the Shiana Special Region will take several days, and you've also been requested to visit the Mieuxga Special Region. Several other individuals have also requested meetings with you. Let's see, what else was there...?"

There's even more?! They're not expecting me to do all this by myself, are they?!

"...You'll be with me, right, Mother?"

"Of course, dear. If I'm unable to accompany you, Dayle will take my place."

I was relieved to hear that either Papa or Mama would be with me at all times. Even if I messed up, they'd swoop in and cover for me.

But I need to keep my wits about me so I don't mess up in the first place! Although to be perfectly honest, I think I'm going to have my hands full just keeping up with all that's gone on while I was sleeping.

"It looks like it's about time," Uncle Sanrus said, and a moment later, there was a knock on the door of the audience room.

Uncle Sanrus, you really are incredible! How did you sense someone approaching through that heavy wooden door?!

While Auntie Olive answered the door, I bid Uncle Sanrus and Uncle Gene farewell.

"I'll swing by the manor sometime to visit you. Your souvenirs from my travels have piled up while you've been sleeping," Uncle Gene told me.

"And I'm sure my wife will want to see for herself that you're healthy as ever," Uncle Sanrus added.

Uncle Gene and Uncle Sanrus took turns patting my head affectionately.

Our entire families were close, so I would have to find time to visit their families when I could.

I sure have a lot of people I need to catch up with now that I'm awake!

"It looks like the dagger I gave you didn't help very much, so I'll make sure to choose something better next time," Grandpa Gouche said, playfully lifting me over his head.

...I forgot about the dagger!

"I forgot all about it..." I muttered.

"It's not your fault; I'm the one who never got around to teaching you how to use it."

Come to think of it, I'd only ever used that dagger to peel fruit.

Just the idea of using it on a person was more than a little intimidating.

When I mentioned that, Grandpa Gouche looked thoughtful for a minute before turning to Papa and suggesting, "What if we gave Neema the ability to protect herself? Whether by teaching her to use the dagger I gave her or arming her with some kind of magical item..."

"Yeah, I'd been thinking that myself. Please tell me if you can think of something suitable."

Once Grandpa Gouche released me, he and Papa fell into a deep conversation.

Based on how this is going, I might end up enrolled in a self-defense course!

I loved anything that involved physical activity, so I was on board with that plan.

"See you tomorrow, Neema!" Auntie Olive called out, winking and waving goodbye. Since we'd be meeting again the next day, she didn't expend much effort on this brief farewell.

Papa and the other cabinet ministers returned to work, and Shinki left with Grandpa Gouche, saying he'd pass the time training while he waited for us.

Grandpa Gouche seemed enthusiastic when he promised to “keep Shinki company” for us, so I assumed this meant they’d probably make a huge spectacle of themselves going at it in the training area, as usual.

As for Mama and me, a maid led us through the palace to our promised tea party with the queen.

The garden was full of a spectacular array of seasonal flowers in full bloom. Amongst the botanical flowers, a group of stunningly beautiful people who could easily be called human flowers sat chatting amicably together. It was truly a breathtaking sight.

“Our apologies for keeping you all waiting.”

Mama and I curtsied to the gathered group, and the queen directed us to our seats with a kind smile.

“Louis and Theo were kind enough to bring me some sweets as a present. Neema, you love pechenne, don’t you?”

“Yes, I most certainly do!”

Pechenne was a bite-sized baked sweet originating in the Linus Empire. I wasn’t sure if referring to it as a cake or maybe a tart was more accurate, but either way, it was my favorite way to enjoy the incomparable sweetness of the peche, a fruit similar to a peach.

Seeing my eyes go straight to the pechenne on the table, the queen picked up a piece and held it out to me.

“Here, say ‘ah’!”

Used to this pattern of pet-like feeding the queen indulged in during our occasional tea parties, I reflexively opened my mouth.

“Neema...”

I stiffened at the astounded tone of Mama’s voice, but the queen hurried to my rescue.

“There’s no harm in it, is there?”

The way the queen said this poutily to Mama without even attempting to hide

her petulant expression was just too adorable.

“...Sister, you’re troubling Her Grace. Can’t you be a bit more regal?”

“But Louis! Neema’s going to Linus! If I don’t dote on her now, I don’t know when I’ll get another chance!” The queen turned her adorable pout on her younger brother.

“That’s not happening right away. Why don’t you ask Lord Osphe to arrange some time for you to spend with her?”

“Oh, that’s a splendid idea! I’ll do that!”

The queen looked delighted, but Will muttered next to me.

“I bet she’s planning to make another outfit...”

“Huh?!” I squeaked.

There had previously been an... *incident*... where I’d received an absolutely terrifying dress from the queen, which she claimed had been designed by Will and that she insisted I wear to the new year’s party at the royal palace.

That had been terribly embarrassing and, in general, bad for my heart, so it was an experience I wanted to avoid repeating at all costs.

“Heh, good luck,” Will snickered.

As if I’d be relieved at all by such insincere encouragement!

“Mother, shouldn’t we first decide upon a date for the observation trip?”

The queen laughed elegantly in response to Will’s suggestion, then said something outrageous.

“I suppose you’re impatient because you can’t hog Neema all to yourself until we finish deciding that, eh, Will?”

Oh god, don’t tell me Queen Relena’s still holding out hope Will and I will end up together... Can’t they rustle him up a potential fiancée or two already?!

Wait...

“Will, you don’t have a fiancée yet, do you?” I asked.

“Not even remotely close.”

“Why not?!”

I’d forgotten, but Will was the same age as my brother, which meant he was already seventeen years old.

In the Kingdom of Gaché, that made him a provisional adult.

A provisional adult was viewed as somewhere between an adult and a child; you could say it was sort of a transitional period. Once a person turned eighteen, they would be an official adult in the eyes of the law, but it was exceedingly rare for a member of the royal family to reach maturity without having decided on their engagement.

Come to think of it, I don’t think Ralf’s engaged yet, either.

“I don’t have the time, money, or personnel to spare on a fiancée right now. I’ll explain it to you more later.”

Oh, right. Sorry. That isn’t exactly something you want to discuss in the presence of guests.

But come on, Queen Relena! Knock it off with that sneaky grin! I see you over there, a grown woman of the highest rank, grinning like an angsty middle-schooler eagerly shipping her favorite couple!

“What are you most interested in seeing during the observation tour?” Mama asked the two men, gracefully changing the topic and clearing the awkward tension from the air.

The queen’s brother responded in an almost blandly appropriate manner, but the queen’s nephew came out with a borderline outrageous request...

“We’re eager to learn more about monsters, of course, but we’re most interested in this ‘hot spring bath house’ we’ve heard so much about,” Louis said diplomatically.

“I’d be happy if you could arrange a practice fight with the infamous Purple Gandal,” Theo chimed in.

That’s all fine and well, but you know what’s really bothering me... This entire time, I haven’t seen Theo show even a single flicker of any expression whatsoever! I can imagine how intimidating it would be if this androgynous

beauty with such a strong resemblance to Queen Relena glared coldly at someone...

“Very well. I would be happy to pass on your request to Purple Gandal.”

The fact that Mama responded that way must mean that Uncle Phillip and his party are still on Mount Reitimo? There’s no way they’ve been camping out in the forest this whole time... is there?

“How would four days from now work for you, gentlemen?” Mama suggested, and the two agreed.

I bet they’ll spend the four days between now and then taking a tour of the royal city and consulting with the cabinet ministers.

The conversation turned to a light-hearted discussion of current events until I suddenly remembered something I’d been curious about and decided to bring it up.

“I was wondering... Is the water holy beast residing in the Linus Empire a Pegasus?” I inquired.

“Oh, have you met a water holy beast before?” the queen’s younger brother responded to my question with one of his own.

It wasn’t the holy beast from the Linus Empire, but I’d seen a water holy beast accompanying a band of traveling performers once. I’d not only *seen* it but also pet it to within an inch of its life!

“Yeah, she met Tarta from Troupe Jeux Vaughn,” Will jumped in to answer.

The queen’s brother remarked, “Oh, I see, it was Tarta...”

Will, is it okay for you to use such a casual tone with the imperial family of the Linus Empire?

“The water holy beasts’ names are Sache and Euche; they are magnificent Blue Pegasi,” the queen’s brother explained reverently.

Blue Pegasi were a type of holy beast. As you might imagine, based on their name, they were blue-colored winged horses that flew through the sky. But because they were water holy beasts, they could also allegedly transform into mist and travel that way as well.

As the queen's brother explained, Sache was a deep, rich blue, the color of the sky just before dawn, with a majestic yet benevolent bearing to match her coloring.

Euche was a clear, bright blue the color of a cloudless sky, and while he initially came across as cold and aloof, he had a kind heart.

I could tell by how he spoke about the holy beasts that the queen's brother adored them.

Even Queen Relena muttered, "There he goes again!" under her breath, leading me to believe this was common practice with him.

"You must be glad to have found a kindred spirit, eh?" Will whispered to me conspiratorially.

"Huh?" I tilted my head to the side in confusion at his strange comment, but Will only smirked back at me.

By "kindred spirit," is he referring to the queen's brother?! Hold on! Is this how I come across to everyone else?!

I looked back at the queen's brother—who even now continued to drone on enthusiastically about the holy beasts—with new eyes.

The way he spoke about them reminded me of an obsessed fan talking about their favorite celebrity or an anime-otaku extolling the virtues of their favorite fictional character.

Meaning he regards them with reverence and respect! I can relate to that! Although, in my case, I think it's more accurate to say that I'm most interested in loving, petting, and hugging the objects of my affection! I don't know what I'd do if an adorable fluffy critter were in front of me, and I couldn't pet them!

Going back to the celebrity-obsessed fan analogy, does that make me that creeper at an autograph session who shakes hands with their favorite celebrity and obsesses over their hand's softness and the scent of their body up close?

...I suppose I have no choice but to admit that my love of animals borders on freakish obsession.

In any case, what I'm trying to say is that even if we're in the same category,

we're different varieties! I suppose it would take someone in the category with us to appreciate the subtle difference, but still...

I swallowed down the instinct to refute Will's comment and waited for the queen's brother to finish what he was saying.

"Uncle, I think that's quite enough for now."

The queen's nephew...

Wait, that's kind of a weird way to put it. He's the nephew of both of them when you think about it... I'll just refer to him as Theo.

Theo glanced at me before speaking up to rein in the queen's brother.

I'll just refer to the queen's brother as Louis, too, to make things easier! But why did he glance over at me like that just now?

"The beloved child is clearly struggling to contain her desire to pet Lars."

Oh, is that it?! He saw my hands twitching and came to that conclusion? That's not it at all—I'm just struggling to contain my desire to talk back to Will!

Although, despite the misunderstanding, I certainly do want to get this over with so I can go pet Lars!

"Oh, don't mind me..."

Despite my polite protest, Louis concluded with, "I'm sure you're looking forward to your reunion with the sky tiger," and left it at that.

"If you insist, I'll borrow Neema for a bit then," Will said.

"Please do. I'm sure she's bored to tears having to listen to Uncle drone on and on. Oh, and Will—when you've got a moment, let's have a practice fight!" Theo said.

"Sure thing."

Hm? They sure seem friendly. I suppose that's not exactly strange; they are cousins, after all.

"...Are you and Lord Theo close?"

"I suppose you could say that. I've spent more time with him than any of his

siblings.”

Theo nodded in affirmation.

Before I could delve any further, Will announced we were leaving, so I bid farewell to the queen and hurried to follow him.

Lars appeared almost instantly at my side and allowed me to ride on his back.

“Thanks, Lars!”

I’d been having a hard time keeping up with Will even when flat-out running, so I was extremely grateful for Lars’ assistance.

Why does Will have to have such long legs?! I growled in frustration and clung to Lars even tighter. Sigh! I can’t get enough of the feeling of the soft fur on his cheeks.

I wiggled a bit on Lars’ back, letting my body sink face-first into his plush fur as much as possible. It was all but impossible to breathe like that, but I didn’t care—it was like being swallowed whole by the world’s most luxurious mattress.

It’s hard to breathe, but I’m going to bear with it as long as I can stand!

Once I reached the limit of my lungs’ capability to go without air, I finally raised my face and greedily gulped in several gasping breaths of fresh air.

I found Will staring at me incredulously, and from the look on his face, I could practically hear him wondering if someone had dropped me on my head when I was a baby.



“Are you even capable of acting with decorum?” Will finally asked.

“...What’s the point of starting now?”

Everybody already knows how much I love Lars! I wouldn’t be surprised if at least half of the staff working in the palace have seen us together before at one point or another.

“I suppose that’s true...”

Hold on, even though I said it, for some reason, it bothers me that you agreed so easily!

Even I didn’t understand the mysteries of my own mysterious female heart.

When we arrived in Will’s rooms, he asked me if I wanted tea, but I declined. I’d just had tea with the queen and was still full.

It had been a long time since I last visited Will’s rooms, but as always, they were spacious and minimalistic.

When we were having tea, we’d relax in the sitting room, but when I wanted to play with Lars, we always went to the room allotted for Lars’ exclusive use.

Lars’ room, located within Will’s suite of rooms, had a plush, long-fibered carpet and a massive cushion that served as Lars’ bed dominated the room. Multiple smaller cushions were also strategically placed around the room for humans to sit on.

After I slid off Lars’ back, he lay on his bed and stretched out, arranging his limbs in a comfortable position. I lay on Lars’ stomach, foregoing the cushions, and Will covered me with a blanket.

...Uh-oh, this is my usual naptime pose!

“Don’t fall asleep on me,” he said.

“...I’ll do my best.”

Will sat on one of the cushions and casually stretched his legs out in front of him.

“Now then, what should we talk about first...” Will pondered.

“I want to know about your engagement!”

There were a lot of things I wanted to ask, but this was the one I was most curious about. I couldn't help it—the curiosity was eating me alive.

It would be surprising if Will, who'd grown up with the expectation of a politically arranged marriage, was now insisting he would only marry for love or something, but that would also be an interesting development.

“First of all, assuming I did get engaged, my fiancée would be the future queen, and a portion of the funds allotted to me would be deducted to cover her expenses.”

As he went on to explain, those fees included the dresses and accessories she wore to parties, her specialized education in preparation for becoming queen, *etc.* Then, royal guards would be assigned as bodyguards to protect the future queen. Of course, the fiancée's family would have their own bodyguards, but these would be in addition to that.

There would be a large-scale meeting to formally approve the selection of a fiancée, and thereafter, periodic follow-up meetings would be held to confirm she was still suitable. The participants in those meetings would be chosen from families with relatives who'd previously married into royalty.

The fiancée would be closely monitored to see how her education for the role of queen was progressing and to make sure she wasn't displaying any problematic behaviors. This too would require personnel.

“And you're opposed to that?” I asked.

“Yeah. I've been busy while you were fast asleep, you know, and I'm still busy.”

You do know that sleeping for so long was outside my control, right?

“You've been busy? Doing what?”

If he's referring to his duties as crown prince, he's never seemed to have too much trouble getting them done before...

“I've been working on ferreting out the human trafficking ring.”

“Oh, is this the same matter that Auntie Olive was referring to?”

When we were discussing the hideout of Runohark's that Ralf had attacked, she'd mentioned that the victims there were connected to the matter Will had been investigating. I hadn't really understood what she was talking about, so it had gone over my head at the time, but apparently, this was a serious matter?

"Some time ago—I guess while we were in Lenice—Healran witnessed a group of knights kidnapping someone," he explained.

"Knights?!"

Why would knights, whose whole job is to protect people, do such a thing?!

According to Will, people had been going missing one after another in the slums of Lenice, and it turned out the source of the disappearances was a group of renegade knights kidnapping people to sell into slavery.

It was common knowledge in some circles that the slave traders from Icoux would buy anyone they could get their hands on regardless of age or gender, with the one caveat that they needed to be adults.

The first knight to catch wind of this potential windfall recruited others who needed money, and they began kidnapping people from the slums in each city they were stationed in.

It was believed that the people who had been sold were brought to Icoux and, from there, were purchased by Runohark.

"As we speak, agents from the espionage department have infiltrated the slave traders' operation and are working on collecting evidence. We need to obtain concrete proof that they're enslaving citizens of *our* country," he said.

If I remember correctly, slavery is legal in Icoux, but they aren't allowed to enslave the citizens of countries where slavery is outlawed. Does this mean they brought the kidnapped people to Icoux to try and pass them off as Icouxian citizens?

"With everything going on with Runohark as well, the investigation is taking time. So, for the time being, I don't want to be troubled by anything else unimportant."

I wouldn't call the selection of the future queen "unimportant!"

“And the king doesn’t have a problem with that?” I asked.

I would expect it to be a big deal for Will to not even have a fiancée yet, given how early people tended to get married in this world.

“He said he’ll give me two or three more cycles to do as I please.”

I suppose it’s fine if the king’s okay with it. But I am curious about who Will’s partner will be. I feel bad for whoever gets saddled with this black-hearted demon prince. She’ll have to be the most accomplished noblewoman in the world to be able to put up with him!

“But, in the end, I’ll *never* be able to get married without Lars’ permission.”

“What?”

Why can’t Will get married without Lars’ permission?

“The bond between a holy beast and their master is very deep. And exchanging a true name vow with their partner involves the partner in this relationship.”

By “true name vow,” he means the vow that a couple exchanges when they get married, promising to stay faithful to one another, right?

“Maybe it will be easier to understand if I phrase it as the couple ‘joining together by their true names’? In any case, Lars will feel compelled to protect my wife after I marry.”

Lars will protect Will’s wife on his own, without Will needing to order it?

“Meaning?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call into account her moral character, exactly, but at the very least, she’ll need to be compatible with the holy beast.”

I see. So basically, if Lars doesn’t approve of Will’s fiancée, he can’t marry her.

“The way things are going, you won’t be able to get married, either, unless you find a guy Sol approves of,” Will warned.

That’s fine with me! Marriage is not very high on my list of life goals.

“And if you don’t watch out, *you* might end up needing Lars’ permission as well.” Will chuckled as he said that, but then Lars gave a little growl that caused

Will to clutch his stomach and let out a hearty laugh.

Well, pigs do fly!

But, Lars! What did you say to Will just now?!

Small Talk: Ralf's Feelings (POV: Ralfreed)

"WELCOME home, Lord Ralf, Lady Karna."

When we arrived home from school, Marjace and Josh came out to meet us.

"Is Neema still not back yet?" Karna asked, although the answer was abundantly clear from the atmosphere in the manor.

When Marjace confirmed that Neema had not yet returned, Karna was visibly disappointed.

"I'm sure she'll be tired when she gets home, so while we wait, let's prepare something warm for her to drink when she arrives," I suggested, attempting to console Karna. It worked because she pepped right up and agreed it was a great idea.

Even though she was my younger sister, I couldn't help but be a little jealous of her optimistic personality.

We both went to change, met back up, and had just called for tea when we were informed that Neema and Mother had returned.

We went out to meet them together, but Karna ran ahead to wrap Neema up in a big hug. That seemed to happen every time they met, but since it was an expression of Karna's sisterly love, I made a point of not interfering unless Neema looked like she was in pain.

"Karna, I can't... breathe..." Neema gasped.

Despite her protest, she looks ecstatic, so I don't think she's in potential suffocation territory.

Karna looked a little dejected but reluctantly released Neema.

"More importantly!" Neema chirped. "Karna and Ralf, you can't do such dangerous things in the future, you hear me?!"

That was the same tone Neema always used when scolding Haku and Gratia. She probably intended to sound intimidating, but she was so cute that it didn't come across as very threatening.

Even now, she had her lips puckered and was pinning Karna and me with an expression that I was pretty sure she intended as a glare, but it looked like she was pouting.

She's adorable no matter what she does.

"Thanks for worrying about us, Neema!" Karna replied cheerfully.

"Yeah. But you have to understand, Neema, that we couldn't just sit by and let them get away with striking out against our family..."

Neema looked dumbstruck by my words. It was written all over her face that she couldn't reconcile what I was saying, but Mother and Karna smiled and nodded in agreement.

Uh-oh, this isn't good. I might've scared her just now.

"It's okay, we won't lose to the likes of Runohark, never fear."

I hugged Neema and stroked her back, hoping to reassure her there was nothing to worry about. After a moment, she hugged me back, so I figured I must've succeeded.

I was happy to see her acting the same as ever.

I picked Neema up and carried her over to a chair where a teacup was already set for her.

Mother excused herself, saying she had a letter to write. Apparently, she planned to hole herself up in her office until dinner.

Josh poured hot tea into Neema's waiting cup, and after taking a sip, she proclaimed it delicious.

Once she seemed to have settled in, I asked her how it had gone at the royal palace.

Neema launched into an enthusiastic recounting of her day, and although she went off on tangents a few times, I understood the gist of what had happened.

She seemed to be fighting back tears when she got to the point in the story where she'd been told about the decision to send her to the Linus Empire with Karna.

We'd discussed this matter many times while Neema was sleeping.

For a while, the atmosphere between Father and His Majesty had gotten very tense, but in the end, they'd come to the same decision—the *only* decision that made sense when prioritizing Neema's safety over all else.

"You'll be safe in the Linus Empire," I said, offering what consolation I could.

"...How can you be so sure?" she asked.

"I'm sure you already know this, but every generation, the emperor of the Linus Empire is bonded with a water holy beast."

Neema seemed confused by the significance of this fact, so I attempted to clarify by adding that this meant the imperial family was very special, but she just tilted her head to the side and looked doubtful.

I decided to explain a bit more about the history of the Linus Empire to Neema.

The Linus Empire was founded long before our own country, and it was said that its first king was of mixed blood—human and elf. Perhaps due to his elven blood, he'd lived longer than normal humans, his rule had extended to encompass the entire country, and the land had prospered under his reign.

Then, his child had grown to adulthood, and when it was time for them to succeed him, the country officially became "the Linus Empire."

When the same holy beast that had previously bonded with the first king chose to bond with his successor, people began saying that this meant the God of Creation chose the imperial family to rule.

Following this turn of events, it had become a tradition that only someone bonded with the water holy beast could become the emperor of the Linus Empire. Over the course of their long history, there had only been two occasions when the holy beast didn't select their bonded master from amongst the imperial family. On these occasions, they'd arranged for the water holy beast's bonded master to marry a member of the imperial family, but these hadn't been forced marriages; on the contrary, they had been something like epic love stories. As the most famous romantic tales to ever come out of the Linus Empire, these couples' love stories had been adapted into books and

stage plays that were extremely popular amongst the commoners.

This country that was lovingly watched over by a water holy beast had a higher-than-average presence of holy beasts, and although they were still extremely rare, even a few elementalists lived there, from what I'd heard.

For that reason, it was the safest place for Neema. The holy beasts and elemental spirits gathered there would never let any harm come to a beloved child.

Meanwhile, Neema seemed hung up on the part of my explanation concerning the relatively large number of holy beasts residing in the Linus Empire.

I see your eyes shining almost fanatically, but are you listening to what I'm saying? You have to learn the history and culture of the Linus Empire so you don't do or say anything that might offend the imperial family while you're there.

"They say that the Linus Empire is extremely beautiful. I'm so excited we can go together, Neema!" Karna said happily.

"What do you say we trade places, Karna?" I proposed.

"No way!"

I knew I couldn't have gone even if she'd agreed, but I couldn't help being jealous of Karna. I might've been allowed to leave the country if I wasn't the all-important heir to such a lofty title as duke, but alas...

"I'll contact you every day to tell you how Neema's doing. I've already promised the same to Father," Karna assured me.

Karna, you make it sound like a pinky promise between schoolgirls, but in reality, Father issued an executive order as the head of household, you know?

"I'll write to you every day, too, Ralf!" Neema promised earnestly.

"Thank you. But you should prioritize Mother and Father before me, okay?"

Neema petulantly responded that she'd already been planning to write to Father as well, but... something told me she was a bit confused about the order of importance.

I think Father's probably just an afterthought, somewhere behind Mother and me. After all, when we were in Zigg Village, I posted a letter from Neema along with my report to Father, but hers was addressed to Mother.

I was pretty sure that was why Father had seemed depressed for a while after that.

...I feel bad for Father.

It might be due to the difference in our sexes, but personally, I'd always felt equally loved and cherished by both Mother and Father, and felt that they maintained all the boundaries appropriate for the relationship between parent and child.

But Neema seemed to feel that Father's love was sometimes too intense and overbearing, to the point of being troublesome and embarrassing.

I think he's a perfectly respectable Father and prime minister, but...

"Oh, by the way, Ralf! Listen to this— Will's a horrid monster! He looked at me and laughed!"

"Huh?"

Sorry to say it, Neema, but isn't that a common occurrence by now?

"He laughed so hard he bent over, clutching his stomach, and *kept* laughing until he couldn't breathe!"

You mean he was laughing loudly and uncontrollably?!

I'd been close with Will since we were toddlers, but I'd never seen him like that even once. Sure, I'd seen him chuckle and scoff, but his smiles always seemed intense and edged with something almost poisonous.

When I exclaimed that I'd never seen Will do something like that, Neema seemed shocked.

She muttered, "Don't tell me this is an omen that the heavens and earth are about to change places!" but I itched to jump in and muffle these ominous words as they left her mouth, lest they come true. It seemed like too real a possibility for comfort at this point.

Neema claimed she had no idea what Will had even been laughing about.

I'm a little scared to find out, but I suppose I'd better ask him next time I see him...

6 - Auntie Olive Made Something

WHEN I arrived home, Ralf and Karna came out to meet me.

The second Karna laid eyes on me, she launched one of her typical hug attacks, but fortunately, it was slightly less violent than usual. Once she finally released me, I scolded my brother and sister thoroughly for doing something so dangerous while I slept, but...

Ralf said something terrifying, as casually as you please, and my back broke out in a cold sweat.

What seemed like the plot of some gruesome horror movie was par for the course, perfectly justified revenge according to my family.

The look on Ralf's face as he said that Runohark needed to pay for kidnapping me... It was downright cold-blooded!

The way Ralf eased my fears with just a gentle hug left me amazed by his soothing abilities.

He's had enough experience dealing with me to know instinctively whether the carrot or the stick is appropriate.

We all sat down to sip our cups of hot tea, and I explained everything that had happened at the royal palace.

I recounted meeting the queen's younger brother and nephew and learning I would be sent to the Linus Empire with Karna. I also went over my meeting with Auntie Olive and the others. At that point, Ralf launched into a mini-lesson about the Linus Empire, but what I basically took away from his explanation was that it was an amazing country.

I'm going to have to learn about the Linus Empire before I go there... That makes sense; there will always be cultural differences whenever you go to another country. I'll have to do my best not to do anything to disgrace myself accidentally!

Ralf seemed eager to go with us, but there was no way that would've worked...

If all of his children were gone, Papa would become so sad and lonely that he'd turn into a mere shell of a human being!

Karna promised Ralf that she'd update him daily on how things were going, which gave me the idea to write letters of my own; if she was sending hers anyway, it wouldn't be any extra trouble to slip mine in with them, right?

I told Ralf I would write to him too, but he replied that I should prioritize writing to Mama and Papa over him.

Ever the perfect, filial, pious oldest son!

At the end of our discussion, I mentioned how Will had laughed at me so hard that he doubled over clutching his belly, and Ralf seemed shocked.

"I've never seen Will do something like that."

Really? Ralf's never seen him do it before, despite how many years they've been friends...? This might be an omen that the heavens and the earth are about to change places!

Probably because it had been my first trip to the royal palace in some time and I'd interacted with so many people today, I was getting sleepy much earlier than usual.

I was so tired that I was nodding off in the bath after dinner.

When I finally crawled into bed and wrapped my arms around the Hanley stuffed animal, I almost instantly fell asleep.

Maybe this was why I awakened on my own the next morning, surprising Leah with that uncharacteristic behavior.

I learned we didn't plan to head out until just before lunch, so I spent the morning eating a leisurely breakfast and playing with Nox and Pluma in the garden. Meanwhile, Haku and Gratia were obsessed with the playground that Ayle had created for them.

That's right—it's grown to become an entire playground, all scaled down to their size!

At first, it was just the cat tower. I remembered that from before I fell asleep. But while I was sleeping, Ayle had made several additions in an attempt to console my friends, who were despondent from worrying about me.

One of these was a catapult-like seesaw. It was designed to send Gratia flying through the air, as that was one of his favorite pastimes.

Gratia would sit on the lower end of the seesaw, and Haku would fill itself up with water from the lake to make itself heavier. Then, Haku would jump on the other end of the seesaw. That would send Gratia flying.

There was even a target set up where Gratia would land, with numbers written on it.

When Haku wanted to take a turn flying, they asked Shinki to push down the other end of the seesaw.

There was also a climbing wall.

Did you know that slimes can roll themselves vertically straight up walls?!

The first time I saw it, I couldn't believe my eyes. Haku rolled itself end over end at a high speed, barreling straight up the side of the wall. Oh, and there was also a Tarzan rope. Unfortunately, it was Haku-and-Gratia-sized.

I want Ayle to make me a Tarzan rope, too!

In any case, Haku and Gratia were geniuses when it came to playing.

Before I knew it, it was time to get ready for our outing. For me, that basically consisted of changing into a slightly more formal dress.

I had a hard time deciding what to wear for this particular outing.

For something like a public audience with the king, I wore elaborate, ornate dresses that could almost be called gaudy, but most of my clothing was much simpler. I didn't own much in between these two extremes.

Today I would be meeting many people for the first time, and I'd been told to dress appropriately for my station as the daughter of a duke, but...

Well, I can say for sure that this all-lace dress is a no-go! If it got caught on something, it would be ruined.

I settled on a cherry blossom pink dress embroidered with vermillion runes of written magic. The design was simple, but a cape of sorts was attached to the shoulders, and the skirt was full and flowy, so I didn't think it looked too bad.

Oh, this is one of Auntie Olive's designs! Is she planning to start her own clothing brand or something?

I climbed into the carriage with Mama, and once we set off, she turned to me with a serious expression.

"The official story we've been telling everyone is that you've been sick, and Ralf has been treating you at home. If anyone asks about your body, you should reply that it's due to the Goddess's protection."

"Are people really going to fall for that cover story?" I asked.

"We're not trying to deceive anyone. You've heard the stories of people who've slept under the Goddess's protection before, right?"

I'd heard several tales passed down through history of such incidents. They had all been very similar to what had happened to me; the Goddess had Descended to save someone who was then protected by her power as they slept.

"There have been very few cases of the Goddess Descending throughout history. The only times this has happened were at the Church of Divine Creation's headquarters in Farshia, Zaishwell in the Linus Empire, where the legendary holy maiden was born, and in Irongane with the sleeping princess."

Irongane used to be a country a long time ago, but it collapsed, and in present times, the region retained that name, if I remembered correctly. I was pretty sure it was located somewhere amongst a bunch of small countries clustered together.

Including my own experience, this meant that the Goddess had only Descended four times throughout history, but there were several additional cases of people falling into extended slumbers.

Does this mean that those stories were false?

"Meaning that in the other cases, the Goddess didn't appear?"

“That’s right. Aside from the four instances where the Goddess Descended in person, all the other cases of people being put to sleep for extended periods to heal were due to the power of healers.”

According to Mama, the extended slumbers that occurred via this second pattern were blessings granted in response to the healers’ heartfelt prayers.

But isn’t that also a form of the Goddess’ protection?

“I don’t understand what the difference is...”

“The difference is the person receiving the Goddess’ blessing. When the Goddess Descended, it was to save *the individual* she protected. When she didn’t Descend, the power to protect that person was granted as a favor to the *healer*.”

Oh! Now I get it! So that’s what she meant! It’s the difference between a person the Goddess herself wanted to save versus someone she saved because someone she favors wished for it.

In actuality, I was in the first group, but because we don’t want people to know this, we’re going to make it out to be a case of the second! But, wait...

“Does everyone know this?”

It wasn’t strange for Mama to know these things, given her academic profession, but the plan would be meaningless if no one else possessed this same base knowledge.

“I’m certain that members of the upper nobility and anyone knowledgeable about history will know.”

Meaning more people than not won’t know!

“But if you say that the Goddess answered Ralf’s prayers, everyone will surely conclude that it was the Goddess’ power,” Mama continued.

Ralf was kind and smart and doted on his younger sisters, plus he was a very skilled healer, so no one would have a hard time believing the Goddess had granted me her protection as a favor to him.

So all I have to do is talk Ralf up! I can do that! In fact, I’m excellent at it!

By the time we finished this discussion, we'd already arrived where we'd planned to meet Auntie Olive.

Shinki opened the door and gallantly offered me his arm to steady myself as I climbed out of the carriage. Shinki had made amazing progress while I'd been sleeping; his formal manners were now on par with those of our household servants.

The place we'd arrived at was somewhere I'd never seen before. I suspected it was somewhere in the middle and lower nobility district, but beyond that...

"Neema, Cerulia, over here!" Auntie Olive called, coming to meet us.

The building behind her was quaint and adorable but seemed out of place in the royal city. The center was a dome shape that glittered in the sun's light. It seemed to be glass or something similar. The exterior, too, was a combination of circular and half-circular arches and was liberally dotted with windows, giving the entire structure a soft and homey atmosphere. Engravings of flowers and vines decorated the outer walls that, despite not being colored in—or rather, perhaps *because* of it—seemed elegantly beautiful.

Compared to the surrounding buildings, which seemed to be doing everything in their power to declare themselves the homes of aristocrats, this building seemed more suited for a location up in the hills of the deep countryside.

"There's something I want to show you, Neema!"

We followed Auntie Olive into the building and down a long hallway that ended in a wide-open space. It seemed to be directly underneath the dome we'd seen from outside. A familiar statue stood in the center of the sun-drenched room that I finally identified as a chapel.

"The Goddess?" I asked hesitantly.

She looked different than her typical depictions.

Normally, the Goddess was portrayed holding two orbs, one in each hand. The orb in her right hand represented "this world" and the orb in her left hand represented "the world of the dead."

But the Goddess in this statue wasn't holding *anything*, and her left hand was

resting lightly atop another statue. Her gentle gaze was also turned toward the companion statue.

“...Dee?!”

I ran up to the statue, examining it closely, and found it was accurate down to the tiniest detail—it really was Dee.



Haku and Gratia popped out, reacting to my surprised exclamation. Before I could stop them, they hopped over onto the statue of Dee.

There was a plaque at the base of Dee's statue with some kind of message inscribed on it...

"The soul of the heroic snow wolf that protected its master's life at the cost of its own answered the Goddess Cresiolle's call to journey home. The Goddess Cresiolle's infinite mercy is not limited to humans but extends to all creatures living in this world. She descended on this land to teach us this lesson."

"...What does it mean?" I asked.

"I'll explain more about that later. First, let me introduce you to the priests."

I didn't see any priests, so we'd be moving to another room to meet with them. But first, there was something I wanted to do.

"Can I pray first?" I asked.

I'd said a simple prayer of thanks before going to sleep the night before, but I still hadn't been able to pray at a church properly yet. I felt the need to pay my respects to the Goddess.

Auntie Olive said, "Of course," so I first called Haku and Gratia back to me from where they were playing atop the Dee statue.

"Come here, Haku, Gratia. Let's all pray to the Goddess together."

Haku mewed in response, and Gratia raised his front legs as if saying, "'kay!"

With one of them on each shoulder, I assumed the prayer position.

Lady Creo, I was safely able to awaken! I'm very healthy now! This is all thanks to you, Lady Creo. Thank you! However, I seemed to have missed out on quite a bit of growing I was meant to have done, so I'd really like to have a growth spurt and quickly make up for that missed growth so I can look my actual age, if you think you could arrange that!

"Mew, mew!"

Haku suddenly cried out, and Gratia began clicking his fangs together. I opened my eyes to see what was going on, but nothing seemed to be out of

place.

The two of them seemed very excited, though, because they both leapt back onto the statue of Dee and kept raising a ruckus.

What on earth is happening?!

“Shinki, what happened?” I asked.

“Who knows?” he shrugged. “They’re saying, ‘Wow, amazing!’ but I’m not sure why...”

So Shinki doesn’t know what’s going on either...

Oh well, whatever.

In any case, I’ll have him grab them. They’re so worked up that I’m afraid they’ll break something.

I relayed this request to Shinki, who nodded and went over to call out to the two little monsters. They were so excited that even after they hopped over onto Shinki’s shoulder and then up onto his head, they continued freaking out.



Haku, that's dangerous! You're going to fall off if you keep it up!

I watched on as, just as I'd feared, Haku bounced up and down so energetically that it rolled right off Shinki's head.

With a loud *SPLAT!* Haku hit the floor. At that moment, I finally realized that a slime's body was essentially 100 percent liquid. The spot where Haku had impacted the floor looked like someone had spilled a glass of water. Thankfully, in the blink of an eye, Haku reformed into its usual steamed-bun shape. It bounced up and down once before launching itself back up on top of Shinki's head.

It hasn't learned its lesson at all!

"Calm down, you two," Shinki scolded, and Haku settled down instantly, seeming appropriately chastised.

Gratia, however, clicked his fangs together and began dancing on Shinki's shoulder, which set Haku off again; it began elongating and contracting its body vertically then horizontally in time with Gratia's strange dance.

I heard Shinki let out a long-suffering sigh, which I took to mean he'd given up.

Sorry, Shinki! They really are free spirits...

Uplifted by Shinki's exchange with the two little monsters, I followed Auntie Olive to a room full of people.

According to Auntie Olive, these were all the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction who had taken refuge in the Kingdom of Gaché.

"We wanted to memorialize the Goddess' Descent, so we built a church on the site."

In actuality, that wasn't their only motivation: they put a dramatic spin on the story, playing the events off as the Goddess coming in person to collect the soul of a dog that had heroically died protecting its master. And they'd also consolidated and preserved the teachings of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction here.

"My name is Yareh. I am the head priest here at Lufteite Church, site of the

Goddess' Descent," a man, apparently named Priest Yareh, introduced himself politely. He was a thin, elderly man. His limbs looked like withered tree branches—he was *so* thin it was hard not to be a little concerned looking at him.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Dayland Osphe's youngest daughter, Nefertima."

Within the walls of a church, the custom of greeting people based on their social status was suspended, so I gave a simple curtsy. I was relieved to see Mama do the same, reassuring me I had not misjudged the situation.

I was told that Priest Yareh would explain the meaning of the words inscribed on the plaque affixed to Dee's statue, so I was eager to get right into it.

"Long, long ago, the God of Creation delivered a message to all the species in this world. 'One is connected to all, becoming the world. Disturb ye not the balance of this world. Bear in mind and take to heart; only destruction shall arise from disruption of the divine balance.'"

Come on, God! I know you were trying to sound cool and cryptic, but it just comes across like the angsty writings of a "tragically misunderstood" middle schooler!

I clutched my head at the cringiness, but Priest Yareh seemed to misunderstand because he gently asked if I understood the meaning of the message.

So long as there's no hidden meaning behind it, I think the message itself is fairly straightforward, Priest Yareh...

"Father previously explained this concept to me a bit," I explained, launching into a summary of what I'd learned from Papa.

Every day, various small incidents occurred that disrupted the balance of nature in some way, and the repercussions of those incidents spread out through the world like ripples, colliding with each other, with one sometimes erasing the other.

Of course, to a certain degree, the world was naturally self-repairing.

But, as I understood it, God was warning that the world would be destroyed if such a large disruption occurred that even this self-repair function couldn't keep up with the damage it caused.

"However, isn't 'the divine balance' synonymous with 'the will of God'? Wouldn't that then mean God himself wishes for destruction?" Mama asked.

Hmmm, not quite. I believe that what's referred to as "the balance of the world" is basically the framework for how everything functions. As long as this framework remains intact, the world will continue to keep running smoothly on its own.

Because everything is automated, if you wanted to change something in the framework, it would take a lot of time and work to reroute it without causing the whole thing to crumble.

God created all this to begin with, so if he wanted to, I'm sure he could change things, but I have a feeling that would involve scrapping everything and starting again from scratch. And then there are the beloved children, who, being from other worlds, are not built into this framework...

Come to think of it, if I go overboard and interfere too much, I might be naturally erased from this world, like an invading virus being targeted by antibodies...

I wonder if God's power will protect me from that happening?

"Um, well, you see... I guess you could say it's similar to magical formulation. There's a set formula, and applying magic to it activates it?" I suggested.

In this analogy, the "formula" was the framework of the world, the "magic" was god's power, and the "spell" that was activated was the automation of the world.

The magic that activated it was fixed, so you couldn't change it after the fact; if you wanted to, you'd have to re-formulate everything from scratch.

When I put it like that, Mama whispered, "Oh, I see..."

Looks like that analogy makes sense to a researcher like her.

"So I don't believe God wishes for destruction," I concluded.

He might be fine with humans being eradicated, but I'm certain he doesn't want the entire world to be destroyed. If this world were destroyed, God might die of loneliness!

“When you put it that way, as a framework, it does make a bit more sense. All of the living creatures in this world are built into its framework.”

However, the way I conceptualized it, monsters were the axis of the framework, and it was possible that the other species didn't have as much of an effect on the whole. If my suspicions were correct, even if humans went extinct, the structure of the world would likely remain intact. The same could probably be said interchangeably for beastpeople and elves.

I wonder if it's just a coincidence that the first sentient species to be created ended up being the axis or something? But no matter how much we speculate about it, in the end, God's the only one who knows the truth.

“Just as the God of Creation's message states, if you accept that all things in this world are connected, you will naturally value and respect them,” Priest Yareh said.

He really does revere God...

If someone like this were the leader of the entire religion, things might change for the better...

“Someone once told me that the time we're alive is to cultivate our soul. If everyone appreciated life's precious and fleeting nature, surely the world would become more peaceful,” I speculated.

That might be the kind of world that God wished for: one where people overcame the barriers between species, caring for monsters and animals, and in cases where they had no choice but to kill one, paying proper respect to its soul...

I knew that was a simplistic and idealized view of things, but if possible, I'd like to see it become reality.

“For the world to become more like that, we will do our best to slowly share the God of Creation's message with all,” Priest Yareh proclaimed, and the other priests repeated as one, “We'll do our best!”

We left the church shortly after that and invited Auntie Olive to our house for tea. Over tea, she explained that the ousted Ancient Divine Creation Faction had formed a new religious group under the name “Church of Divine Balance” and received official recognition from the government.

They were still a small and relatively unknown religion, but they were steadily gathering followers.

In case you were wondering, the members of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction who went to the Linus Empire were also working on establishing the Church of Divine Balance there.

It was the first case in history of any faction completely splitting off from the Church of Divine Creation.

For its part, the Church of Divine Creation had remained silent on the matter, and as Auntie Olive remarked with a light chuckle, “It’ll be interesting to see how they handle this moving forward.”

She seems to be enjoying watching this all play out, huh?

“But now there’s no chance anyone will ever forget about Dee. His name might not remain, but tales of his courageous spirit will be handed down throughout the ages.”

“Thank you, Auntie Olive!”

Just a normal statue of the Goddess would’ve sufficed; she added Dee for my sake!

“It’s got to be hard for you to come to terms with such a traumatic thing happening to you here in the royal city, the place where you’ve lived all your life. I was just hoping to ease that burden in some way...”

I couldn’t properly convey my gratitude with words, so I settled for throwing my arms around Auntie Olive and hugging her tightly.

They didn’t have photographs in this world, so along with the portrait in our house, this statue would serve as a precious memorial, so I would never forget what Dee had looked like.

Recalling happy memories can instantly brighten your day, no matter what

else might be going on!

The most unexpected thing was how many times Haku and Gratia begged to play with the statue of Dee. They seemed to really, *really* like it.

You can play with it, but just don't break anything!

7 - Sightseeing in the Royal City

I asked what our plans were for today and was told guests would be visiting. But when I asked who those “guests” might be, I was only told, “It’s a secret!”

Grr!

Just as I finished preparing to receive *whoever* was coming, Paul came to get me.

“Lady Neema, the guests have arrived.”

Paul led me to the guest parlor, where an unfamiliar man around my father’s age was waiting.

“Neema!”

While I was distracted by the man, someone grabbed me in a tight hug.

“Nino, that’s rude.”

Huh? Nino?!

“Forgive my poor manners. I am Rhitten Ireiga’s daughter, Nino,” the beautiful girl said, executing the bow used when greeting high-ranked nobility.

“My apologies for my sister’s behavior. My name is Pino Ireiga,” said a handsome boy with an easy-going smile.

“Pino! Nino!”

I was so happy that I was the one to leap at Nino for a hug this time. I’d been exchanging letters with them since we met, but this was the first time we’d seen each other in person since we parted ways.

“We heard that you were sick, so I’m glad to see you looking well,” Nino said.

“Ralf was praying to the Goddess on my behalf day in and day out,” I said.

“So that’s why you look the same as when we first met,” Pino concluded

thoughtfully.

Apparently, just that simple explanation was enough for Pino and Nino to understand the implications. That showed how thorough their education had been.

“I guess that leaves me for last. I’m their father, Rhitten Ireiga.”

Earl Ireiga resembled a sterner, older version of Pino. His dark yellow hair was artfully swept back, and fierce determination dwelled in his amber eyes.

“I am Dayland Osphe’s youngest daughter, Nefertima. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He was one of the proxy lords Papa had praised highly. I’d been curious what kind of person he was ever since.

“Father said he was going to the royal palace, so we got him to bring us along because we wanted to see you, Neema!” Nino announced.

“Besides, we’ll be entering the royal academy next cycle, so we wanted to go on a tour and check it out,” Pino added.

Oh, that’s right. Pino and Nino are already at the right age to enter the academy. I’m jealous... I want to go to school with my friends too! I wonder if I’ll be able to return to the Kingdom of Gaché before I turn ten.

...Come to think of it, how long will Karna study abroad, anyway? They aren’t planning to forbid us from returning until Runohark has been wiped out, right?!

I’ll have to confirm that important detail with Papa!

“If it’s okay with you, Lady Nefertima, could I possibly impose upon you to entertain these two while I attend my business at the royal palace?”

After Earl Ireiga asked so politely, Nino chimed in “Yeah, let’s go together!” and then I *really* couldn’t decline.

Not that I wanted to decline in the first place!

“I’d be delighted to!” I replied.

Just then, I noticed Pino staring fixedly at something, but when I followed his gaze, the only thing I saw where he seemed to be looking was Shinki.

“That’s the hobgoblin we met back then, isn’t it?” he asked.

Oh, that’s right. The two of them were there when Shinki evolved.

“Yeah. He’s my bodyguard now.”

“Oh... More importantly, Neema! I want to go to a sweets shop! There must be loads of famous shops here in the royal city, right?” Nino, who seemed to have no interest in Shinki, steamrolled right over that topic and moved on to something stereotypically girly: sweets.

“I don’t know the shops in the royal city very well. But that’s okay! I have a very, very capable butler, so we can ask him!”

I’m counting on your research skills, Paul! Please find us the tastiest sweets shop in the royal city!

But more importantly, Pino... You fixate on details that other people would overlook, huh?

This time, he was staring intently at a tapestry on the wall.

“Pino, is there anywhere you’d like to go?”

He slowly turned his gaze to me and said with his usual easy-going smile that he’d like to see a workshop where magical items were made.

Heh, typical boy. I suppose he’s around the age when boys tend to get interested in those kinds of things. I’ll ask Paul to fulfill this request as well.

Without wasting another minute, we set off in my family’s carriage and headed for the royal academy. Earl Ireiga said he would travel to the royal palace in his own carriage, so we parted ways in front of the house.

“When we enter the royal academy, there won’t be anyone particularly high-ranking there anymore, right?”

“Huh?” I tilted my head to the side, confused by Nino’s question.

“His Highness and your older brother will already have graduated and moved on to the upper academy, right? And I heard that your sister will be studying abroad in the Linus Empire.”

Oh, right. Yeah, there probably won’t be any members of royalty or the

children of dukes at the academy next year...

Oh, no wait...

“Duke Razul’s daughters might still be there... Oh, and General Zelnan’s grandchildren.”

“...I haven’t heard much *good* about Duke Razul and his family. I don’t know much about General Zelnan’s family, though.”

I’d better warn her not to get too close to Gash and Hughey; they’re wild and mischievous. Hopefully, they’ve grown up to be a little more gentlemanly since I last saw them, but a tiger never changes its stripes; at their core, they’re selfish brutes.

I can totally picture Nino fighting with them!

“Oh, I see, they’re a bit rough, hm?” she hummed in thought when I told her about them. “In that case, I’ll remove them from my list of likely candidates.”

Apparently, Nino planned to get right to work and begin searching for a marriage partner as soon as she entered the academy. Pretty much all of the children of noble families attended the royal academy, so I supposed it was a good place to look.

But is she planning on looking for her own partner? Isn’t that usually the parents’ job in this world?

I thought that was strange, so I asked Nino about it, and her answer was so typically *her*.

“If I left it up to Father, he’d marry me off to someone totally boring. Even if I can’t avoid a political marriage, I don’t want to marry someone I don’t at least respect. So I’ll find someone perfect before Father gets around to picking someone dreadful.”

She’s really something, huh? I’ve never really thought too much about my future or marriage or any of that; I guess I just figured it would all work out one way or another.

Well, with Papa always saying he’ll never marry me off, I mostly just figured I’d end up becoming a spinster.

“You’ve really thought this through, huh? You’re incredible, Nino!” I exclaimed.

“W-Well, of course! I’m a nobleman’s daughter, after all!”

Oh, she’s embarrassed. I’m happy to see she’s as much of a tsundere as ever!

“Oh, is that it?” Pino had been ignoring our girl talk, staring out the window.

“...It’s bigger than I imagined,” Nino remarked.

“Long ago, this used to be the royal palace.” I went on to tell them that, being the former royal palace, the grounds of the royal academy were vast, and there was even an arena.

After that, we chatted lightly for a bit, and before I knew it, we were pulling to a stop in front of the academy.

Paul registered us for a tour, but the current students were responsible for showing guests around.

“I’ll be in charge of leading your tour today. My name is Elena.”

Elena had a disarmingly plain face and told us she was a minor noblewoman in the maid class. It turned out her father was an earl, and she’d chosen to attend the royal academy because she hoped to work in the royal palace in the future.

“That reminds me, what classes are you two planning to join?” I asked.

“I’ll join the elite officer class. I’m my father’s heir, after all,” Pino answered.

He’ll join the same class as Ralf.

“I... am still undecided. Joining the elite officer class or the government official class would open up a lot of opportunities for me to be useful to the family I marry into. But I also find myself drawn to the idea of working at the royal palace.”

Does everyone feel that way? I’m not sure I see the appeal of working at the royal palace...

There’s at least one really terrifying head maid there!

“Within the maid class, our education is tailored to reflect our family

background. There's no way the daughter of an earl would go to work for a baron's family, for example," Elena explained.

I see... So the assumption is that you'll work for a family ranked higher than your own. And the students of common birth must have their own curriculum as well.

"Those who are untitled are ranked based on their abilities. The most skilled of the common students are just as talented as any of us from the nobility," Elena told us.

Wow... They have a well-thought-out system in place.

Elena continued to pepper the tour with random tidbits of information as we peeked into a classroom where a class was in session. The classroom was tiered, like a university lecture hall.

We moved on to one of the classrooms for the elite officer class, but I was surprised by the air of opulence that was almost cloyingly heavy in the room. Each movable desk was paired with a plush lounge chair, and there was even a tea corner inside the classroom.

"Oh... My apologies, it appears there are guests from a foreign country visiting at the moment. I will alter our route slightly."

Some kind of group was gathered in the hall up ahead. Looking closer, I noticed several familiar faces.

It wouldn't be right for me to pass by without greeting them properly, right?

"Paul, it would be rude not to greet them now that we've noticed them, right?" I brought it up with him.

"Yes, I believe you're right. His Highness seems to have already spotted us."

Of course he did—Lars roared a greeting as soon as he saw us!

"Elena, would it be okay if we went to say hi first?"

"Umm..." She seemed hesitant to approach a group of honored guests who were being shown around personally by the crown prince of our country.

"It's okay, my brother is with them, so we won't get in trouble," I reassured

Elena, then headed towards the group without waiting for her to reply.

“Good day, Lord Louis and Lord Theo.”

This time, I executed a curtsy used when greeting esteemed visitors, rather than the highly formal “second-rank official greeting” Mama and I had performed the last time we met. I figured this was fine since they wanted to keep their identities a secret, and this wasn’t exactly an official setting.

Paul didn’t correct me, so I took this as confirmation that I’d chosen correctly.

The two returned my greeting, then one of them asked in a friendly tone, “Are you taking a tour as well, Lady Neema?”

“Yes. Or, rather, my friends are taking a tour, and I’m tagging along.”

After I said this, Will whispered something in Ralf’s ear.



I can hear what you're saying, you know! As for you, wind spirits! You don't need to deliver every little thing to me! Is this a form of mischief for you guys or something?!

"She has friends?" Will had whispered.

RUDE!

Of course I have friends!

Pino and Nino are my first friends, in fact!

...I suppose it's a little strange that I'm already this old and only have two friends my age, but...

I'm not lonely! I have Nox, Haku, and Gratia, so I'm not lonely! Really!

"Will, I think she can hear you! Neema looks like she's going to cry," Ralf whispered back.

"Oh, it must be the elemental spirits... Knock it off, you guys!"

I didn't hear anything else after that, but I'd already heard more than enough.

"You're Earl Ireiga's children, Pino and Nino, right? Thank you for being friends with Neema," Ralf said, ruffling my hair affectionately, but I wouldn't be pacified so easily.

Pino and Nino greeted Ralf, and I was a bit mollified to hear them say that they were looking forward to being friends with me for many years to come.

"As for you, how about you stop spending all your time with animals and make a few more friends, eh?" Will drawled at me.

You make it sound so easy, Will! Where oh where, pray tell, am I to find these friends, hm?

"Ralf..." I implored, and my kind brother came to my rescue, seeming to understand what I was feeling instinctively.

"Neema's still very young. She's only ever participated in tea parties with our close family friends, and she's forbidden from going out other than to visit the royal palace," he explained.

“...I see, so Duke Osphe’s to blame, then,” Will said.

I wasn’t completely forbidden from going out, but I had to get Papa’s permission first. He always allowed me to go out if I was accompanying Mama. Mama wouldn’t take me with her to tea parties hosted by the other noble families, so I hadn’t had much opportunity to meet other people my age.

“Neema, are you close with His Highness?” Pino whispered to me conspiratorially.

“Yeah, I suppose so... He and my brother are friends.”

I was sure he saw me as little more than a third wheel, but I couldn’t deny that I *had* received more opportunities to interact with Will than the average person, even among the nobility, because I was his best friend’s kid sister.

“I see... When your father has the rank of duke, you end up brushing shoulders with royalty! That sounds difficult.”

Nino used the word “difficult,” but I could practically hear her thinking “troublesome.”

“Lady Neema, it’s almost time for us to leave,” Paul spoke up.

Oops, I lost track of time! I nearly forgot that we’ve got an appointment for a tour of the magical item workshop after this, like Pino requested.

“Forgive us for taking up so much of your time. We’ll head off to our next engagement now,” I announced.

“Where are you going after this, Lady Neema?”

“We’re taking a tour of a magical item workshop.”

At this, Theo—who up until this point had been blank-faced—suddenly lit up.

Or rather, his face didn’t change at all, but he spoke up for the first time, saying, “That sounds interesting.” With the bland look on his face, it was hard to tell how *interested* he actually was, though.

“Would you like to join them?” Ralf offered.

Louis and the others seemed flustered by the sudden change in plans, but despite my fervent wishes, Will and the others decided to join us on our tour of

the workshop.

When we exited the academy, a group of familiar-looking royal guards and servants, whom I assumed were personal attendants, were gathered and waiting.

We're going to be a burden on the workshop, showing up with such a large group... But I suppose it will work out, one way or another.

And so, we gave it a shot and headed over to the workshop, where many surprises awaited.

Through the power of magical formulation, they were creating items designed to make people's everyday lives easier using magic. I'd seen the process at the research center, so I understood that much.

Many were protection spells shaped like accessories you wore somewhere on your body. There were also offensive spells that could be set up like booby traps or thrown at an enemy—all of those reminded me of the kind of items I often saw in RPG games.

However, the variety and quantity of items geared towards making the average citizens' lives easier were unreal.

There were devices similar to water servers that produced hot and cold water and devices similar to microwaves that used fire magic to heat anything placed inside. There were also food-preservation boxes similar to refrigerators and even a swiveling fan.

I saw that last one back when it was in the development stage at the research center! This is incredible; magical items have evolved to the level of household appliances!

Who knows, they might even have a coffee maker around here somewhere!

"Thanks to the original technology law, we've seen a renaissance in the invention of various magical items. They are still rather expensive, but from what I hear, even the common people have benefited from these devices, making their daily lives much easier."

Oh, that's right, the patent law! Who would've guessed so much would've

changed in just two years... I was well acquainted with the convenience of household appliances, so I was internally cheering the researchers on. I hope the next thing they invent is a flying carriage, shoes, or something to let ordinary people fly!

“Very impressive. All you did was protect privately developed technology, right?” Theo asked, staring intently at each of the magical items in turn. I couldn’t determine based on the lack of expression on his face, but I *thought* he liked them?

“We introduced a law to protect privately developed technology and established a flat fee of one gold coin to purchase the right to use it. As you can imagine, this also benefited manufacturers like this one who actually produce the magical items for sale.” Will explained the finer details of the law, with Theo asking questions from time to time when he didn’t understand something.

“But isn’t it difficult to catch people illegally using the technology without paying the fee?”

“At this point, we can only leave it to the inventors to come forward and report it if they discover their original technology being used without permission. We created an agency where people can come with inquiries and request an official warning be issued to violators. There’s also a stringent review process in place for ruling on cases of alleged infringement.”

It looks like they’re still working on ironing out all the details.

However, when things got to this level of specialized knowledge, I was way out of my depth to be able to provide any helpful suggestions. I would have to leave it to Will and Papa to sort out.

While I was entranced by all the magical home appliances, Pino purchased several magical items of his own. He said he wanted to “try some things” when he got home.

With an exasperated expression, Nino lamented, “Pino’s room is full of magical items. He always buys them, obsesses over them for a while, then gets bored and never touches them again.”

Heh, so Pino’s a collector, is he?

“Let’s move on to the next location, shall we?”

After the magical item workshop was the sweets shop. For some reason, Will and his entourage followed us there as well.

The place Paul had found for us was an adorable shop that clearly catered to female patrons primarily.

A tantalizingly sweet smell wafted out of the shop to greet us as we approached.

The shop had been so accommodating as to reserve the entire second floor for our exclusive use even on such short notice, so I was determined to thank the manager personally afterward.

The illustrations on the menu were cutely drawn, and everything looked delicious.

Nino and I excitedly discussed between us what to order.

“This whole shop is so adorably decorated; you can really see ‘a woman’s touch’ in every impeccable detail,” Louis remarked.

“Uncle, don’t you think it’s about time you settled down?” Theo prodded.

“It sounds like such a hassle; I’d rather not.”

Louis is unmarried?

That’s surprising. He’s the emperor’s younger brother and a mega-hottie, so you’d assume he’d be popular with the ladies!

“What about you, Theo? How’s it going with your fiancée?”

“There’s not much to tell. She’s just a candidate fiancée at this point, anyway.”

...There seems to be more to that story.

I was curious but got the feeling that it would be rude to eavesdrop on their conversation any more than I already had.

“I’m going to go with this one. Have you decided, Neema?”

Nino pays absolutely no attention to things she’s not interested in, huh?

Nino selected a cake generously topped with seasonal fruits.

Oh, that does look good... What should I get?

The peche tart looks good, but so does the berry pie...

And I'm also drawn to this muffin with the cute decoration...

Ugh, this is too hard! I can't decide!

"Neema, why don't you get this one? Will and I will order the other two." Ralf suggested that I order the muffin and he and Will order the tart and pie.

"Is it really okay?" I asked.

"Of course," Ralf replied, smiling brilliantly, and I accepted.

Will grumbled something like, "Hey, don't decide for me!" but I ignored him.

When our orders arrived, Nino and I let out cries of delight.

It's so cute!

It's almost too cute to eat—but I'm still gonna eat it!

I took a massive bite and was not disappointed. The rich sweetness of the whipped cream, the slight tartness of the fruit, and the soft sponginess of the muffin made for a heavenly combination.

"It's delicious!"

"It really is! Pino, let me try yours too!" Nino demanded, and her twin obligingly traded plates with her so they could try each other's food.

Sigh, they're almost too perfect to be real!

Pino looked adorable, uncontrollably grinning as he ate, and the dainty way Nino took tiny bites of her cake made her look like a porcelain doll come to life.

"Hey, you wanted to try this one too, right?"

Suddenly, a fork was thrust toward me, loaded with a tantalizing bite of berry pie. Without thinking twice, I gobbled it right up.

"Hehe, you're like a little puppy being fed a treat, Neema..." Nino giggled.

Ack! I reacted without even thinking!

“Lady Neema, that was poor manners,” Paul scolded, adding insult to injury.

But, but, but! Will was the one who offered to feed me from his fork...

Who am I to reject a prince’s act of kindness?

Or at least that was the totally bogus excuse I made up inside my mind.

Despite Paul’s warning, Ralf and Will continued offering me bites of their desserts...

What should I do?!

“Your Highness, Lord Ralf, that is more than enough, thank you,” Paul chided.

Louis and Theo continued eating without comment, graciously overlooking our antics.

“Sweets really are delightful!”

“They really should serve them more at the imperial palace.”

It seemed that they liked sweets more than I would’ve expected.

Louis remarked that he especially longed to eat something sweet when he was buried under a mountain of work, and Theo nodded emphatically in agreement.

“Are you not allowed to eat sweets?” I asked.

I was always served tea and sweets almost immediately every time I visited the royal palace in our country, but maybe things were different in the Linus Empire?

“If I ask, they’ll prepare them for me, but for some reason, most of the things I’m served tend not to be sweet. Maybe that’s just the kind of impression I give off?” Theo said.

Oh yeah, I can see that. I can picture Louis as the type who likes to eat sweets, but Theo, not so much. Maybe because he’s always so expressionless?

Before we left the sweets shop, we bought some extra sweets to bring home as souvenirs. I was confident that Mama and Karna would love them.

Nino bought a whole load of baked goods that would stay good for a few

days.

Wow, she really loves sweets!

We parted ways with Will and his group outside the restaurant, with Ralf joining us for the trip home.

Earl Ireiga was already there waiting when we arrived, so Pino and Nino had to leave, too.

“Let’s get together again soon, Neema!” Nino cried.

“Maybe we can show you around next time,” Pino offered.

Once they entered the royal academy, they would stay at a manor in the royal city, so they would probably quickly become more familiar with the city than me.

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it!”

After that, we exchanged promises to continue writing to each other, and then the two of them climbed into the carriage with their father and departed.

...I really do want to have more friends...

8 - Feeling a Bit Like Rip Van Winkle...

“LADY Neema, are you ready?”

“Yeah!”

Today was the day I’d been waiting for—we were going on the highly-anticipated observation trip to the Shiana Special Region!

Finally, I can visit all my friends!

Furthermore, this time, the entire Osphe family would join the observation trip—including Mama, Papa, Ralf, and Karna.

It feels like we’re going on a family vacation! I’m so excited!

“Please be on your best behavior, Lady Neema. That means no slipping off when His Lordship isn’t looking; you hear me?” Paul had become almost unbearably protective ever since my kidnapping.

My whole family will be there, and I won’t do anything reckless, so there’s nothing to worry about!

I enthusiastically promised to be good, but Paul still didn’t look terribly convinced.

Why?! Is it really so hard to trust me not to get into trouble?!

Apparently so.

It was decided that not only Shinki but also Nox, Haku, and Gratia would come along to keep an eye on me. Oh, and Koku—who Mama had *finally* begrudgingly released—parasitically inhabited my body again.

In case you were wondering, Hai, Charcoal, and Silver were still inside Ralf. Apparently, it was comfortable in there because they all refused to leave. The “gray slimes squad” would protect the host whose body they inhabited, so we figured it was fine to leave them as they were. Ideally, though, I would’ve liked to have at least one of them move over to Karna’s body.

We met Louis and Theo at the royal palace and traveled together to Fauxbe via the teleportation circle.

Once again, we were a large group.

As personal protection, we brought four butlers and two maids from our household.

Members of the third brigade of the royal guard had been appointed as Louis and Theo's security detail, and there was a maid to see to their personal care.

The members of the royal guard were dressed in ordinary clothes instead of their uniforms. I assumed that was to avoid drawing attention, but the alert and wary manner with which they surveilled our surroundings instantly gave them away as trained fighters.

From Fauxbe, we would travel by carriage as usual, but the route seemed busier than I remembered.

"There sure are a lot of carriages..."

A row of carts were lined up in front of one specific building. They weren't the type of carriages used by the nobility, such as the ones we were currently riding in; they were rustic-covered wagons.

"That's the depot where wagons heading to the Shiana Special Region depart," Papa explained. They'd arranged a schedule for travel via wagon between Fauxbe and the Shiana Special Region. When this still hadn't been enough, the merchants' guild had arranged for local farmers who owned wagons to offer ride-alongs in their wagons. For a reasonable fare, of course.

As you might expect, some travelers still chose to walk, but because the wagons were inexpensive and convenient, most people used them.

And it wasn't just Fauxbe; wagons also traveled on schedule to and from a town called Ricora and the city of Garvance in the Mieuxga Province.

I was surprised that enough people were visiting to warrant such an extensive transport system.

Once the scenery around us started looking familiar, Karna cried out, "I see it!" and I eagerly pressed my face closer to the window.

To my surprise, a large gate was ahead, guarded by knights. Apparently, they didn't confirm people's identities before admitting them; the purpose of the knights' presence was simply to keep the peace.

Once we passed through the large gate, the scene awaiting us was bustling and lively. More than half the people were dressed in the garb of adventurers, and shop stalls were set up, almost like a festival.

"This is the Shiana Special Region. It's a short distance away from Zigg Village."

The main building—the inn—was close to Mount Reitimo, surrounded by a group of smaller buildings that I presumed to be the guild offices. The flat area extending out from the mountain's base contained new shops and lodging facilities.

Our carriages stopped in front of the main building. Looking at it up close, it really was massive. Just the front entrance looked to be at least ten feet square.

However, there wasn't a door; instead, there was a kind of decorated frame where I would expect a door to be.

And there was something written above the entrance.

"A... As..."

I can't read it! I think this is probably Celestian, right?

"It's pronounced 'Asmunlorta.' It means 'the starting point.'"

Gasp! This is like a town where you'd start in an RPG; right after the tutorial or opening scene ends and you get control of your character, the first thing you have to do before you head off on a quest is outfit your character and level up your skills.

...Did someone choose this name intentionally? Don't tell me there's someone else here who was reborn from another world with all their memories intact?!

"Will chose the name, but the adventurers have taken to calling it 'Lorta Building' for short," Ralf explained, chuckling and remarking that the full name *was* a little long and difficult to pronounce.

Oh, so it was just Will...

“Is there some meaning behind there not being a door?” Louis asked, and Ralf responded again.

“If we made it human-sized, many of the beastpeople would need to duck to pass through, so we made it large enough to accommodate just about anyone.”

Now that he mentioned it, I could see how the feliance beastperson would have trouble passing through human-sized doors with their large wings, and the ice bear tribe beastperson Luck’s head would probably hit the frame! Even Shinki was often barely able to pass through human-sized doors with the horns sticking up from the top of his head...

Just picturing it was enough to make me laugh.

“Several people suggested that if we put doors on such a large entrance, it would be rather intimidating to open them, and people would hesitate to go inside, so we decided to create a welcoming, open atmosphere by not having any doors.”

I totally get that! Large doors really do seem intimidating; they’re so heavy that you have to put a lot of effort into opening them, and it feels like you’re drawing a lot of attention to yourself when you do...

“But without doors, isn’t it inconvenient during the colder parts of the year?”

“You’ll understand when you step inside,” Ralf said, gesturing for us to do just that.

As I passed through the entrance, the air around me felt chilly.

“Oh, I see! They used Wind Curtain!”

Louis and Theo seemed to have both come to a revelation of some sort. I wasn’t sure what they were talking about, but I gathered that some kind of spell was at work.

When in doubt about anything related to magic, I know who to ask!

“Mother, what is Wind Curtain?”

“It’s a spell that creates a thin, barrier-like curtain of wind to prevent the flow of air from one side to the other.”

A curtain made out of wind? I mean, yeah, that much is apparent from the name, but...

I didn't quite get it, so I tried stepping back through the entrance again.

Where is the wind?

I tilted my head to the side in confusion over the fact that I didn't *feel* any hint of a breeze, causing Mama to laugh. It was a very elegant laugh, and her expression was gentle, which meant she was in the mood to indulge my childish antics.

I'll pretend I didn't notice Papa standing next to her, smiling so wide that his face looks deformed!

"Maybe you'll understand like this," Mama said, using her magic to create a frigid breeze that caused a white mist to form in the air. As the mist spread, the color began to fade, but when it neared the entrance, the mist suddenly moved in an unusual way.

The mist blew horizontally from left to right, then promptly disappeared entirely.

I can only assume that this means that there's a breeze creating the unusual airflow I just witnessed...

But then, why didn't I feel the breeze when I stepped through?

"Why don't I feel the wind at all?" I asked.

"That's because you're wearing a temperature-regulation magical item that I created."

Huh?

"Temperature-regulation magical items" contained magic to block the unpleasant sensations of hot and cold weather. I'd previously used one in the shape of a hair clip, but the clip I was wearing in my hair was made of dragon scales and wasn't a magical item.

Besides that, I was equipped with the following "gear": the necklace I'd received from the king, the bracelet I'd received from Will, and the bunny backpack containing the dagger I'd received from Grandpa Gouche.

Oh! It must be the accessory they attached to the bunny backpack's ear!

It looked like a simple golden ring, but it was too small for me to wear as a bracelet. At the time, I *was* surprised they'd gone to all the trouble of creating such a fancy accessory just for my backpack.

It never even occurred to me it was actually a magical item...

"The ring on this little guy's ear is a magical item?" I asked.

"That's right; I engineered its construction as a magical item, but the design and shape were Olive's work. It seems it even repelled the effect of the Wind Curtain spell."

That means that the magical item Mama created was stronger than the spell on the entrance, huh?

I asked why they chose to put it on the bunny backpack instead of on me, and Mama explained that it used the power of the dragon orb as an energy source, so as long as I didn't remove it, the effect would be continuous and there would be no need to re-enchant the magical item.

Rather than making it an accessory that might not match the clothing I was wearing, they figured it would be easier to just attach it to the bunny backpack I carried everywhere with me.

Is it okay to use Sol's power like this without even asking? I'll run it by him later, just to be safe.

Ah!!

While I was distracted by my conversation with Mama, Louis and Theo had already moved on with Ralf, leaving us behind!

I hurried to catch up with them and soon spotted some familiar faces behind the registration desk.

"Healran! Miss Belle!" I ran up to them, and both Healran and Miss Belle crouched down at eye level with me.

"Lady Neema, I'm truly overjoyed to hear that you've made a full recovery," Healran said, his words formal but his tone genuine.

“We were so worried about you!” Miss Belle cried.

Healran was wearing a smile I’d never seen on him before, whereas Miss Belle looked like she might burst into tears at any moment.

“I’m sorry for making you both worry. But I’m all better now!” I said emphatically, trying to convince them that there was nothing to worry about anymore.

Following my emotional reunion with Healran and Miss Belle, Papa introduced them to Louis and Theo.

“This is the site manager of the Shiana Special Region, Healran Dewitt. Beside him is his assistant, Ariabelle Tellouse.”

Wow, Healran has an impressive job title!

I asked Ralf about it in a whisper, and he explained that Healran had essentially been put in charge of running Project Shiana. You could say he was the general manager, and Papa was the CEO.

I also learned that the only people employed directly by the Osphe family were Healran, Miss Belle, and the elven healer Vel. Project Shiana’s business entity employed the other staff, so they worked for the company and not for our family directly.

I chose to leave all those complicated details to Papa, so I have no right to comment on it now.

Just as I thought that Healran and Miss Belle joining our group made it even more unmanageably massive, the servants dispersed, presumably to attend to other tasks.

Even so, our group was still very eye-catching.

When we entered the restaurant, the lively chatter inside stopped, and all the diners fell silent for a moment before resuming their conversations at twice the intensity and volume.

The restaurant was more like a mall food court than a sit-down restaurant, and competing delicious aromas filled the air.

“It’s certainly busy in here,” Louis observed.

“This restaurant allows adventurers to eat here even if they aren’t staying at the inn, and the food is reasonably priced.”

Healran explained the restaurant’s system in detail, with Louis listening attentively.

Oh! There’s a rabbit beastperson! I wonder if that’s the older of the two grand rabbit tribe sisters we met at the staff interviews?

Oh! And there’s a beastperson with what I think are cat ears!

Miss Belle seemed to notice me fidgeting at the sight of the beastpeople because she offered to introduce them to me later.

I’m looking forward to it!

After the restaurant, we visited several unoccupied guest rooms, the recreation room, and finally, the public baths. The latter had been temporarily closed for use so we could tour them.

When we entered the public baths, Louis’s excitement peaked to almost freakish levels.

“So this is the ‘hot spring bath’ I’ve heard so much about! It’s simply incredible!”

Louis, I’m pretty sure you have large bathtubs in your country as well...

But it seemed that Louis had long been harboring dreams of bathing with other people.

“I can imagine nothing more remarkable than breaking a sweat with your companions, praising one another’s physical forms, sharing confidences you might not dare to speak outside those tantalizingly warm waters, and deepening the bonds of friendship!” Louis crowed passionately.

He really is a strange person...

Everyone’s having a hard time trying to come up with something to say in reply to that...

“Uncle, please do calm down,” Theo chided, snapping Louis back to his senses.

Seeming embarrassed by his overly enthusiastic outburst, Louis quickly moved on to asking about how the showers worked and how the terrace was used.

“Uncle became fascinated by the custom of public bathing ever since he went on a tour of a ludan.”

Ludan—I remember learning about this in my studies!

Ludans were simple public bathhouses for the common class.

Public bathhouses were fairly common in the Linus Empire. They’d originally been built as part of a long-ago government project, but they quickly grew in popularity to the point where they were a crucial part of the commoners’ daily lives in the present day.

The custom of public bathing had gained a foothold in some regions of our country as well, but because bathing at home was more prominent in our culture, even the commoners’ houses usually had a bathtub of some sort. That could also be because there were many areas with cold climates.

In the Linus Empire, ludans were a place to interact and communicate with your neighbors.

In the imperial palace, there was a similar bathing facility for the servants, where all kinds of information—rumors, truths, and observations on the latest trends—were exchanged.

I guess, compared to public baths on Earth, ludans are more like the ancient Roman thermae than Japanese sento.

Theo also informed me that the professional responsible for controlling the heat of the bathwater commanded a high salary.

“Is that true at our manor as well?” I asked curiously.

“Yes. At the Osphe manor, if a servant attains the skill to control the water temperature, they receive a pay raise,” Papa’s personal butler, Aurphan, answered.

Mama’s personal butler, Feio, and Ralf’s personal butler, Josh, were busy elsewhere. I suspected they were probably preparing our rooms in the

operations office that essentially doubled as the Osphe family's private vacation home. The two maids were also gone.

"Theo! Come look over here!" Louis was worked up over something again.

What is it this time?

Out on the terrace, there were tables, chairs, and lounge chairs for lying down.

This area was intended to be a place to relax and hang out while cooling down from soaking in the hot water. The terrace's roof was retractable and would be opened or closed depending on the weather.

At my request, they'd also built a foot bath out here. It looked like a drainage trench at first glance, but there was a drain with a plug you could insert before filling the basin with water. There was no faucet for this bath, so you had to scoop the water in by hand with a bucket, but the foot bath was a small one that could only accommodate up to three people at a time, so it didn't take long to fill.

It was this foot bath that had Louis so excited.

"It feels so nice!"

"...I want one in my office," Theo agreed.

"That's a great idea. I bet I'd get a lot more work done!"

Sitting with their feet soaking in the foot bath, the two were engaging in a borderline outrageous conversation.

A foot bath in an office?! I can only imagine that preventing any work from getting done!

Once they'd had their fill of the foot bath, we reconvened to the meeting room where lunch was served. I was surprised that the food they brought out was every bit as opulent as the food served at the royal palace.

Apparently, a nearby building was like a state guest reception hall run by our family, and the chef there—who'd trained at the royal palace—had sent over the prepared dishes using teleportation magic.

Theo, however, seemed disappointed. He said that he'd been looking forward to eating at the restaurant.

After lunch, we headed out to Mount Reitimo.

The building that housed the teleportation circle was very durable. Knights were stationed there as well, providing security.

We would have to break up into multiple smaller groups to teleport this time, but today, it wasn't one of the researchers from the Royal Magical Research Center who adjusted the settings so we'd all teleport to the same location; it was a researcher from the Osphe family's private research center that Karna had established.

Several researchers were stationed here to attend to regulatory maintenance and troubleshoot any issues that might arise. The actual research center was in the region of our province closest to the royal city.

A lot has changed, that's for sure!

We teleported onto Mount Reitimo, where we received a passionate reception—from the slimes.

"Ukyu!"

"Punyo!"

"Nyan!"

"Noon!"

What a chorus of energetic voices! Which of you cried "nyan" like the sound a cat makes in Japanese?!

The royal guards accompanying us as security reacted to the potential threat posed by the energetic slimes, spurring me into action in an attempt to calm them down.

"What are you all doing outside of your cave?"

"Roo, roo!" answered a slime I was pretty sure was Kohaku based on its coloring.

After telling me that its mother was here too, Kohaku looked around and,

apparently finding what it was looking for, hopped off in that direction.

It just occurred to me, but... Kohaku is significantly larger than the other slimes, isn't it?

The other baby slimes were about half Haku's size, whereas only Kohaku had, for some reason, become even larger than Haku.

Kohaku continued crying, "Roo, roo!" seemingly beseeching someone to feed it. In response, the other baby slimes began complaining, "No fair!"

I looked closer, trying to determine who Kohaku was begging for food, and realized it was speaking to Healran. At that very moment, Kohaku was bouncing up and down on top of Healran's head.

"Healran, don't tell me you've been feeding Kohaku magic?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. For some reason, it's become unusually attached to me. The only way to get it to leave me alone is to feed it magic..."

"Kohaku! Bad!"

I scolded Kohaku as sternly as I could manage, and it seemed to understand it was in trouble because it let out a mournful cry of "Rooooo!"

"I knew they ate magic but didn't realize it accelerated their growth. Perhaps there's a correlation between eating magic and developing the ability to negate magical attacks?" Mama postulated.

Oh boy, now we've flipped Mama's "researcher" switch! Not to mention, Theo's getting in on it!

Still completely expressionless, Theo was asking Mama to explain that to him in more detail.

I don't understand the workings of Theo's heart!

By that point, all of the baby slimes had joined in, their cries for food forming a chorus of incredible volume, leaving me no choice but to ask all the magic users in our midst to volunteer.

Both Louis and Theo eagerly asked, "Can we help too?" So, I gratefully accepted their assistance as well.

“All slimes line up in groups based on the attribute of magic you want to eat!” I ordered, and the slimes reacted immediately, organizing themselves into orderly lines.

The lines were divided by color, forming something of a rainbow, which Louis remarked was “So beautiful!”

I didn’t have any magic to feed the slimes, so I played with Shizuku while I waited for the others to finish.

“Shizuku! Where are you?”

“Pew! Pew, pew, peew!”

A large, jiggling ball appeared in front of me.

Shizuku, you’ve become even larger since last I saw you!

“Shizuku!”

I hugged Shizuku with all my might. It was like sinking into the softest, plushest mattress in the entire world.

Oh, man...

I can only imagine how amazing it would feel to be sucked inside of Shizuku and take a nap in there!

Still clutched tightly in my embrace, Shizuku obligingly changed its shape, becoming what looked like an egg-shaped chair.

Oh! This is even better...!

I sat in the Shizuku-chair, marveling at how it seemed to mold perfectly to fit my butt, hips, and back.

“Pew, pew, peeew!”

What’s that? You had another litter of babies while I was sleeping?! So that’s why there are so many of them! I thought there seemed to be more than I remembered...

“Mew! Mew-mew!”

While I was totally vegged out, relaxing in the Shizuku-chair, Haku suddenly

hopped over and began demanding something from Shizuku.

“Pew!”

Shizuku agreed, and Haku suddenly... Jumped right *into* Shizuku’s body!

“Haku?!”

“Pew, peeew, pew-pew!”

Huh? What do you mean by “This is necessary for it to evolve”?!

I was left clutching my head at the mysterious biology of slimes.

Apparently, parent slimes could reproduce year-round so long as they were in a safe and stable environment.

However, each slime with the power to reproduce only ever birthed one offspring with that same power. For Shizuku, Haku was that offspring, and under normal conditions, that offspring would never venture far from its parent.

I was surprised to learn that the first litter of babies born in the cave had already reached maturity and become independent.

Shizuku reported that Haku, too, had developed more quickly than expected.

Is this because they all have names?

As Shizuku explained, for an offspring with the potential to reproduce to become a parent slime itself, it would need to evolve three times, and this was Haku’s second evolution.

I asked why it needed to go inside Shizuku’s body to evolve, but the only response I received was a carefree *“Who knows?”*

The biggest mystery in this strange other world really is the biology of slimes...

9 - The Goblins Are Doing a Little Too Well!

***WELL**, now that Haku's inside of Shizuku, there's not much I can do about it. It will come out in about a day, so I'll have to leave them to it.*

After all the slimes were satisfied from feeding on magic, those I hadn't named disappeared into the forest. Now, only the slimes who I had named remained. I wasn't sure if they just wanted to be near me or what, but they chattered away energetically, following after us as we set off walking.

And you, Kohaku! Get off Healran's head already, will you?! You look like some kind of really bizarre hat!

Kohaku let out a baleful "Rooo!" in protest when I ordered it to get off Healran's head but ultimately obeyed.

Hai and the other members of the "gray slimes squad" are still refusing to leave Ralf's body, and Kohaku is also being rebellious... Do these little guys forget I'm technically their master?!

I squeezed and kneaded Kohaku like a stress ball, and it cried with delight this time.

Hmm, Kohaku's body is a bit tougher than Haku's or Shizuku's. Is this clay-like firmness because it gobbles up earth magic?

"The monsters really do serve her," Theo observed.

"It certainly is mysterious. I wonder if they'd follow me the same way if I named them?" Louis pondered.

"Uncle, please... Don't you think maybe that's not such a great idea?" Theo said.

"Why?!"

"Because you won't take care of them!"

I accidentally overheard a most... *interesting*... conversation.

If Louis took in an entire clan, they could probably fend for themselves for the most part, but he'd need to provide them the right environment to live in. Since he's a member of the imperial family, I bet he could arrange it with just a snap of his fingers, but many monsters are frightened of holy beasts, so I wouldn't recommend it.

Although, since it seems like the holy beasts in the Linus Empire are all bonded with powerful people like the emperor and the retired emperor, maybe it would work if he selected a territory for the monsters far from the imperial city?

In the time it took me to ponder through all this, we reached the goblins' cave.

"Mistress!"

The entire goblin clan was assembled in orderly lines outside of the cave.

Wait just a minute! When did they turn into an army of soldiers?!

"...I never imagined such a large clan of goblins could exist..." Theo sounded just as surprised as I felt.

They'd already been a fairly large clan when there were only somewhere between sixty and eighty of them, by my guess. But now their numbers seemed to have more than doubled...

"Shinki, how many goblins are there now?" I asked.

"Including the babies that were just born recently, there are 134 goblins, I believe."

Hmm, I'm not sure if that's a lot or not.

"Do you think that's a lot?" I asked Shinki.

"...Not particularly. I would've expected the population to have increased more in this environment. The number of births is actually less than the previous rate. I have a feeling the clan will start to shrink soon."

I see. In that case, we might need to come up with a plan to remedy this issue. Should we try splitting them into two clans based in separate locations on Mount Reitimo? Even if we attempt to strengthen their fighting abilities, I'm not sure how much the goblins without names will be able to improve...

“...Mistress...”

Oh no. I got distracted and ignored Suzuko. Now, she looks like she’s going to cry!

“Suzuko, Touki, things must’ve been difficult for you while I was sleeping,” I said. “I’m sure a lot has happened. Thank you for protecting the clan this whole time.”

The two were kneeling before me on one knee, putting them at just the right height for me to reach out and consolingly pat the tops of each of their heads simultaneously.

They didn’t have hair, so their heads were shiny and smooth. It felt like human skin, so it wasn’t a new and exciting sensation, but I knew the value of skin-to-skin contact.

“We wait and believe you come, mistress,” Touki declared. His grammar still wasn’t perfect and he spoke haltingly, but his pronunciation had gotten much clearer.

“We were able to keep trying our best because we could feel the connection with you hadn’t broken,” Suzuko explained. She, on the other hand, now spoke Larshian flawlessly, just like a native speaker.

“Gii!”

“Gi, gi-gii!”

A group of about ten goblins broke ranks to gather around me.

“They’re saying they’re happy to see you again, Miss,” Shinki translated, but that much was apparent from just looking at their faces.

“I’m glad to see you’re all doing well, too!” I exclaimed.

I’m pretty sure these goblins are the ones who were around back when I was kidnapped.

In short, they were the ones who recognized me as the clan’s leader.

Aside from the group of goblins gathered around me, all of the others seemed uneasy, as if not quite sure how to react to the presence of the humans before

them.

One of them, a hobgoblin, even glared at me.

“Everyone who recognizes me, please raise your hand!” I called out.

With cheerful “*Gii!*”s, the goblins gathered around me raised their hands. Amongst the remainder of the clan, not even a third of them raised their hands.

That meant that in just two cycles, a few of the original members were still alive.

Aside from Suzuko and Touki, there were nine hobgoblins. Two of those didn’t know who I was. One of the remaining seven was the hobgoblin Shinki had fought with and defeated in Cass Village, adding him and his followers to this clan. That meant that six of the goblins I’d known had evolved while I’d been asleep.

“*Gi-gyaaaa!*”

One of the hobgoblins who hadn’t raised his hand let out a vicious battle cry and began charging straight toward me.

Something cut in front of me, obscuring my line of sight.

“*Gu-gyaaa!*” came an answering battle cry.

Suzuko still responds in goblin language when speaking to the other goblins. More importantly, is the hobgoblin she’s currently grinding into the dirt even still breathing?!

“Suzuko, let him go, please,” I ordered.

“But he tried to harm you, mistress!”

“You too, Touki, put your weapon down. I’m fine.” I attempted to reassure Touki, who had taken up a fighting stance, before turning to speak to the hobgoblin on the ground. “Why did you attack, knowing full well that you’d be stopped?”

He said something, but it was muffled and impossible to make out.

“How dare you!”

Apparently, Suzuko understood what he said because the force with which

she ground him into the dirt increased.

While scrambling to calm Suzuko down, I asked Shinki what the hobgoblin had said. At first, he hesitated, as if it were something he didn't want to say, before finally admitting, "...He says he will never recognize any other boss besides me."

I see. Those from the generation who have never met me must be surprised and unimpressed by my sudden appearance.

As soon as I woke up, Shinki suddenly left. That probably made them uneasy.

"Were you lonely because Shinki left? And now I'm here, and you're worried the clan might change?"

The hobgoblin let out a weak "Gii, gii."

He seemed so pitiful that I couldn't help reaching out and patting his head.

At this, the group of goblins gathered around me shouted angrily in goblin language.

What's going on?!

"Apparently, he doesn't like me being with you, Miss. Hearing that, the older goblins started saying, 'Don't run your mouth, newbie!' and 'We'll kick you out of the clan for trying to hurt our mistress!'" Shinki explained.

That's interesting; although they're only goblins, and he's already a hobgoblin, they're calling him a "newbie" based on seniority, regardless of the power difference.

...Does this mean their intellectual abilities are increasing? In any case, what should I do about this situation?

Oh! I've got it!

I hurried over to Papa, who'd been standing off to the side watching everything play out, reached out for him to pick me up, then whispered something privately in his ear. Once he heard this, Papa replied immediately.

What I'd been thinking and Papa's response was the same, so I thanked him and returned to where the goblins were gathered.

"Okay, Suzuko. Please release him."

Not even bothering to hide her reluctance, Suzuko begrudgingly climbed off the hobgoblin.

“As for you, sit there.”

I helped up the hobgoblin splayed out on the ground and had him sit down right where he was.

“You can sit in whatever position is comfortable for you,” I instructed.

The hobgoblin plopped down with his knees drawn up to his chest protectively, looking pathetic. He didn’t change positions despite my urging, which made me feel as if I were beating on a chastised puppy or something.

“What do you think of Shinki?” I asked.

The hobgoblin glanced fearfully at Suzuko before answering in a tiny voice.

He really is terrified of Suzuko, huh?

I suppose I can’t blame him!

“He says Shinki is a wonderful leader.”

This time, Suzuko jumped in to translate before Shinki got the chance.

Hm, that’s about what I was expecting.

“I see. In that case, Shinki, please give him a name.”

An uproar erupted amongst the goblins the moment those words left my mouth. The majority seemed jealous that *he*, out of all of them, was getting a name after what he’d just done.

“Mistress! Why would you grace this scum with a name?!” Suzuko protested hotly.

“If it were you, how would you feel if Touki were the boss of the clan?”

“I would hate it! The clan would be wiped out under his leadership for sure!”

“So you wouldn’t want to have to follow and obey a goblin whose leadership you can’t support?”

Suzuko fell silent, an indescribable expression on her face.

What’s that about? Maybe something unpleasant happened in her past?

“Being named by Shinki and serving him will still ultimately put the hobgoblin under me, but...” I trailed off.

What I’d asked Papa was how he’d deal with a subordinate who disliked him. Papa had answered that he’d assign them to work for another of his subordinates whom he knew they respected.

It’s mentally painful to work under someone you hate, but when it’s someone you respect, that makes everything better.

But, from the perspective of upper management, as long as you don’t leave the organization, the overall result is the same. No, it’s actually better this way because you’re sure to be more productive working under a manager you respect and feel motivated to work hard for.

Papa had said that determining the most effective way to position and use one’s subordinates was a major part of any supervisory role.

“But...”

It looks like I’ll have to work a little harder to convince Suzuko and Touki first.

“Suzuko and Touki, will you both sit down for me?”

You’ve gotten so big that my neck hurts from looking up at you! Gosh, I hope I get that growth spurt soon!

They obediently sat down in front of me, putting us at eye level.

“It makes me very happy to see how much you care for me. But, you know, that’s not something you can *force* on all the others.”

By nature, goblins were instinctually wired to follow the strongest clan member, who was most likely to be able to protect them. I suspected those instincts had been distorted in those bound to me by the fact that I’d named them.

“I care about you all very much, so I want to do all I can to protect the clan. But I can’t live here with you, so in reality, Suzuko is the clan’s day-to-day leader.”

While I felt bad, I also would not be returning Shinki.

Not only was he my “knight” as a beloved child, but even before learning that, I’d come to rely on him to the point that I would be lost without him.

Not to mention, I would miss him too much!

“I’ve said this before to Touki, but you must always think about what is best for the clan,” I said.

“...What does that have to do with giving a name to this guy?”

Don’t think I don’t see the two of you frowning and tilting your heads! I can tell you still totally don’t get it! And now all the other goblins are starting to copy them, like a bunch of bobblehead dolls!

It is pretty cute, though...

Seeing no other option, I grabbed a stick and began sketching a rough depiction of the clan’s hierarchy in the dirt.

“All right, so in theory, I’m the boss of this clan. Directly below me is Shinki. And Suzuko and Touki are below him. Under Suzuko and Touki are the hobgoblins. Below them are the older goblins. And finally, we’ve got the younger goblins.”

Suzuko and the others seemed to be keeping up with me this far.

“Let’s pretend there’s an older goblin who’s been working really hard and successfully captured many prey. But this goblin is only working so hard because he likes you, Suzuko. Would you be unhappy about that?”

“...I would be happy, I think, but he *should* be doing his best for your sake, mistress, not mine.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s not for my sake. If this goblin brought back a lot of food for you, everyone in the clan would have plenty to eat, right? It doesn’t matter what the reason behind it was; the *result* benefits both Shinki and me just the same.”

If a low-level employee at a company worked hard because they wanted to make a name for themselves and ended up producing results, their supervisor would be praised for training such a skilled employee, and the company would profit. And as long as the company profited in the end, no one would complain

that the motive behind the results was the employee's desire to make a name for himself.

Everyone had different reasons for working hard.

The most troublesome thing would be if someone spent all their time dissatisfied and complaining to the point where they neglected their work.

So, if this hobgoblin didn't like *me* personally, I had no problem with him forgetting all about me.

All that was important was whether this would benefit the clan or not.

I was certain they didn't want to constantly live under the heavy cloud of dissatisfaction, either.

"It benefits you, mistress?"

"That's right. If he receives a name and goes on to guide and protect the clan for Shinki, that's still achieving my ultimate goal, right?"

In an actual company, no matter which department you hoped to be assigned to, that just might not be possible depending on the current placement of other staff and number of openings, and it was pretty rare for the company to work with you and authorize a transfer just because you couldn't stand your boss...

Fortunately, I'm in charge of this clan!

"The same goes for the rest of you as well. It doesn't have to be me—you're free to follow whichever goblin makes you want to do your best to protect the clan."

"I'll follow you, mistress," Suzuko declared.

"Touki, too. Mistress not give up on Touki when Touki was weak."

"Thank you both!"

Suzuko and Touki were both so unfalteringly loyal; it made me feel a bit embarrassed.

The older goblins all pledged their loyalty and vowed to follow me as well.

"All right, Shinki, if you'll do the honors please," I said.

“...Shuki.”

I was a bit confused by the immediate reply but presumed that must be the name he'd chosen for the hobgoblin.

“You're giving him the name 'Shuki'?”

Shinki replied with a short grunt.

Shuki, hm? I've been using “ki” in all the male goblins' names, inspired by the Japanese character for “demon.” Maybe he wanted to continue this trend? If I were to write it in Japanese characters, the first character that comes to mind for “shu” is the character meaning “vermillion,” but he's not red...

There's also the character for “alcohol,” but that doesn't apply here, either...

Oh, I've got it! I'll use the character for “protect!”

All right, let's go with that: Shuki, written with the characters for “protect” and “demon.”

...Although, since Shinki named him, I suppose his true name doesn't have any Japanese characters associated with it. Still, it should be fine for me to think of it this way, right? No one will know!

“Your name will be Shuki. With your mental strength, you should be able to calm down Suzuko and Touki, who are both easily angered,” Shinki announced.

The hobgoblin, now named Shuki, finally released his kicked-puppy posture and stared up at Shinki with glistening, almost worshipful eyes.

“How do you know that Shuki is mentally strong?” I asked.

“Because he was able to attack you.”

Goblins generally didn't attack children; in fact, it was built into their fundamental instincts to protect them. Now that I thought about it, I vaguely remember Shinki telling me this when he was still a hobgoblin himself.

Shuki had been able to suppress these instincts and attack me, but he'd probably never intended to seriously harm me. He'd known that Suzuko and the others would stop him long before he could reach me.

A terrifying thought struck me just then.

...Don't tell me this all played out exactly as Shuki planned...

It couldn't be... Could it?

"Shuki, did you actually want me to give you a name? Did you do what you did to get my attention?"

Shuki didn't say anything in response to my question, but his expression told me everything I needed to know. Shuki was *highly* intelligent and had calmly deduced, based on the situation, what action would be most likely to bring about the result he desired.

Even if attacking me was just an act, simply the fact that he had the mental capacity to come up with such a plan before even receiving a name is incredible... He's a force to be reckoned with!

"Well, whatever! All's well that ends well. More importantly, Shuki, please protect this clan. These goblins are all important to me, yourself included," I said.

Shuki gruffly said something in reply, then turned and disappeared into the cave. After that, some goblins who'd lost interest also returned to the cave.

"He said, 'You didn't have to tell *me* that,'" Shinki belatedly translated.

"I bet Shuki wanted to become stronger as well. For that reason, he wanted a name," I reasoned.

"...And that's why he attacked you?" Shinki asked, sounding doubtful.

Shinki's expression clearly stated that he didn't understand it, but I suspected that he wasn't capable of understanding how Shuki felt since he'd been strong even before receiving a name.

I was curious how much more Shuki might have progressed if *I'd* named him, but I also had a feeling that might've been borderline dangerous, so ultimately, I was glad Shinki had done it.

Oh, that's right. I have to tell Suzuko and Touki I'll be going to the Linus Empire.

I explained to them that I wouldn't be able to visit for a while because I would be in the Linus Empire.

“Mistress come back after?”

“Of course!”

“Okay. Touki waiting.”

Touki’s such a sweetheart. He’s almost too sweet—sometimes I worry someone will come along and take advantage of him.

“Mistress, I will protect the clan. So there’s nothing for you to worry about!”

“Thank you, Suzuko! Let’s play together lots and lots before I leave!”

While I was reaffirming my bonds with the two hobgoblins, I overheard a strange conversation being carried out somewhere behind me.

“Hmph! Why did you stop me, Shinki?!” Karna shouted.

Apparently, Karna was peeved with Shinki and not shy about making it known.

“You would’ve killed Shuki, right?”

Gasp!

Come to think of it, it is strange that my family sat by and watched as Shuki attacked me.

I see, so Shinki stopped them, huh?

“You’re still too inexperienced, Karna,” Ralf chuckled.

“But Ralf! There’s no way I could sit by and watch our precious Neema be attacked!”

“It was all part of that hobgoblin Shuki’s plan. I saw him tracking ours and Shinki’s movements with his eyes,” Papa stated calmly.

What?!

Papa, did you see through everything that was going on, even before I came to ask you that question?!

“We got to witness something incredible, eh?” Louis remarked.

“Naming a monster, huh? Why can Lady Neema name non-human creatures?” Theo asked.

“We haven’t been able to confirm that yet, but we suspect it may be related to her bond with the holy beast. However, as we can’t exactly conduct research on the sacred bond between a holy beast and their bonded master, we may never know for certain,” Mama answered.

They couldn’t exactly turn one of God’s so-called servants, a holy beast, and their bonded master into lab rats, after all. And even if Will were on board with trying to replicate my results, it would be problematic if the crown prince of a country amassed an army of monsters.

“Assuming we’re going to introduce this project back home in Linus, we’ll need to be in control of the monsters’ leaders. If possible, I’d like to see another example,” Theo said, seeming to be considering this deeply.

By “example,” does he mean he’s going to try to get one of the people from the Linus Empire who are bonded with holy beasts to try naming a monster?

“I bet His Imperial Majesty would do it happily,” Louis suggested with a grin.

Louis, is that the kind of person your older brother is? If this means he isn’t prejudiced against monsters, I’m happy to hear it, though!

“...I think it would be better if the next-in-line did it,” Theo said.

“That won’t be possible until the holy beast chooses.”

Based on what they’re saying, it sounds like none of the emperor’s children have bonded with a holy beast yet?

What criteria does a holy beast use to decide who to bond with, anyway?

In Sol’s case... I think he probably chose me because I’m a beloved child.

I wonder why Lars chose Will. This is going to bother me! I’ll have to ask him next time I see him.

We set off again, heading to the kobolds’ territory next, and for some reason, Suzuko and the others followed. These “others” consisted of the older goblins and all the kids.

“Shinki, is it okay for the children to tag along?” I asked.

“Yeah. When I’m here, I often take them to visit the kobolds, so they probably

assumed that's what we're doing today."

Shinki is good at taking care of others, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that he's so good with kids, too.

The goblin children seemed especially interested in the slimes they'd picked up and were playing with.

I tried warning the slimes not to attack the goblin children, but one of the purple slimes—probably Violet, based on its color—fled from the children so frantically that when it accidentally crashed into one of them at full speed, it was like an upper-cut to the jaw.

That child began crying, and although the older goblins nearby tried to console them, for some reason, several of the other children also burst into tears, as if it were contagious or something.

With a long-suffering sigh, Shinki headed over to the children and scooped several of them up into his arms all at once.

When Touki picked up the remaining children at Shinki's order, the surprised children immediately ceased crying.

Seeing that, the slimes apparently thought it looked fun because they started attempting to climb up Shinki and Touki's backs.

Even Violet was now happily sitting atop one of the children's heads despite being so determined to flee moments earlier.

Oh, I see. Maybe it doesn't like to be played with, but it likes to play? In any case, I'm having plenty of fun just watching, so I won't stop them!

"It's about time to call for an escort."

Miss Belle explained that if we continued any higher up the mountain, we'd run the risk of stumbling into one of the kobolds' traps, so she pulled out a whistle and blew into it. It made a shrill, high-pitched noise similar to Lestin's signature two-fingered whistle.

I wonder who will come to get us?

10 - They're Mine!

UP ahead was the kobolds' "trap area," so we were forced to wait for someone to come and lead us through safely. I was curious about what kind of traps they had, but it would be totally uncool if I fell into a pitfall and got stuck, so I resisted the urge to take a peek.

But we sure make for a lively group, huh?

The goblin children were excited that Shinki and Touki were paying attention to them, and the slimes were messing around, playing with the people who'd fed them magic.

Apparently, it's the newest craze to ride on top of people's heads? For some reason, Gratia was hiding in my hair, refusing to come out. Maybe he's lonely because Haku's not here. They're normally always together.

It's okay, Gratia; I'm sure Nox will play with you later!

"Woof, woof!"

Just as I was registering that our escort had arrived, a group of massive, fluffy white creatures barreled toward us.

...This situation is giving me déjà vu...

They're on course to plow straight into me...

They are going to stop, right?

No, they're not!

The fluffy mass of bodies crashed into me, knocking me to the ground and then proceeding to lick my entire face... I didn't even have the presence of mind to enjoy their fluffiness because I was in such imminent danger of being smothered by it!

"Get off of Lady Neema, all of you!" a familiar-sounding voice called out, and the swarm of fluffy white critters backed off, whining pitifully at being scolded.

“They look just like the stuffed animal Neema carries everywhere with her,” Mama remarked.

Mama, now’s not the time for observations! Please help me! My clothes and hair are totally wrecked! I turned to Paul for help with putting myself back together. *Since he’s a super-butler, I’m sure he can clean me up in no time!*

Paul used a cleansing spell on me, pulled a comb out of his pocket, and made quick work of arranging my hair. From what I could tell, it felt as if where he tied my hair had changed; it seemed he’d completely changed my hairstyle.

There’s no doubt about it; with his kindness and attention to detail, Paul must be popular with the ladies!

All right, now that that’s taken care of, it’s time to get back to business!

“You’ve all gotten so big!” I exclaimed.

My “attackers” were Hanley’s grandchildren. They still weren’t as big as Hanley, but they’d gotten bigger than me. The way they sat at attention, wagging their tails enthusiastically, reminded me of dogs.

I went around to each of them, patting the tops of their heads in greeting and enjoying the enticing texture of their fur. Their topcoats were so silky my fingers slid through the fur like a hot knife through butter. The undercoat consisted of shorter hairs, but they were densely packed and springy, leaving me wanting to pet them for hours.

I tried pinching and tugging on their cheeks, and the combination of their soft fur and the pudginess of their cheeks was incredible!

The young kobolds began shaking their bodies as if saying, “*Hey, knock it off, will you?!*” which had the unintended effect of spraying me with drool.

“...Lady Neema...”

I would pretend I hadn’t heard Paul’s almost despairing tone, despite knowing it probably had something to do with the fact that he’d only just finished cleaning me up once.

“Lady Neema, we heard you were sleeping for a long time... Are you okay now?” the owner of the voice that I’d previously recognized only as “familiar”

said, and now that he was close enough, I realized it was Tolf.

He's just as handsome as ever! Well, if you like dog-faced men, that is...

"I'm all better now!" I replied.

Come to think of it, Suzuko and Touki also seemed to know what had happened to me... Did Healran explain it to everyone?

Following Tolf, we continued on, climbing up the mountain towards the kobolds' territory. The path was not even worn enough to count as an animal trail; we were trudging through dense brush.

"Tolf, what kind of traps do you guys have set up?" I asked curiously.

"There are all sorts. For example..." Tolf pointed to something a short distance away. I looked in the direction he was pointing, but nothing stood out to me. "You can get a little closer," he encouraged.

At his urging, I took two, then three steps forward into the underbrush when...

There was a *SNAP!* Followed by the *WHOOSH!* of something flying through the air. Tolf nimbly stepped in front of me, moving so fast that I barely even registered the movement before a dull *CRASH!* echoed through the air.

"Does that answer your question? This whole area is set up with rock-catapult traps," he said calmly.

...And you decided to have me set one of them off?! Not to mention, he just deflected that huge stone with the sheath of his sword!

Ack! Papa and Karna, calm down! I'm fine, see?! You can put your magic away!

Just as I thought that, the slimes converged around Papa and Karna and began eating the excess magic they'd reflexively called up. I slapped a hand to my chest in relief, and the two of them chuckled good-naturedly, so I determined the situation to be safely defused.

Then a voice called down from up in the trees overhead, "Tolf! Was that you?!"

What is it now?!

“You intentionally set that trap off, right?! You *know* I just got done resetting that one!” A familiar high kobold was peeking out from amidst the canopy of leafy branches.

“Fika!” I cried.

“Huh? Oh, if it isn’t Neema!”

Fika was one of the older children of the family leader of the Herb Family. He was a Shiba Inu high kobold with reddish-brown fur. He was also Seigo and Rikusei’s blood-related older brother.

“You’re just as tiny as ever, huh?” Fika was used to dealing with kids—not surprising given how many younger siblings he had.

“Who’re you calling tiny!” I protested, but Fika just laughed it off.

“You’re adorable just as you are, Lady Neema,” Tolf attempted to console me, but I wasn’t about to be deterred so easily.

“All of the traps are non-lethal types like that one. Their purpose is mostly just to alert the Herb Family if anyone approaches. There’s no chance of the adventurers getting anywhere near the pack.”

“Each of the traps is marked with a scent that only kobolds can pick up, so there’s also no concern that any of us will accidentally stumble into one of them.”

So that’s how they’re able to guide us through safely. But there must be beastpeople with excellent senses of smell, too, right?

“Wouldn’t beastpeople also be able to smell it?” I asked curiously.

“Some of them can; it depends on the tribe. That guy from the bear tribe was really impressive.”

A bear beastperson, huh? Come to think of it, I remember Lestin saying that wild bears have a really good sense of smell.

He’d mentioned that sometimes the wild bears would tell him when they smelled someone whose scent they didn’t recognize. However, it was

apparently difficult to get them to track a scent trail, such as that of an animal who'd run off. That kind of action flipped a switch in the wild bears' primal instincts because once they chased down their target, they tended to tear it to pieces.

As we climbed the mountain, Tolf and Fika regaled us with tales of all the adventurers they'd encountered. The most common were stories of new and inexperienced adventurers totally bungling it.

Whether this took the form of the adventurer being so panicked that they couldn't even cast a single spell or whether they were struck immobile with fear when confronted by the mere sight of a scary-looking kobold, all of the stories were amusing.

It seemed that none of the adventurers had bested any of the hunting families even once, but the lifestyle families often intentionally let themselves be defeated. When I asked why they would do this, it was because most of the lifestyle families engaged in professions related to making things; they didn't want to risk being injured. Even with the Healer Family's help, depending on the injury, it might not heal perfectly, leaving permanent damage. So the members of the lifestyle families often chose to surrender if they couldn't simply escape with minimal fighting.

It made sense, considering the vast difference in fighting abilities between the hunting and lifestyle families.

Oh, and apparently, there hadn't been any "festivals"—one of the options for adventurers to earn their release after being captured by the hunting families—since shortly after the mountain had opened for business.

According to Fika, that was because the adventurers quickly realized that, between themselves—newcomers on this mountain—and the kobolds who called this place home, they were at a severe disadvantage in trying to navigate the terrain to escape.

Well, duh!

Figuring that out, all the adventurers who couldn't afford to pay the ransom had saved themselves the hassle by choosing to become bondsmen.

Finally, we made it to more level ground, and I knew we must be close to the kobolds' territory.

All at once, Hanley's grandchildren booked it, rushing forward in a wild mob of bouncing white fur.

While I was marveling at the young kobolds' boundless energy, we arrived in the area where the pack lived, and it was nothing like what I remembered.

Gone were the washing hanging to dry in the branches of trees and the giant communal cooking pot. In their place were houses, just like those humans lived in.

I wouldn't go as far as to call it a town, but it was definitely a village.

Without hesitation, Tolf and the others continued along the road. The rest of us followed, and before long, a familiar cave came into view.

"What were those houses just now?" I asked.

"That's where the humans who live with us stay."

So they are houses for humans! But what are humans doing living all the way out here?!

"Most of them are bound by servitude contracts, but there are also some humans who've voluntarily chosen to become apprentices of the lifestyle families," Miss Belle spoke up to explain.

It turned out that part of Miss Belle's job was to oversee the adventurers who'd become bondsmen. She would review the job descriptions provided by the lifestyle families who wanted more help and assign the appropriate number of bondsmen to each position, keeping in mind their periods of servitude. She also stepped in to mediate any conflicts that arose between the humans.

Tolf said that Miss Belle had been a huge help, so apparently the kobolds had come to trust and rely on her.

I also learned that the Weaver Family and Knitter Family had become popular work placements among the female adventurers who'd become bondswomen. Many of the women had experience with weaving. In addition to the relatively enjoyable tasks of embroidery and making accessories, the members of the

Weaver Family and Knitter family were easy-going and friendly, which made them desirable employers.

On the other hand, the Green Family and the Carpenter Family were popular with many of the more seasoned adventurers. Since their professions were agriculture and woodworking, I could see why.

Is it just my imagination, or is this almost like an internship program?!

We made our way through the village, looking around as we went, until we arrived in a wide-open area. This was probably the same place we'd once held a mamushi-barbecue.

A beautiful Dalmatian woman stood in the clearing, looking up at the sky.

"Sicily!" I cried, and her eyes crinkled as she smiled back at me.

"Lady Neema."

Sicily said that she'd been waiting for me, but she looked surprised when she caught sight of the sizable group that had followed me here.

"Even Suzuko and Touki came along? How rare," she remarked.

"We don't get many chances to spend time with our mistress," Suzuko replied, and Sicily seemed satisfied with this explanation.

"I heard from Belle that some fancy-pants people would be coming for a visit?"

"This is Louis and Theo. Oh, and these are my parents," I said, introducing everyone.

They already know Ralf and Karna, so I don't need to introduce them.

"I'm this pack's leader, Sicily of the Star-Reader Family."

"I'm Theo."

"My name is Louis. It's nice to meet you."

Both men introduced themselves to Sicily as common courtesy demanded, but I was a bit surprised by how abrupt Theo's greeting was.

"Come to think of it, where's Spica?" I asked.

Normally, she would come literally flying towards me, but I hadn't seen her anywhere.

"Oh, you hadn't heard? Spica's off undergoing training."

Huh? Training?!

"What kind of training?" I asked.

Although I'd directed the question to Sicily, for some reason, Aurphan answered, "Spica is currently in our care."

What does he mean "our" care?

"She professed a desire to serve you, Lady Neema, so we've been educating her in all she'll need to know as a servant of the Osphe family. She's not quite ready to stand on her own yet, so please wait patiently just a little longer," Aurphan elaborated.

"As a beastperson, she possesses impressive fighting abilities. Once she's mastered etiquette, she'll be ready to serve at your side, Lady Neema," Paul added.

You knew about this too, Paul?! Who's been training her, anyway?!

"What about Seigo and Rikusei?" I asked.

"They've been trained in all the necessary skills: guard duty, infiltration, and assassination. But they still have a way to go in mastering speech."

Aurphan! What have you been doing to all of my people?! You can't just swoop in and recruit them for training—they're mine!

"You've managed to collect excellent specimens. Perhaps because the foundation was already laid, they've quickly mastered everything they've been taught and become quite skilled," Aurphan said.

Well, of course—obviously, I'm an excellent judge of character!

...No, wait, that's not what I should be focusing on here!

The direction this conversation was taking was confusing me.

"This was what they wanted, so you don't need to worry about them," Fika said kindly, but I wasn't so easily convinced.

After all, he didn't know our household servants. If Spica and the others were being trained to *their* standards, their lives might actually be in danger!

"There's truly nothing to worry about. They are doing their best because they want to work beside you. All you need to do is give them lots of praise," Papa insisted, probably seeing the concern for my friends' lives written all over my face. He also pointed out that Aurphan rarely praised anyone, which showed how incredibly well Spica and the others were doing.

Okay! I'll take his word for it and make sure to praise them lots next time we meet!

"Good grief, do you guys ever go anywhere *without* a massive entourage?!"

If it isn't Uncle Phillip! Of course he's hanging out here! Where else would he be?

"Phillip, you do whatever you want whenever you want, huh?" Papa chided dryly.

"Sorry, sorry. It's just such a hassle—someone always seems to want something from me whenever I'm at the Lorta Building."

The original plan was for him to meet us at Asmunlorta. But the members of Purple Gandal were idolized by all the other adventurers, which made it uncomfortable for them to show their faces in a place where so many adventurers gathered.

"Hey, Neema! You certainly overslept this time, eh?" Uncle Phillip called out jovially, rubbing the top of my head so vigorously that my neck started to ache.

The female healer came to my rescue.

"I'm so relieved to see you've recovered, Lady Neema. My gratitude to the Goddess," she said, offering a quick prayer of thanks to the Goddess on my behalf.

I thanked her, then went on to greet the other members of Purple Gandal, who all looked the same as they had the last time I'd seen them.

"Phillip, Lord Theo has expressed a desire to engage in a practice fight with you. Would you please indulge him?" Mama requested.

“There’s no way I could refuse a personal request from you, Cerulia.”

Heh, even Uncle Phillip’s weak against Mama, huh? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised; Mama is probably the most powerful member of the Osphe family. I’m not sure if Mama is manipulating Papa or if he’s simply indulging her, but nothing Mama has opposed has ever gone through, not even once.

Showing a glimpse of his background as a child of nobility, Uncle Phillip greeted Louis and Theo with a graceful, practiced bow. But the next moment he was back to his usual self—a roguish and carefree middle-aged man!

“Let’s get right to it then, shall we?” Uncle Phillip drawled, leading Theo away to another clearing that was being used as a training area.

“What would you like to do, Lord Louis?”

“I want to look around this area a little more.”

And that was how we ended up touring the lifestyle families’ work area.

As Miss Belle had said, five female adventurers were in the Weaver Family and the Knitter Family’s joint workspace.

The sight of people weaving fabric and making nets was enough to make me doubt my eyes—it seemed like this could be just any other peaceful little farming village.

Around the communal well, humans and kobolds were gathered together, washing vegetables, and people were also making their way back from a long day of working in the fields.

In the Carpenter Family’s workshop, the family leader was patiently instructing a group of humans.

In the Furnace Family’s smithy, we witnessed the striking sight of several humans busily attending to various tasks while a bulldog kobold was hammering away at something in the center of the room.

“...It really is a strange and unusual sight,” Louis remarked. “I never expected to see humans so seamlessly blending into a space where monsters are the majority.”

It must be impactful to someone witnessing such a thing for the first time.

Even to someone like me who's gotten somewhat used to such things, it's still quite surprising.

"In some ways, the lifestyle families have more in common with humans than other monsters. That might explain why it was easy for them to accept and integrate with humans," Miss Belle explained, with Louis listening intently.

As we strolled through the work area, the sight of humans and kobolds working together all around us struck me, and a thought occurred to me.

On Earth, dogs were said to be "man's best friend," but even in this world, maybe if more humans could only understand kobolds better, they would also be able to view them as cherished friends and neighbors.

The existence of ogres and other aggressive species had unfortunately painted all monsters in a negative light and given them a reputation for attacking humans, but personally I felt that kobolds were more similar to humans than even goblins.

"If we do this in Linus, maybe we should make kobolds the focal species," I heard Louis mutter, seemingly to himself.

Despite his outward ambivalence, Louis seemed to be considering this all very carefully. Watching him, I almost got the shivers. It was a poignant reminder that he was, after all, a member of the imperial family.

"By the way, did you ever make contact with the other packs?" I asked. I suddenly recalled how Fika had previously said that if they settled down somewhere permanently as part of Project Shiana, other packs might come join them.

"Yeah. It seems that several packs fled through the mountains into Linus."

Fika went on to tell me that Sicily had made contact with a pack led by the Strength Family. Currently, the Linus Empire and Milma were making efforts to protect monsters, so the risk of being subjugated was relatively low.

After that, the conversation turned to humans who'd chosen to stay even after completing their period of servitude as bondsmen. While we were discussing this, Theo returned. He was just as expressionless as ever, but...

“...Damn,” Uncle Phillip remarked, looking *exhausted*.

“His skill does not betray the rumors,” Theo grimly reported to Louis.

Louis gave a dry chuckle, but I couldn’t figure out which of them had won.

“By the way, are you going to visit the sirens before you leave?” Uncle Phillip asked, but we’d already decided against it because it would be dangerous to try and navigate through the caves with such a large group.

I *was* a little worried about how Kai was doing, though.

“They decided we can’t go because it’s too dangerous. How is Kai doing?” I asked.

“He’s fine. He goes out sometimes, but I don’t know where to.”

Huh?! He’s going out?! Didn’t the siren ladies forbid him from leaving the cave?

“Don’t worry; His Highness personally came to collect him each time, so there’s no need to worry he might be attacking people.”

...Will! This is the first I’ve heard about this! How dare you use one of my friends for your own devices without even consulting with me first!

That was a shocking revelation, and it seemed that Papa and Mama had also been unaware.

In any case, we ended our tour there for today, and I decided I would be sending Will a very strongly worded letter as soon as we got back.

We made our way down the mountain, and when we arrived at Asmunlorta, Josh and the others came out to meet us.

Louis and Theo, as well as the staff from the royal palace, would stay at the state guest reception hall our family had built. It was run by our family’s servants, so the service was on par with that at the royal palace. Of course, the bathing facilities used natural hot spring water, and there was even an outdoor public bath.

I want to go in the outdoor bath too!



“NEEMA, a letter’s arrived for you from His Highness.”

Papa had written a letter for me as soon as we returned to our family’s operations-office-slash-private-residence. Apparently, a reply had already arrived.

All right, Will! Let’s hear what excuse you’ve got for callously using one of my companions for your own undoubtedly nefarious reasons without asking me!

“I was having Kai help me with the matter at hand. I’m sorry for not obtaining your consent first. I’ve taught Kai all he needs to know, so you can use that as you see fit.”

But Kai is mine!

And what does he mean “use that as you see fit?!”

“I suppose we couldn’t very well expect him to write all the details in a letter that might be intercepted. It looks like you’ll have no choice but to take it up with him in person once we return to the royal city.”

If I could get permission to go off on my own, me and Shinki could go up to the cave and ask Kai directly what’s been going on, but...

Tomorrow, we’re planning to meet with the staff working here in the Shiana Special Region, so I’m sure I’d be turned down if I asked permission to go off on my own.

Grrr.

Kai!

Please come to me!

11 - Time Changes People

MY tangle of complicated emotions finally eased after a nice, refreshing bath. The bathing facilities in the operations-office-slash-private-residence building also used water from the natural hot spring. Playing with my sister in the bath might also have improved my mood.

Oh, but it's a secret that we were horsing around when we were supposed to be bathing! Nobody tell Mama! We might even have done something a little dangerous, so we're guaranteed to get a full-blown Mama-scolding if she finds out!

So this has to stay a secret no matter what!

"Lady Karna, I'm certain Her Ladyship has told you before that the use of magic is prohibited in the bath..."

Oh, crap... Paul found out somehow! How did he know?

"The water was too hot for Neema, so I just cooled it down a little, that's all!" Karna said with a suspiciously innocent smile.

"...Yes, well, that's quite enough of that. See to it that this doesn't happen again," Paul warned pointedly, but Karna seemed unfazed. She was determined to invent a magical item that could be used as a bath toy.

Karna, I'm fine with just plain old non-magical bath toys! Buuut... It's my job as a younger sister to support her aspirations.

Yeah, that's it!

At night, I shared a bed with my sister, and we chatted enthusiastically about what kind of magical item to create until I drifted off to sleep.

I'd developed a healthy sleep schedule early on—to my parents' relief, I'm sure—and now the phrase "early to sleep, early to rise" was so ingrained in me that I couldn't stay up very late even if I tried.

When Karna woke me the next morning, the first thought on my mind was *Breakfast!* But I was forced to put those plans on hold temporarily.

Theo had seemed so disappointed about being unable to eat at the restaurant inside Asmunlorta the day before that it had been decided we'd all meet there for breakfast this morning.

...But I'm hungry! I wanna eat now!

My stomach was growling fiercely, so I begged Paul to bring me a little snack to tide me over.

"Woo-hoo! A fruit palas!"

I couldn't help getting a little excited when I saw the sandwich he'd brought me, stuffed with my favorite fruits. I wasted no time taking a huge bite and was surprised it tasted identical to the fruit palases I always ate at home.

"It tastes just like home! Mmm, it's so yummy!" I squealed with glee.

"Thank you," Paul replied with a wry smile.

Does that mean Paul was the one who made this?

"Did you make it yourself, Paul?" I asked.

Paul nodded in the affirmative, and Karna chuckled.

"Our servants really are talented," she said. "The private butlers have memorized their charges' preferences, even down to their favorite foods."

According to Karna, when a butler was appointed to serve a specific family member exclusively, the first thing they learned was how to prepare that person's favorite foods. They would get the chef to teach them how to make each dish, then practice until they replicated the taste perfectly.

For this reason, Paul also mastered a dish similar to bruschetta that used a vegetable resembling a tomato.

...Aw man, I miss the food from home! Right now, I'd kill for one of those steak hand-pie things that are the chef's specialty! Unbelievably, I was dreaming of meat while eating a fruit sandwich. *Somehow, I suspect this train of thought can't be good for my digestion, so I'll quit now while I'm ahead!*



WHEN we arrived at Asmunlorta, Louis and Theo were already there waiting for us.

I recognized them immediately by the elite aura they gave off, but the royal guards accompanying them as bodyguards blended in with the adventurers. They were in off-duty clothing like the previous day, but curiously, the tenseness that had previously given them away had disappeared. I wondered how they'd suddenly gotten so good at hiding it.

Healran and Miss Belle had reserved an entire corner of the restaurant for us, so we sat down as soon as we arrived. I wasted no time browsing the menu but was disappointed that it only listed the names of the dishes and their prices.

Hm, there's certainly room for improvement here!

The sweets shop we'd visited in the royal city contained descriptions of each item and even illustrations of the most popular items.

"There certainly are a lot of options," Louis remarked, seeming a bit overwhelmed by the variety.

Mama and Karna both went with a light breakfast soup made with a variety of vegetables and some kind of simmered seafood dish.

Papa selected "gardola something-or-other"—some kind of fish dish.

As for me, I was unfamiliar with the names of most of the items on the menu and couldn't decide what to order. Seeing no way around it, I reluctantly asked Paul to explain each item to me.

Yeah, having too many options can also be a problem! They should narrow it down a bit, maybe splitting the current options into separate menus for "breakfast" and "lunch."

In the end, I got a sashimi set that came with a side of soup and mixed-grain rice.

Come to think of it, I've eaten "mixed grains" plenty of times, but I've never seen anyone eating just plain white rice in this world. Oh, well, even if eating white rice isn't part of the culture here, the food's still delicious, so I guess it

doesn't matter!

Once everyone decided on their orders, Healran called over a waitress.

I was delighted that the waitress who hurried over to our table was a beastperson with cat ears!

“May I take your orders?”

One by one, we conveyed our orders to the cat-eared young lady, who smiled broadly as she wrote each item down. From time to time, one of her ears would flick to the side, and I got the feeling she was picking up bits and pieces of conversation from the surrounding tables.

I'm sure it's fine during the slower periods, but when they're busy in the evenings, especially when people are drunk and rowdy, the noise must be hard on beastpeople's ears.

“Excuse me, miss... You have very beautiful fur! What tribe are you from?” I asked.

Her fur was the same dark golden color as her hair. The length of the hair on her tail made me think she must be a member of a long-haired tribe.

“Thank you very much! I'm from the small tiger tribe.”

The small tiger tribe was the most iconic tribe of feline beastpeople. The specific animal ancestor of their species was unclear, but it was theorized it was probably some kind of mid-sized toetail. There was also a “large tiger tribe” believed to be descended from large-sized rye panthers.

However, there was so much interbreeding between the small tiger tribe and other types of beastpeople that there were virtually no “pure blooded” small tiger beastpeople anymore.

Among the many diverse animals in this world, there weren't any lions or tigers. The closest things resembling these earthly species were the lion and tiger holy beasts. The fact that their names had been incorporated into the beastperson tribes' names was probably simply down to the coolness factor.

While waiting for the food to arrive, I told Healran about the areas I'd noticed that could use some improvement. My first suggestion was to reorganize the

menu so it was easier to understand and add illustrations. Next, I suggested paring down the menu and dividing it into a “breakfast menu” and a “lunch menu.”

I also suggested implementing some type of magical item similar to a call button to help the servers. They could number the tables so that when the call button was pushed, the table number would be displayed, just like in a family-style restaurant in Japan. However, I wasn’t sure if that was possible to recreate using magical items or not.

“Hmm, I *have* heard that there are times during the evening rush that people calling out to the servers have a hard time catching their attention...” Healran said, mentioning that the beastpeople, with their keen sense of hearing, didn’t usually have trouble, but it was harder for the human waitstaff.

“I think the beastpeople’s sensitive ears must hurt when it gets particularly noisy,” I observed.

“Hmm, but I think it would be difficult to link up multiple magical items spread out over a wide area,” our resident magical item specialist, Mama, pointed out dubiously.

Oh... How do they do it in Japan? Does it use radio waves or Bluetooth or something? I don’t know much about technology...

If what they need is a way to send and receive signals...

“Could you use teleportation magic?” I wondered.

They could install one of those “continuous one-directional” magic circles on each table and connect them all to a single magic circle either in the kitchen or somewhere high up on the wall, mimicking the call button system.

“It might be possible, but the technology doesn’t currently exist to make the magic circles any smaller.”

The smallest teleportation circles in existence were those used to send letters, which were approximately a foot across.

That would certainly take up a lot of space on the table!

“...There’s only one person I can think of who might be able to figure it out,

but if I'm being perfectly honest, I'd rather not involve him," Mama said.

Someone who Mama feels that strongly opposed to working with must be quite the character... If they can make this work, it might be worth it, though.

But if Mama says it's out of the question, I guess we'll have to find another way.

"Cerulia, could it be you're referring to Marquis Reyus Bielisov?" Papa asked.

Mama made an uncharacteristically dour face at the sound of this unfamiliar-to-me name coming from Papa's mouth.

It was only for the briefest moment, so fleeting that I was certain only our family seated closest to her would've noticed it, but that expression told me clearly that Mama either *hated* this person or he was extremely eccentric.

I'm curious which it is.

"By 'Marquis Bielisov,' do you mean..." Ralf started to say, then trailed off, giving me the impression that he knew of the person but was having a hard time finding the right words to describe him.

"Let's decide what to do about this later," Mama cut in neatly, not letting Ralf even attempt to finish that sentence.

Just then, our food was brought out, conveniently clearing away the tense atmosphere, and we all set about eating our breakfast.

It was a bit amusing to see how the elites in our party reacted to the sight of my sashimi set—it had never even occurred to many of them that fish *could* be eaten raw.

Papa's flustered reaction was the most amusing. He incredulously asked if the kitchen had forgotten to cook my meal and even offered to grill it for me with his fire magic.

Papa, if you grill it, there won't even be ashes left when you're done!

I explained that freshly caught fish could be eaten raw, but the others remained unconvinced.

Hmm, it looks like a demonstration is in order!

I selected a slice of what looked like fatty tuna and dipped it in sauda sauce. Just looking at the sauda sauce dripping enticingly off the fish's beautifully marbled surface was enough to make my mouth water.

It looks so delicious!

"Father, say 'Ah'!"

I held out the sashimi, and with a reluctant grimace, Papa accepted it.



I knew there was no way Papa would turn me down if I told him to “say ‘ah’”!

“Oh, it’s actually pretty good.”

Apparently, it had been so good that even Papa couldn’t deny it.

“Right?!” I eagerly agreed.

Louis looked like he wanted to try the sashimi, too, so I offered him a piece of what looked like seabream.

“This is delicious! I’ve never tasted anything like it before!” he exclaimed.

I would imagine not!

In this world, only commoners in fishing villages like this one ate sashimi. Nobles usually didn’t have an opportunity to try it.

Louis was so taken by the sashimi that he ordered a serving and forced Theo to try it, too. For his part, Theo quietly ate the sashimi, expressionless as ever.

Come on, Theo, you’re supposed to make some kind of comment!



WHEN, at last, our lively and entertaining breakfast ended, the next order of business was a tour of each of the guilds’ branch offices.

The first branch office we visited was that of the merchants’ guild.

The first floor was a shop that sold souvenirs and was bustling with customers.

I peeked at one corner of the shop especially crowded with female customers and saw a display of accessories made with nuts and flowers that I suspected had been crafted by the Weaver Family and the Knitter Family.

I was surprised to spot a familiar face among the staff waiting on customers in the shop.

“Big sister!”

I didn’t know her name, but it was the older of the rabbit tribe beastperson sisters I’d met at the staff interviews.

“Lady Nefertima?!”

Her big ears are standing straight up! So cute!

“I’d heard you were sick! Are you doing better now?”

“Yes, I’ve recovered completely!”

“I see. My sister will be glad to hear that as well. Would you mind waiting here for just a moment?”

I nodded, and the older sister darted off.

Louis was looking around the shop, seeming deeply fascinated.

Theo was holding dried fish.

Is he planning on buying that?

A moment later, the older sister returned, now accompanied by another person.

I’d recognize those droopy, orange-ish ears anywhere... It’s her younger sister, Racul!

“I’m so happy to see you again, Lady Nefertima,” Racul said. Her face looked very different from the last time we’d met. It was lit with happiness, making her look even cuter than before.

“Did you also get hired by the merchants’ guild, Racul?” I asked.

“Yes. The guild master approached me, saying they could always use someone to keep the books and do other behind-the-scenes work.”

Hmph! I had my eyes on the two of them!

But given their previous job running a restaurant in Icoux and Racul’s experience with accounting and stock management, I guess the merchants’ guild is a good fit. And I suppose this just goes to show that the guild master of the merchants’ guild is a shrewd judge of character.

“By the way, will you please accept my gift, as we promised?” Racul asked shyly.

Oh, right. We agreed that the next time we met she’d give me something in exchange for the ribbon I gave her.

I responded that I'd be delighted, and Racul handed me a handkerchief. It was dark blue with a pattern of tiny, embroidered stars all over it, and in one corner was the silhouette of a droopy-eared rabbit, gazing up at the stars.

"It's so cute! I'll cherish it!" I cried.

The droopy-eared rabbit was embroidered with red thread, so it probably represented the dragon orb that was currently a bunny-shaped backpack.

"I'm so happy that you like it."

I promised the rabbit sisters I'd visit again soon, and then we exited the shop. When I glanced at him, Theo was still holding the dried fish.

I guess he decided to buy it after all.

An imperial prince eating dried fish... Now there's a sight you don't see every day!

Next, we made our way to the adventurers' guild's branch office.

It was one of the largest of the branch offices, and it was full of young adventurers who were there to use the training facilities.

This branch office also took job requests from clients, so they had sound-proof booths like the guild halls I'd previously visited.

But what caught my eye more than anything was a peculiar sheet of paper tacked onto the bulletin board. It read "List of Purple Gandal Sightings."

Uncle Phillip and the others are regarded as rare attractions, even more than the monsters! And it says here that one of the places they're often spotted is the sirens' cave. Are they still into cave exploration?!

I shook off my distraction and hurried to catch up with the others as they continued with the tour of the branch office when I noticed something strange.

I understand why there are so many people in their late teens here, but there are also a lot of adults who look like they're probably in their late twenties or early thirties. No matter how you look at it, I can't imagine people of this age range are newbie adventurers...

"Aren't there a lot of adult adventurers here?" I asked Healran.

“Indeed. They gather here to replenish themselves.”

Replenish themselves...?

“Among adventurers, it’s said that there’s no one in this day and age who hasn’t heard of the wonders of the hot spring baths. Many people treat themselves to a trip to the Shiana Special Region as a reward after successfully completing a particularly difficult job.”

I see...

The waters of the natural hot spring do contain healing properties, so it makes sense that people who bathe in them will feel mentally and physically rejuvenated.

“Most of them don’t go out on the mountain, but they help out here in the branch office, instructing the younger adventurers.”

A set of unspoken rules seemed to exist among the veteran adventurers. First, they wouldn’t stay at Asmunlorta. Next, if they ventured onto the mountain, they wouldn’t attack the monsters. And finally, they wouldn’t scoff at newbies who requested practice fights with them.

This was due to the veterans’ collective consideration of the fact that the Shiana Special Region was designed as a training facility for novice adventurers. Of course, some adventurers did whatever they wanted, but the others made sure to make it so those people wouldn’t ever come back.

It turned out that if a person’s problematic behavior crossed a certain point and multiple veteran adventurers reported it to the adventurers’ guild, the guild would blacklist them so they wouldn’t be allowed to use the facility in the future.

These unwritten rules had been established by the group of adventurers sent as the guild masters’ protection detail during our observation trip two years prior.

I’ll have to remember to thank them the next time I see them!

Since the area had also turned into something of a retreat for veteran adventurers, the innkeepers’ guild had added several new lodging facilities, and

the blacksmiths' guild had set up a smithy where they repaired weapons and so on.

Many adventurers wanted to do something fun in their free time, so a recreation industry consisting of marine activities and leisure tours was also developing.

Some of the fishermen from Zigg Village are earning extra money from the marine activities, so I suppose things are progressing in a positive direction?

But it's deviating a bit from what I originally planned...

I was pondering that when an uproar broke out in the training area.

"...It looks like someone's fighting," Healran noted in a bored tone that suggested this was an everyday occurrence. Then he excused himself to go break up the fight.

"You little brat! Just you try saying that again!"

"I'll say it as many times as you like! Stop being so arrogant when you can't even complete jobs properly, old man!"

Oh... Yup, that's definitely a fight.

But I can see why the novice adventurers wouldn't like being taught by people lacking credentials and ability.

"That's enough. I believe you've already been warned yesterday and today not to cause trouble, isn't that right?" Healran said sternly to the older man.

"What?! Oh, if it isn't the big wig himself. The one causing trouble is this brat!"

"Hmph! You're just a damn lugger, but you still get all full of yourself ordering us around and then have the nerve to demand money from us?!"

I understand the gist of the situation based on what they're saying, but there's one thing I don't understand... What's a "lugger?"

"Ralf, what's a 'lugger'?" I asked my brother in a hushed tone.

"I think it's a derogatory term for a transporter..."

"To be precise, it refers to a transporter that a well-reputed party has taken in

out of nothing more than pity,” Paul interjected quietly.

A transporter was someone whose job was to carry the loot a party of adventurers had accumulated. Top-class transporters had the skills to appraise the value of newly-acquired loot, knew the best techniques for protecting it during transport, and in the case of hunted prey, they expertly handled everything from butchering to preserving the meat, all in addition to actually transporting the goods.

Not to mention, they were trained to fight just like any other adventurer.

However, those lacking this specialized knowledge and with poor fighting skills, who served no other purpose than just carrying around the other members’ bags, were referred to derisively as “luggers.”

Part of the insult came from the fact that this term implied the lugger themselves was little more than another piece of baggage for the party to drag around with them.

I guess it’s similar to calling someone a leech?

“Hey, hey! Don’t you go causing trouble for Mr. Healran, you hear? And the young lady is here today, so behave yourself!” one of the veteran adventurers butted in, scolding the novice adventurer, who, based on what I could make out, seemed to be little more than a boy.

I assume, based on the fact that he recognizes me, that this guy must be one of the adventurers who guarded our group during the previous observation trip. But I don’t remember his face! Sorry, mister!

For some reason, having a fierce-faced middle-aged man call me “young lady” makes me feel like the daughter of a mafia family or something!

“As for you, mister, why don’t we all have a little chat over there, hm?”

The lugger visibly paled as if terrified by the implied threat in the veteran adventurer’s voice.

Why would he do something like this knowing full well he’d get in trouble if it were ever discovered? Was he under the delusion that he would never be found out, so it would be fine? I never understand people like that!

“...‘Young lady’?”

The novice adventurer sounds dubious about that phrasing, but I think it's appropriate for my station? It's not that weird, is it?

“Are you talking about Nefertima?!”

“Huh?!” I squeaked, surprised the young man had suddenly called out my name.

Who is he? I don't think I know any adventurers this young... He's barely out of childhood.

“Hmph, have you forgotten me already?! I'm Belgar Crius from Lenice!”

Belgar Crius... Wait, that Belgar Crius?!

No way! There's no way he could've changed this much in just two years!

The last time I'd seen him, Belgar was little more than skin and bones and only a little taller than me... But the teenager in front of me was fairly muscular and had grown far more than two years' worth taller than the Belgar I remembered.

“Wow, you really did it, Belgar! You really did become an adventurer!” I exclaimed in awe.

When we'd parted ways, I'd suggested that the older children become adventurers, but I certainly didn't expect that Belgar would not only take my advice but also participate in Project Shiana!

This is kind of exciting, somehow!

“Yeah. I'm still green rank, but I'll be able to advance to blue rank before too much longer.”

“I see. In that case, you'll catch up with your father in no time!” I said.

I recalled that Belgar's father was a red rank adventurer, and at the time we'd met, he'd been away on work.

Back then, many of the adults living in Lenice's slums had been kidnapped and become victims of Runohark. Without anyone to protect them, the children had been forced to band together to struggle to survive. Belgar had been those

children's de facto leader.

"Just you wait and see! I'm going to become even stronger, and then you'll sure be surprised!" he said.

"Okay!"

I wish there were something I could do to help him...

Hmmm... Oh, I've got it! I'll ask Uncle Phillip to train him!

"I'll ask Uncle Phillip to help train you," I said.

"Uncle Phillip? ...You don't mean *Phillip* from Purple Gandal, do you?!"

"That's right!"

I was so focused on my conversation with Belgar that I didn't notice the menacing aura brewing around Papa and the others a short distance behind me...



"**RALF** and Paul... Do you know who that boy is?"

Right in front of us, a teenage boy was chatting familiarly with Neema. I asked Ralf and Paul if they had any inkling of who he might be.

"I think he was the leader of a group of children Neema met in Lenice, Father..." Ralf answered, but I was far from satisfied with this scant information.

In the end, Healran provided a clearer picture of the boy's identity.

"He's the leader of Green Galance, Belgar Crius. As Lord Ralfreed said, he used to look after the orphaned children in Lenice."

"Does he pose any threat to Neema?"

"Very unlikely. It seems he regards her with something akin to first love."

The very temperature of the air around us seemed to drop suddenly in response to Healran's words.

He has a crush on Neema? Hm, well, I have to give him points for his taste in women, at least. But there's no way in hell I'll let him have Neema!

"It looks like Neema's planning to entrust him to Uncle Phillip's tutelage. Why

don't we let Uncle Phillip decide whether he's worthy of her?"

I snickered at Karna's wicked suggestion.

She's suggesting we sic Phillip on the boy and see if he's got what it takes to protect Neema? All right, then. But I'll have a little chat with Phillip first. I'm looking forward to seeing if that boy will live up to the standards of Purple Gandal.

12 - A Certain Boy's Reflections: Part 1 (POV: Belgar)

"BELGAR!"

When I returned to the city of Lenice, the kids ran up to me.

"Did you behave yourselves and work together while I was gone like I told you?" I said.

"Of course!"

I was on my way to my house, surrounded by a gaggle of excited kids, when one of the residents called out to me.

"Oh, you're back, eh, Belgar? Tell Lirae thanks for me, will you?" the man who ran the local restaurant said, to which I replied, "Sure."

Lirae often helped out at the restaurant, so I figured that was what he was referring to.

The entire way home, various people stopped me and welcomed me back. One person asked me to rustle them up some help for the following day, while another thanked me for helping them out recently. While responding to each as patiently as I could manage, I reflected on how much the city had changed.

Ever since *she* came, the city had returned to life.

Or rather, it had become more pleasant to live in than it *ever* was before.

People never would've called out to me so easily before. Has it really already been three cycles since I first noticed strange things happening in the city?



"SORRY, Belgar."

My father, who'd just finished packing for his journey, looked down at me with a miserable expression and affectionately patted the top of my head.

"I told'ja, it's fine! If I need anythin' I'll ask th' lady next door!"

Due to his work as an adventurer, my father often had to leave home for long periods. I was used to it by now, but this time, he wasn't sure *when* he'd be back. This was a long-term job in a neighboring country. Accordingly, the pay was too good to turn down. Father promised that when he came home, he'd prepare me a huge feast with all my favorite foods.

Once father left, the house felt quiet and lonely. At times like that, I always wished my mother were there. Unfortunately, Mother had run off long ago, abandoning Father and me.

"Belgar!"

It was my friend Yuewi.

"Hey Yuewi. What's up?"

"Do ya 'ave any idea where th' older gal who lives on th' corner went?"

"Th' gal who lives on th' corner? Oh, d'ya mean Fran?" I asked dubiously, and the blockhead responded, "Yeah, her!"

Looks like Yuewi's just as bad at remembering names as ever.

"I dunno, but... Is she missin' now, too?"

"...Looks like it."

This was the first case in a while, ever since that young adventurer had disappeared. Well, I'd also heard about some middle-aged man who'd also allegedly gone missing, but he wasn't someone I'd ever met.

"My ma thinks she pro'ly journeyed home to be with th' Goddess because she got dumped by a guy."

Come to think of it, I did sometimes see her walking with a guy...

"Maybe she'll show back up on 'er own in a few days," I suggested, knowing even as I said it that I would never see Fran again.

Not long after, another person went missing.

This time, it was Yuewi's ma.

He said she'd gone out to work in the city the previous day and should've been home once the sun set, but morning came, and she still hadn't returned.

As I did my best to console my sobbing friend, I felt in my bones that something was wrong.

“I’m goin’ ta th’ knighthood t’ get them ta search fer yer ma.”

I’d never ventured far from home other than in the company of my father, but I knew the general layout of the city. And so, after calling over a friend to keep still-distraught Yuewi company, I headed out into the city.

Somehow or other, I finally tracked down the knighthood’s local headquarters, where I attempted to explain to the knights on duty that multiple people had gone missing.

But, unbelievably, the knights didn’t want to hear it.

“People from the slums are missing? And you want us to *search* for them? It’s a good thing they’re gone! Those people are nothing but an eyesore in this city.”

“Yuewi’s ma would ne’er jus’ leave without tellin’ anyone!”

“Listen, brat. You need to face the reality: your friend’s mom ran off and abandoned him.”

The word “abandoned” struck me like a knife in the heart.

It wasn’t inconceivable, considering the miserable existence most of us eked out in the slums... But I desperately wanted to believe that, unlike my mother, Yuewi’s ma wasn’t that kind of person.

“If you’ve got it now, then scram, kid.”

They’re clearly not going to help, no matter what I say. What should I tell Yuewi? I can’t repeat what that jerk said and tell him his ma abandoned him...

In the end, I couldn’t bring myself to tell Yuewi the truth, so I lied and said the knighthood promised to look for her.

After that, Yuewi and I started living together. He didn’t have a father, so after his ma disappeared, he was all alone.

From then on, adults continued disappearing from our neighborhood.

I tried appealing to the knighthood for help many times but was always

scoffed at and told to get lost. Sometimes, they even punched and kicked me.

“What’s going on here?” demanded an important-looking middle-aged man I’d never seen before.

On that day, the lady next door had gone missing, and even though I knew it was pointless, I went to the knighthood’s local headquarters to report her disappearance.

“Regional Commander, sir!”

The man, who was roughly around my father’s age and looked a bit like a *ralga*, really *was* someone important.

The knight who’d been dealing with me froze, then created a fist with his right hand and pressed it to his chest. I figured that must be some kind of formal greeting between knights.

“‘scuse me, sir! Someone I know ‘as gone missin’. Actually, a lotta people I know ‘ave gone missing. Someone ‘as ta be kidnappin’ them. Please invest’gate their disappearances!” I cried, hoping I’d have better luck with this higher-up than with the useless knights stationed here, but I was so desperate that my plea came out a bit incoherent.

“You little punk!” the knight growled, reaching for me as if to stop me from continuing, but the important guy halted him.

“I see. *You* are going to tell me exactly what’s been going on.”

The knight this sharp order had been directed at paled but explained about my many visits to the local headquarters.

“In Ena District, an area also known as ‘the slums,’ there are a number of people whose whereabouts are unknown. It might seem like something nefarious at first glance, but we’ve determined that it’s likely these people got sick of their lives here and left of their own volition.”

“Ya ‘ave t’ believe me! They aren’t th’ kinda people who would jest leave without sayin’ anythin’!” I desperately appealed to the commander, who placed a reassuring hand on my head.

“It appears that negligence has been running rampant in my jurisdiction. I’ll

take care of this now that it's come to my attention, never you fear."

These words reassured me greatly.

Now people will finally stop disappearing for sure!

And for a little while, all was peaceful.

However, so many children had already lost their parents that Yuewei and I had our hands full trying to look after all of them.

Winter would be coming soon. It didn't usually snow in Lenice, but the cold was severe. Every year, people froze to death in the slums.

One day, the neighborhood elders suddenly announced that we didn't need to worry about them. They said that if they journeyed home to be with the Goddess, we could do whatever we liked with their belongings.

I told them not even to think about it.

With all of our parents gone, who's going to pass down wisdom to us kids if all the elders die, too? The only reason we've all survived on our own this long was because of everything the elders have taught us.

"Our savings are gone, and we're too old and frail to work. At this rate, we're just a burden on the rest of you young folks. We've lived long enough; you don't need to worry about us anymore."

As the elders had predicted, that winter was harsh.

Even with all the children huddling together for warmth, it wasn't enough. Gradually, they began falling ill.

The money Father had left me was already gone. I'd spent it all trying to feed everyone. Seeing no other option, I'd taken to stealing anything of value from the homes of the people who'd gone missing and selling it for money to keep the children fed.

Then, the elders began dying.

All of the children gathered to grieve, sobbing as if the deceased were their own grandmother or grandfather. It was the only thing we *could* do for them.

There were many days when we didn't have anything to eat, and on those

days, I cursed my powerlessness.

And yet, through it all, we somehow survived.

That's when people started disappearing again.

The first was a boy only two cycles older than me. He possessed unusually strong magic for a resident of this area and had saved my ass more than a few times.

Then an older man, a drifter I didn't know very well, went missing.

Next, Yuewei brought home a young child who was wailing that their mother had disappeared.

Just when I was sure I'd finally reached my breaking point, both physically and mentally, things got even worse: on that day, kobolds attacked Lenice.

I heard someone chanting a spell followed by screaming, and then the boom of a magical explosion rocked across the city.

"Listen up, all of ya! No one's ta step a single foot outside, got it?!" I shouted sternly to the younger children before heading out on my own to determine what was going on.

Horrors filled my vision such as I'd never seen before—knights drenched in blood and burning houses tumbling to the ground.

"Why...?" The horrified whisper slipped unconsciously from my lips.

"They're coming from that way!" a knight shouted.

"The kobolds are catching up! Get in formation, men!" ordered another.

Kobolds.

I'd heard about them from my father. He'd told me they were a type of monster that looked like dogs.

"We've got to back up the adventurers fighting outside! Let's wipe those mangey dogs out completely!"

The panicked knights ran this way and that. I also spotted a cluster of healers working tirelessly, casting healing spells on the wounded.

“Get outta the way, kid!” an adventurer half-carrying, half-dragging an injured man shouted as he bumped into me.

Frightened, I turned and ran.

I’d never felt such fear in my life as I did at that moment, knowing that we were under attack by monsters so powerful that even highly trained fighters like adventurers and knights couldn’t defeat them without grievous injury.

Just as I made it back to the house where the children were holed up hiding, I heard howls far off in the distance.

The city changed after that.

Most citizens fled, and adventurers who flocked to the city replaced them.

Food prices increased, and keeping everyone fed became harder than ever.

When we ventured out into the city, we were often surrounded by adventurers.

More than once, while out foraging for leftover scraps in the city, they converged on me, calling me a dirty street kid and even beating me up.

By that point, I’d lost all faith in adults. I’d come to the conclusion that we’d have to make do somehow on our own.

When spring finally came, that was when I met *her*.

A young dog got lost and wandered into our neighborhood. At first, I’d thought we could kill and eat it, but I gave up on that plan when I realized it might be one of those monsters.

If it *was* a monster, we needed to exterminate it. With that goal, I kicked the mutt fiercely, sending it flying. Watching the dog collapse to the ground from my kick, I felt a sensation I’d not felt in many, many months—being stronger than that poor creature made me feel powerful.

Thinking back on it now, I’m ashamed of my foolishness. But at the time, I wanted nothing more than to feel strong, so I was thrilled to find something even weaker and more pathetic than myself. The existence of someone weaker made me strong in comparison.

“What do you kids think you’re doing?!”

Suddenly, a group of people wearing knights’ armor appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

They were followed by a young girl dressed in fine clothes that looked out of place in the neighborhood. For some reason, she was being carried by a man who seemed to be a beastperson.

“It’s got nothin’ to do with ya—mind yer own business!”

“What did you do to that poor creature?!” the girl cried, seemingly oblivious to the danger as she stepped out in front of the knights.

I told her the kobolds were our enemy, and she said something that made no sense in response, asking me if the mutt looked like an enemy to me.

Then she said that it was shameful to attack a defenseless creature.

If that’s true, what about those adventurers who attacked me? Everyone stood by watching and pretending they didn’t see—if they weren’t actively laughing at me! No one said a single word to even try to stop them.

There’s no way a coddled aristocrat, especially a little kid like this, could understand what life is like for us commoners living in the slums.

Enraged at her arrogance, I screamed at the girl to shut up and lunged at her.

But I’d taken no more than a single step forward with my fist raised when one of the knights grabbed my arm and pushed me to the ground.

“Lemme go!”

I struggled with all my might, trying to free my pinned arm, but the knight’s grip didn’t so much as loosen.

“You must not turn immediately to violence. Your strength is a gift to protect those weaker than yourself.”

What is this kid talking about? Use my power to protect the weak? It’s not like I’ve ever seen any adults doing that. If I don’t make use of every possible advantage I can get my hands on, I could be dead in the blink of an eye.

“We’re not going to punish you. Just give us that poor creature.” That was

directed not at me but at the other children behind me.

I heard them move immediately, and a moment later, the girl returned carrying the dog.

“What is it that you want to protect? Isn’t it those children behind you? The strong tyrannizing the weak doesn’t protect anyone.”

Is she trying to say that protecting the weak is what makes a person truly strong? If that’s true, why is no one protecting us street kids? Although I hate to admit it, even I know just how weak I am.

I didn’t care if I was deceiving myself. Feeling even for a moment like I was strong—maybe even strong enough to protect all of them—had felt good...

I didn’t know *what* I wanted or where I should go from here. I was confused, but more than that, I resented her for preaching down at me.

“A pampered rich brat like ya ’as no right to talk to us as if ya understand anythin’!”



It's easy to tell others how they should behave.

But when it comes down to it, neither you nor anyone else is going to do anything to help us! We're even more pathetic than this "poor creature!"

"Strength isn't just about power. If you stay on the right path, falling prey to neither cowardice nor subservience and emulate even one facet of the strength these knights can boast, then you may grow into a strong man who can protect what's precious to you."

Strength isn't just about power? All I need is to have one thing I can be proud of?

Her reference to "a strong man who can protect what's precious to him" reminded me of my father. Or rather, it reminded me of something he'd said to me once, a long time ago, while he was drunk.

"I'm not really all that strong. I made it to red rank because of my companions and just plain good luck."

He'd also said that his eyes, on the other hand, were better than anyone else's. Father's eyes immediately picked up on even the tiniest details.

He'd been drunk at the time so I couldn't get him to explain clearly what he'd meant, but he'd mentioned that things like his opponents' movements in a fight or concealed traps had seemed to jump out at him. He claimed that his great-grandfather had been a beastperson and thought he might've inherited that ability from him.

Father had been proud of the power he'd inherited from his great-grandfather. He truly believed that his keen eyes had gotten him this far and allowed him to protect his companions and himself.

Is there something in me, too?

Something I can be proud of?

"I'm Belgar, son of Adventurer Guy Crius the Red! I'm gonna become strong like me pa. Then I'll be able to protect e'ryone, just ye wait!"

Before I realized it, I'd already shouted this.

But it was the truth. I wanted to be strong, like my father.

“I’ll remember you, Belgar Crius. My name is Nefertima Osphe. When you believe you’ve become strong, come find me and let me see for myself.”

I didn’t get the feeling she was looking down on me for being of lower social status, but rather that she was treating me like a little kid, which still pissed me off.

I’m older than her!

Then the girl turned and ran over to a young man, carrying the battered dog.

When I caught a glimpse of the large animal by his side, I became even more confused about who these people were. They certainly weren’t normal aristocrats; that much was for sure.

“You very nearly threw your life away just now, kid.”

The knight who’d been holding me down released me. Then, I was forcefully tugged to my feet, and the knight tousled my hair roughly in an almost affectionate gesture.

“You not only dared to perpetrate violence in the presence of His Highness but towards Lady Nefertima, who is not only the provincial lord’s daughter but also a princess of royal blood.”

I had no idea what the knight was saying. His Highness? Princess?

“Huh?”

What kind of princess would carry around a bloody animal like that? In the first place, there’s no reason such important people would ever come to a place like this.

The knight might just have been exaggerating, but it still felt as if the pristine image I’d always held began to crumble.

Ever since I was young, the neighborhood elders had told me and the other kids tales of the first king and his companions, the founding heroes. That king, who was undefeated no matter what difficulties he faced, and his companions who worked together to defend him had become our childhood idols.

It went without saying that the other boys and I often played pretend, imagining we were the first king and his companions.

The elders had also told us that our provincial lord's ancestor had been one of the founding heroes.

And you're telling me the descendant of my beloved idol, one of history's greatest heroes, turned out to be a princess like that?! Aren't princesses supposed to be lovely, delicate, and kind?!

While I stood there motionless, filled with a mixture of shock and something close to despair, the knight said, "Be patient just a little longer. These people are going to help, I'm sure of it."

Both the knight and Nefertima and her companions left before I could formulate a response.

"...They're gonna help?"

I've already given up, so why is he saying something like that now? No one spared us a glance, even when we screamed for help. Is this some kind of cruel joke, designed to give us hope so they can tear it away from us again?

...Yeah, that's gotta be it.

Saving a bunch of dirty street kids doesn't benefit those nobles in any way. In fact, if I'm not careful, they might rip us apart and sell us off or something.

I'll never let that happen!

I'll protect everyone; just wait and see!

13 - A Certain Boy's Reflections: Part 2 (POV: Belgar)

I'D renewed my determination to protect everyone, but the atmosphere in the city had become tense.

They were planning a large-scale subjugation of the kobolds.

I searched in vain among the faces of the adventurers flooding into the city to see if my father was among them, but of course, he never was. Still, I couldn't help but hope that when word reached my father about what was happening, he might rush home.

I should've known better. Father wasn't the kind of person who would abandon a job he'd committed to completing. Even if he *did* learn about the situation in Lenice, he would hurry to finish the job properly before returning.

I could picture him working frantically to complete the job so he could come home, and it was enough to make me chuckle despite myself.

This is no laughing matter, that's for sure.

"Belgar! It's an emergency!"

I spotted Yuewi racing towards me, panicked. I asked him what the matter was, and he said that some of the kids who'd gone out looking for food had been terribly injured.

I quickly followed him to where the wounded children were waiting and could tell at first glance that human violence had caused their injuries. Based on how much pain they were in, it seemed likely that they probably even had a few broken bones.

Some of the street kids could use magic, but none of us possessed healing magic.

"I told 'em so many times not ta venture out into th' city 'cuz it's dangerous...!" I raged.

"...They've been beatin' themselves up o'er wat happened ta ya. It kills them that they cudn't prevent ya frem getting' beat up, so they jus' wanted ta help so

ya wouldn't 'ave to put yerself in danger again," Yuewei responded.

"That was me own fault. I dun' blame any of ya."

For the time being, I checked their wounds, doing my best to ice the swollen areas and apply amateur splints to stabilize damaged bones.

"They might develop a fever, so sumbody's gotta watch 'em at all times, a'right?"

I had to go out and scavenge for food in their place.

With all the adventurers filling the city, there were plenty of scraps. Of course, all of the adventurers only ate at a few restaurants and taverns, and with those damn knights constantly coming and going, it was hard to sneak in to pilfer from the garbage undetected. Still, our chances of scrounging up something to eat were better than the previous winter.

I was taking a shortcut through a house that had been abandoned ever since its owner fled the city when I froze, sensing someone nearby.

There shouldn't be anyone in this area anymore, even in the middle of the day. Did a drunk get lost and wander in here?

"What should we do?"

"It looks like it's about time to take our leave of this city. We've already earned a small fortune here. Even *they* can't complain we've not gotten them enough people."

Could these be the perpetrators who've been kidnapping people?

"I really wanted to get rid of that annoying brat before we moved on, but..."

"Even in the slums, people will notice if a buncha kids die. It'll just cause trouble for us if he's not around to keep feeding them all."

Wait, are they talking about me?! Who are they?

I didn't dare move a muscle lest I be discovered, but I couldn't see their faces from my spot.

"But this was a pretty nice city. No one cares if a few useless poor people go missing; plenty of adventurers are gathered here for us to make money off of.

And it doesn't hurt that the proxy lord is a clueless idiot."

"Don't let your guard down until we're well and truly gone. Despite everything, Parzeth is said to be very capable. Although, he clearly tends to believe the best in people, fortunately for us!"

"So he's one of those squeaky-clean, holier-than-thou nobles, huh? I hate those types. Everyone can be bought for the right price... Just take you, for example, Regional Commander. *You're* a real man of the people, much more relatable than some high-and-mighty aristocrat with lofty ideals if you ask me."

Regional Commander? ...Oh, that guy who looked like a ralga?!

"I'll take that as a compliment," the man said with a light chuckle.

I was deceived from the very beginning.

"His Highness is still just a child. He can't stand up against us, the royal knighthood."

Even with the position of crown prince, he's no match against adults? If that's true, then there's really no hope for us street kids...

Even after I sensed that the men had gone, I still couldn't move. A part of me couldn't get past the realization that no matter how committed I was to becoming stronger, I could never win.

What should I do?

Please, Father... Tell me what to do!

I can't trust anyone.

No one cares about helping us.

I can't protect anyone.

What should I do now?

It felt almost like a consequence of my hesitance when one of the children who'd been injured died. I later learned that the entire time he was battling a high fever, he'd been apologizing to me over and over again in his delirious state.

How foolish. There's nothing he needs to apologize to me for. I'm the one who

should apologize for not being able to save him. Goddess, please... Let him be happy wherever he's reborn next. Surrounded by a loving family, with plenty of food to eat... True happiness.



AS the sun set, a commotion rang out across the city.

It wasn't a battle cry; if anything, it almost sounded like... cheers?

Not long after, the tantalizing smell of cooking reached us, and the younger children cried that they were hungry.

That's right, I need to find them something to eat.

Taking a few of the older street kids with me, I headed out to see what was going on. Everywhere I looked, adventurers and knights were merrily drinking alcohol and eating meat. Among them were the adventurers who'd beat me up and the knights who'd shouted at me.

I knew right away that if they caught us sniffing around here, they wouldn't let us get away without severe consequences this time.

We'll have to wait until they're done with all this stupid partying and see what we can scavenge afterward. I guess we've got no choice but to head back for now and tell the younger kids to be patient a little longer. We should be able to get our hands on some scraps in the middle of the night after everyone's gone to sleep.

Compared to this time last cycle, the children were almost skeletally thin, with only their starvation-bloated bellies protruding.

It's honestly surprising that they're still alive at all.

"Is that you, Belgar Crius?"

My guard instantly went up at the sound of someone calling my name, and the other children looked frightened.

I turned to see who had called my name, and a terrifyingly fierce-looking beastperson stood there, with Nefertima, of all people, riding on his shoulders. The beastperson, with his sharp eyes and fangs protruding from his mouth, looked like he could crush our bones to dust without even breaking a sweat.

“Wadda ya want?”

I pushed the children who’d started crying at the sight of the beastperson behind me. Seeing that, the beastperson looked almost—sad?—for just a moment. Maybe it was just my imagination.

Nefertima told us we could have some food if we washed the dishes, but I scoffed at her. There was no guarantee they’d keep up their end of the deal. Even if we washed all the dishes, there was every likelihood they’d make some excuse and deny ever making such an offer, possibly even attacking us if we protested.

Does she have no idea how the world works for helpless kids like us?!

“Oh? Didn’t you say you wanted to protect these children?” she challenged. “Do you truly plan to let them starve because you don’t feel like washing a few dishes?”

Obviously, this has nothing to do with my whims!

Experience had taught me that nothing good came of taking adults at their word.

Stupid Nefertima, she doesn’t understand anything!

“Protecting someone doesn’t mean just protecting them from enemies. It also means watching over them so that they can grow up and become self-sufficient.”

“What would ya know?! A pampered noble brat like ya ’as no idea what it’s like fer us on these streets!” I raged, but Nefertima let my anger roll right over her, unfazed.

I’m not wrong! No one understands what it’s like to be us.

“Be that as it may, isn’t it your duty to determine whether the hand reaching out to help you is sincere and to guide the other children?” she persisted, despite acknowledging her ability to relate to our circumstances.

Who’s ever reached out a hand to help us? And even if they did reach out, it would likely only be to drag us down even further.

“I think it’s really incredible to want to protect someone,” Nefertima said.

“But what do you want to protect them from? Think about it. Their survival depends on you. Your choices might end up killing the very people you claim you want to protect.”

“I might end up killin’ them...?”

Does that mean I was the one who killed the boy who died of his injuries, all the while apologizing to me? He died because I made the wrong decision?

“Yes. Letting those children die due to your pride is the same as killing them yourself, don’t you think?”

Pride?

Have I been letting my pride get in the way?

No! That’s not true!

I tried to get help!

“No! Everythin’ I do is fer their sake!”

For their sake, I stole and scrounged for food!

For their sake, I endured derision and even violence!

Everything I’ve done was all for the sake of the kids who depend on me!

“Then get it together already!” Nefertima shouted. For some reason, her expression looked a little sad.

Why are you making a face like that? You might as well ignore us—everyone else does.

“It’s impossible to go your whole life without ever depending on anyone! You first need to learn to accept help from adults.”

Nefertima’s words hit me with all the force of a fist to the face.

I can’t go my whole life without ever depending on anyone...?

Does that mean that we, children who’ve lost our parents and have no one left to depend on, can’t go on living? My father’s still alive, but there’s no way he can care for this many children.

And no other adults lining up to help...

I was on the verge of finally losing all hope when Nefertima continued to speak...

“Only then can you become wily enough to manipulate adults into doing your bidding. But don’t lose sight of your goal, you hear me? You’re going to become stronger so you can protect those kids, right?”

It had never even occurred to me to manipulate adults into doing what I wanted. Maybe it was simply because I didn’t think such a thing was *possible*, but I’d never even *considered* using adults.

I see... Maybe “strong” and “weak” aren’t necessarily determined entirely by physical strength, then? Being able to determine how to best leverage a situation in one’s favor is also a form of strength!

It felt as if an avenue that had previously been barred suddenly opened up in front of me.

I might not be able to deal with adults on even footing. I might fail over and over again. But where I failed, the other children might succeed. So, even if I failed a hundred times over, I had to get up and keep on going to try again. If I achieved nothing else, at least the other children could learn from my mistakes.

Maybe that was what Nefertima was talking about when she mentioned “watching over them so that they can grow up and become self-sufficient?”

In that case, the first thing I need to do is...

“...I understand what ye’re tryin’ ta say. Fine, I’ll manipulate ya inta doing my bidding, then!”

I called forward five of the children, including Yuewei. All of them were the same age as me or a year older, could use magic, and still had the strength to move.

“ere’s wat we’ll do. From here on out, the six of us will take care of the rest of these kids.”

I couldn’t do it alone—we needed to work together.

Their expressions changed from surprise to happy smiles, and it made an impression on me.

I should've depended on them earlier. It looks like they've been mistakenly believing they're useless because I never depended on them.

"Fer now, we'll wash the dishes. And tomorrow, we'll look fer work that even we can do."

"The older children could probably join the adventurers' guild."

Become an adventurer?

There was a time when I wanted nothing more than to become just like Father...

I doubt I'll ever become as good as him, but it might be fun working as an adventurer.

"Ya seem differ'nt from last time we met," I remarked.

Something seemed different about Nefertima compared to the first time we'd met. She'd previously struck me as a sheltered, albeit slightly unusual, princess raised in comfort and security, but now she seemed to have a new awareness about her that made me think she'd come into her own a bit.

"Yeah. A lot of people died because of me..."

As soon as those words left her lips, her expression twisted into a grimace that made it clear she hadn't meant to say that.

Were they attacked by monsters or something?

Even the beastperson stroked the top of her head in a comforting gesture.

As if to cover for her slipup, Nefertima announced it was time for them to go.

"The head cook seems to be a nice person. I'll be leaving this city tomorrow, so good luck," she said to me.

"Nefertima, when I become strong, I'll find ya so I can brag about it. Don't ferget our promise."

I was surprised to feel a bit saddened by the news that Nefertima would be leaving. It was the same aching loneliness I'd felt watching my father leave.

"This makes us friends now!" Nefertima exclaimed.

“Huh?!”

Her sudden declaration of friendship embarrassed me so much that I blushed outrageously.

People don't usually just come out and say it like that! Normally, friendships develop naturally, and by the time you realize you've become friends, there's no need to announce it or anything.

What an embarrassing kid she is!

Nefertima and the beastperson led us toward the town square.

Apparently, they were holding a banquet to celebrate successfully defeating the kobolds.

There was an area tucked away in a corner of the square that gave off the tense atmosphere of an active battlefield. A makeshift kitchen was set up to prepare all the food for the banquet.

A small army of cooks was lined up in front of the cookfires, attacking pots and pans with ladles and spatulas. Another battalion of kitchen staff hacked through unbelievable quantities of vegetables and meat with their knives. As I watched, barrel after barrel of alcohol was carried into the kitchen tent.

I was shocked—I hadn't thought there was this much food in the entire city.

“Oh, there you are. We were waiting for you,” said a man I assumed was the “nice” head cook Nefertima had mentioned.

“Here, before you get to work, eat this!” the head cook said, passing us a large serving dish piled with fulka. The fulka had been stewed with some kind of meat so that the soft, porridge-like mixed grains had absorbed the savory broth from the meat. It was absolutely delicious.

Yuewi cried as he ate, saying he wanted to share this with the other children. I felt the same.

“Once you finish washing all those dishes, you can take home whatever's left. I doubt there will be any meat leftover, though.” Under his breath, the head cook muttered what sounded like, “Those blockhead adventurers don't eat anything but meat!”

I was full of determination to do my best.

I'll give it my all for those kids.

After that, both the city and us street children began to change.

The prince who'd been traveling with Nefertima had done something because people called "investigators" came to the city.

I heard that both that ralga-like regional commander and the knights who'd attacked me were arrested. And they weren't the only ones; a whole boatload of knights and adventurers who'd been doing bad things were also captured.

The head cook told me that due to all the corruption brought to light, a bunch of new knights had been dispatched to the city, and the proxy lord had even issued a formal apology.

It turned out that the head cook who'd fed us that time was actually the head cook working at the mayor's manor.

The older children and I continued helping the head cook and taking on simple jobs such as herb-gathering from the adventurers' guild, and somehow, we kept everyone fed.

I was on my way back from working with the head cook one day when one of my friends came racing towards me and shouted, "Hey, Belgar! Yer old man is back!"

I took off running, not even stopping to thank him.

"Father!" I shouted to a figure I'd recognize anywhere.

When he turned to face me, Father had a torn expression, somewhere between relieved and guilt-stricken.

"Belgar!"

I hugged my father tightly, and he wrapped his arms gently around my shoulders.

"...Ye've lost weight, eh?"

Maybe he'd already heard what had happened because Father apologized over and over again after that.

“Father, did ya get the money? We’re gunna need it!”

Many children had lost their parents.

I’d decided to protect them and was prepared to go as far as using my own father to do it.

“I became an adventurer! I’m gonna do my best ta help th’ others, until they can all make their own way in th’ world! Father, please teach me everythin’ I need ta know!”

I was still a child, after all. Even I knew I couldn’t do much without my father’s help.

“Belgar, ya’ve grown up since I las’ saw ya.”

“Huh? ’s only been one cycle. There’s no way I could grow up in such a short time.”

I laughed at Father, half-worried he’d started to become senile already.

“’s not yer body, ’s yer mind. Ya might still be a child on th’ outside, but ya’ve become an adult on th’ inside.”

“...Oh, ya think so?”

I didn’t necessarily agree, but I supposed I would count it as a win if I matured even a little.

After Father returned, things got busy, but the days were happy and fun.

Father taught me the knowledge and skills I would need to take on more advanced jobs as an adventurer, and he drilled me endlessly in the use of weapons. While training, I had the other children take my place helping the head cook.

To be honest, after a while, the head cook came out and told me not to bother coming anymore, as the other children had far more aptitude for cooking anyway.

I knew he was saying that to be kind. He gave me the excuse I needed to indulge my desire to spend time with my father and pursue a career as an adventurer without feeling guilty for neglecting my job with him.

Around the time I progressed from white rank to yellow rank in the adventurers' guild, they suggested I go to the Shiana Special Region.

Apparently, it was some kind of special pet project of the provincial lord, a training facility of sorts for low-ranked adventurers.

It cost a bit of money to participate, but there was a branch office of the adventurers' guild in the Shiana Special Region, so I could continue taking on jobs to earn money and pay my way. It was also rumored that the legendary adventurer group known as Purple Gandal had made the Shiana Special Region their base.

I formed a party with the others who'd washed dishes with me on the day of the banquet, and we got Father to give us a name.

Galance is a word in Celestian that means "ideal."

Father instructed me never to stop chasing whatever "ideal" meant to me.

I tried telling Father that *he* was my ideal, but then he started crying, which was totally out of character for him and left me even more flustered.

The Shiana Special Region turned out to be more interesting than I'd expected.

When we went into the mountains, we sometimes encountered monsters, and there were plenty of medicinal herbs, so we were also easily able to complete herb-picking jobs.

At first, we ran away whenever we spotted monsters. But the experienced adventurers helped train us and gave us advice from their own experience, so as time went on, we started fighting and won most of the time. We did get captured by kobolds one time, and I was seriously worried for a moment there, but we became bondsmen and after working in the fields for twenty days, we were released.

I was surprised that the huge kobolds—apparently, they're called high kobolds—could speak Larshian. But what surprised me most of all was that the kobolds lived pretty similar lives to us humans. If not for the fact that the people all around me were kobolds, I would've believed it was any old normal human village.

The high kobold in charge of us was the gruff and silent type, and he didn't speak any more than absolutely necessary. But he let us use the hot spring baths, and when the time came to leave, he loaded us up with more vegetables than we could carry. Maybe that had something to do with the fact that I'd off-handedly mentioned that we were from Lenice?

One time, I'd gathered up the courage to ask why kobolds attacked humans, explaining that kobolds had attacked my city.

He responded that humans had driven them out of their homes, and they had nothing to eat. If it had just been themselves they needed to worry about, they wouldn't have resorted to attacking humans, but they couldn't bear to watch their children starve to death.

When I heard this, I realized that we were the same. Both the monsters and humans were just desperately trying to survive.

From that day onward, I lost my desire to kill monsters.

Of course, that didn't mean I never would. But from then on, I vowed only to harm monsters who attacked humans first.

We couldn't tell the kobolds apart, but increasingly, we encountered kobolds on the mountain who remembered us. The kobolds who recognized us didn't show any mercy when we fought, and we ended up working in the fields several more times.

Some of the adventurers who knew my father took us under their wing—by which I mean they subjected us to a brutal but effective regimen of training—and before I knew it, we'd progressed to green rank.

Then, one day, we received orders from the veteran adventurers to be on our best behavior and not cause any trouble because a delegation of state guests would be arriving in the Shiana Special Region.

The mention of "state guests" reminded me of Nefertima.

She was a very strange princess, but she was the only member of the upper nobility I'd ever met.

Well, except for the prince. It turned out that knight hadn't been lying—the

older boy with Nefertima that day really had been the crown prince. Everyone said that the crown prince of our country was bonded to a holy beast. That must've been what that strange, massive animal I saw that day was—a holy beast.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

In any case, we weren't allowed to go out on the mountain while the state guests were here, so we headed to the training area instead, and that's where I ran into Nefertima.

For some reason, she hadn't changed at all from the first time I met her. But she was always a weird kid, so I figured maybe that was just how she was.

"Wow, you really did it, Belgar! You really did become an adventurer!"

I responded to her praise by pointing out that I was still only green rank, but she replied that at that rate, I'd catch up with my father in no time.

I was happy but also a bit embarrassed. Either way, I was still far from fulfilling our promise.

"Just you wait and see! I'm going to become even stronger, and then you'll sure be surprised!"

For some reason, Nefertima seemed delighted by that. Then she said something truly shocking: she would ask her "Uncle Phillip" to help train me.

I wondered what kind of adventurer her Uncle Phillip was and suddenly recalled an almost legendary figure...

Isn't the leader of Purple Gandal named Phillip?

"Uncle Phillip? ...You don't mean *Phillip* from Purple Gandal, do you?!" I asked incredulously, to which Nefertima responded almost flippantly, "That's right!"

No way, it's nearly impossible to score a practice fight with Purple Gandal!

You never knew when or where they might appear, and when someone spotted them, everyone would rush to that location, so it was rare we were able to get close enough to even see them.

How is it that she's able to talk so casually about asking a favor from such a

famous person?!

It was certainly an eventful conversation, but it ended all too soon, with Nefertima having to move on.

That was only the beginning for me, though.

The other adventurers forcibly dragged me to a tavern and began interrogating me about my “relationship” with the little noblewoman.

I explained how I’d met Nefertima, and some of the older men chuckled, saying that was just like her.

That’s right; there was not one but *several* red-ranked adventurers gathered in the tavern. They’d been assigned to guard a group of administrators who’d visited to tour the site while the Shiana Special Region was still being constructed, and Nefertima had been part of that group as well.

“Lady Nefertima is a member of the nobility, but she’s very friendly and doesn’t turn up her nose at interacting with knights and adventurers like us.”

“But she’s much too fine a flower for the likes of you, Belgar! Don’t get any ideas in your head, got it?!”

“What?! It’s nothing like that! We’re just friends!”

I responded to the suggestion that I was interested in Nefertima by declaring it outside the realm of possibility.

“Denying it so strongly just makes you seem all the more suspicious, boy!”

Damn buncha drunks!

I couldn’t deny that when things got hard, I would remember our promise and use it to force myself to get back up and keep going...

But it wasn’t out of any romantic feelings; I simply hated losing and didn’t want to let her, of all people, see me admitting defeat.

“Well, everyone knows how much Duke Osphe dotes on his youngest daughter, so you’ll have to become *incredibly* strong if you’re to have any hope of him letting you take her as your bride.”

“You’re not listening to a word I’m saying, are you?!”

How many times do I have to say that's not it?! There's no way a street kid like me could hope to be a match for a princess!

"I would certainly like to hear more about this," came a voice from behind me as an unfamiliar man clapped me on the shoulder.

I didn't notice his presence at all. Just how long was he standing there?!

"Purple Gandal!"

The guys teasing me suddenly let out disgusting squeals of delight.

"I heard from my favorite disciple that an insect had attached itself to my precious niece, Neema, and that I should check it out," he said.

Disciple? This is the first I've heard of Purple Gandal having a disciple.

Based on the sudden uproar that broke out amongst the other adventurers, apparently, it was news to them as well.

"Neema herself asked me to train a boy named Belgar because he wants to become stronger so he can protect the street children in his hometown."

...Nefertima! She really asked him to train me?!

"So, what is it that *you* want, young man?"

"Me? ...I want to become strong! I never want to feel the shame of being weak and unable to protect the people I care about ever again!"

"Very well. Purple Gandal will take Green Galance under our wing. Prepare yourselves, boys. Your next mission is to defeat Dayland!"

This looks like it's starting to snowball out of control...

And who's Dayland, anyway?

I was surprised when I later learned that Dayland was the name of our provincial lord, and even more surprised to hear that this provincial lord was "keeping an eye on" me.

However, the way things were going, the day I could brag to Nefertima that I'd become strong might come sooner than I would've ever expected.

I was looking forward to that very much.

14 - My First Visit to the Mieuxga Province

“WE'RE going home already?”

It was the morning of our fourth day in the Shiana Special Region, and preparations were already being made for our return home.

“No, next we'll go inspect the proposed location of the Mieuxga Special Region,” Mama replied.

“I asked Shinki all sorts of questions, but I still think it's probably easiest to just go see it ourselves,” Papa elaborated.

Huh? What kinds of questions did he ask Shinki? I glanced over at Shinki, who told me he'd been asked what kind of topography and environment were easiest for monsters to live in. *He answered before I even got a chance to ask! Way to go, Shinki!*

“Lord Louis and Lord Theo will be returning to the royal palace, so let's go bid them farewell properly,” Mama prompted.

“Okay!”

Yesterday, I slipped away from Mama and Papa to play. Ralf, Karna, Louis, and Theo all joined me. Maybe because we played together, I got the feeling we'd become closer than before coming to the Shiana Special Region.

Theo seemed to get along well with Fika, and they'd built a pitfall trap. It was so well constructed, in fact, that I fell into it totally unaware! When I pouted and glared at them, they teased me for my petulant reaction. Theo even said with his usual expressionless demeanor that he'd wanted to try setting a trap for me because he'd anticipated how amusing my reaction would be.

I scolded Theo, saying that kind of behavior wasn't befitting of an imperial prince, but Louis laughed and came to his defense, claiming Theo had always been like that since he was young. Apparently, Theo had a mischievous, prankster personality.

Now I know why he gets along so well with Will!

I'd often heard the maids and royal guards talking about how Will always used to pull pranks on everyone at the royal palace when he was younger. Not to mention that even now, he enjoyed teasing people just to see their reactions.

That means Will and Theo are the same type!

Oh, and Haku returned, too.

Shizuku had estimated that Haku's evolution would only take about a day, but it ended up taking two days. I wasn't surprised to see that Haku had gotten significantly larger, but what was unexpected was the change in its coloring; it had turned from milky white to a slightly translucent white. Before, Haku had resembled a steamed bun. Now, it looked more like a warabi-mochi rice cake.

Mmm, I love warabi-mochi with roasted soybean powder! Darn you, Haku, just looking at you is making me hungry!

I didn't notice any differences in Haku other than its larger size and slight change in color.

Gratia was thrilled that Haku had returned, and I got so distracted by the sight of them playing together with Nox that I forgot to ask if it had developed any other new abilities.

Oh well, I'm sure I'll find out soon enough.

After bidding farewell to Healran and the others and promising to visit again soon, we made our way to Fauxbe, where we next parted ways with Louis and Theo.

"I guess the next time we meet will be at the imperial palace in our country, huh?" Louis said with an easy-going smile, but there seemed to be some unspoken undertone to his parting greeting that gave me the chills.

"We're counting on you to deal with the monsters, Neema!" Theo added.

What kind of farewell is that, Theo?! I'm not a monster exterminator, you know!

I'm starting to get a little... No, very apprehensive about going to the Linus Empire!

We performed the appropriate bows according to formal etiquette as the two of them—along with their bodyguards and attendants—teleported back to the royal palace. The moment they disappeared, I distinctly felt the sudden decrease in the size of our group. The past few days had been lively, so it made me a little sad that our group had shrunk so abruptly.

“Now it’s our turn,” Papa said, urging us to step into the magic circle and then calling out our destination.

“Moureaux!”

Moureaux... It sounds kind of familiar, but I don’t exactly recognize it either. I think it’s somewhere in the Mieuxga Province?

The sparkling lights coalesced around us, and when I opened my eyes again at our destination, I spotted two familiar faces.

“Welcome to the Mieuxga Province.”

It was Uncle Sanrus’ parents: the former provincial lord, minister of finance, and current Duke Mieuxga, Wayne Mieuxga, and his wife, Duchess Mishri.

“Grandpa Wayne!”

Grandpa Wayne was a devilishly handsome older gentleman who was especially proud of his incredible beard. In terms of “handsome older gentleman,” I thought that King Gauldi was also in that category, but whereas the king was more of a fashionable “dandy” type, Grandpa Wayne had a bit of a “bad-boy” air about him.

“Neema! I’ve missed you!” Grandpa Wayne scooped me up in his arms and rubbed his cheek affectionately against mine, but his prickly beard hurt a bit.

He’s a little over-excited since we haven’t seen each other in so long, so I guess I’ll just have to grin and bear it.

“Dear, your beard is scratching poor Neema’s face. Please get ahold of yourself!”

As for Grandma Mishri, she was such an alluringly beautiful “mature lady” that you’d have a hard time trusting your ears if she told you her true age. She was highly respected and admired in upper-class society and was generally

regarded as a force to be reckoned with. She was always a kind, grandmotherly figure to me, so it was hard to imagine her like that. Still, this information had come directly from Mama, so there was no doubt it was true!

“I’m delighted to see you’ve all arrived safely. Now then, if you’ll join us, I’ve had tea prepared for you at our family’s villa here in Moureaux.”

“Thank you for the kind invitation. We would be honored to accept your generous hospitality.”

Heh, looks like even Papa’s no match for Grandma Mishri.

I suppose that to Papa’s generation, Grandpa and Grandma’s generation are venerable elders, and to Grandpa and Grandma, Papa’s generation are still floundering little chicks.

“Ralf and Karna, you’ve both grown up as well! I’m looking forward to seeing your bright futures unfold.”

I supposed it couldn’t be helped that Grandpa Wayne and Grandma Mishri treated us almost like their own grandchildren. Uncle Sanrus was married, but he didn’t have any children. He and his wife were enjoying their child-free lives as a lovey-dovey couple. Auntie Olive always teased them for being even more lovey-dovey than my parents.

Fortunately, Grandpa Wayne and Grandma Mishri had accepted their choice not to have children and didn’t pester them about it.

Although, it was also possible they were just biding their time and hoping Uncle Sanrus and his wife took after themselves; apparently, Grandpa Wayne and Grandma Mishri had also been infamously very much in love but not had children until later in life.

Any man would be tempted to hog a beauty like Grandma Mishri to himself and not want to share her with anyone, not even his own child!

Whoa!

On the way to their so-called villa, Grandpa Wayne pointed out the area being considered for the potential site of the Mieuxga Special Region.

It wasn’t as hilly as I normally thought of when I pictured “the wilds,” but the

terrain was vast and forested. I *was* a bit concerned that the trees appeared to be dried out and dying in some areas, though.

It took two colors on foot from this area to reach the closest village. Considering the hearty country folk in this area were used to walking everywhere, one hour of walking for them represented a sizable distance.

It was a government directive, and the nearby village would receive funding to support the project, so not many people opposed it. When I asked what they would do about the people who *were* opposed, Grandpa Wayne responded lightly that that was the provincial lord's job.

I think Uncle Sanrus already has his hands pretty full, though... I wonder if Grandpa Wayne plans to help?

I gleaned a lot on our way there, but once we arrived at the villa, we really got into it.

We were shown a map with the area of the proposed site circled and discussed everything from an approximate budget to the provincial lord's conditions.

They weren't exactly able to do a topographical survey like on Earth, so we couldn't say for certain, but it looked like the hot spring baths at the Shiana Special Region would be impossible to replicate here.

We were able to do it in the Shiana Special Region thanks to the natural hot spring on Mount Reitimo, but who knows if there are any natural hot springs around here? It might be a little difficult, but maybe we could try building one of those "ludan" public bathhouses that are all the rage in the Linus Empire?

And if we build a bathhouse, we have to sell milk in glass bottles, just like at the public baths in Japan!

Nothing beats chugging ice-cold coffee milk right after getting out of the bath! Well, coffee milk is my favorite, but some people prefer plain milk, and others prefer fruit-flavored milk, so we'll have to make sure to sell all three!

"This budget seems reasonable, but there's another problem; I doubt the higher-ranked adventurers will gather here like they do in the Shiana Special Region," Papa pointed out.

“Not having hot spring baths is really going to be a deal-breaker, huh?” Grandpa Wayne lamented.

“Father, how long does it take to learn how to control the temperature of water?” I asked.

If we were going to build man-made public baths, we’d need magic users to control the temperature of the bath water. And if we wanted to create an impressive enough bathhouse to draw in tourists, we’d need quite a few of them.

“Hmm... It’s a rather intuitive task you need to develop a feel for, so I’d say it would probably take an intermediate-level fire magic user about a season?”

By “season,” he’s referring to the four seasons, so roughly three months?

“It takes quite a while for a magic user to develop the level of mastery required to manage the water temperature entirely by themselves, but if you assigned groups of three magic users to work together, they could become proficient enough to manage it much quicker,” Papa’s personal butler, Aurphan, cut in smoothly.

Following Aurphan’s proposed system, an intermediate-level water magic user would fill the tub with water, and an intermediate-level fire magic user would heat the water up. Then, the intermediate-level water magic user would cool the water down a little bit at a time until it reached the perfect temperature. When the temperature was just right the third member, a low-level fire magic user, would be in charge of maintaining the temperature.

It’s like the magical version of our automatic water-reheating bathtubs in Japan!

Magical items could fill the bath with water and maintain the water temperature, so as long as the magic user was experienced and skilled enough, one person could adjust the water temperature by themselves.

But if it’s so difficult to heat bathwater, how do the commoners manage it?

“Is this how the villagers do it too?” I asked.

“No. Commoners generally rely on magical items. Of course, some families

don't need them if they have water and fire magic users in the home."

Back in the day, heating the bathwater was the children's job. However, younger children were sometimes unable to moderate the amount of magic they used and lost control, blowing through all of their magic until it was depleted and they died, so that practice had been outlawed.

Even so, there were still occasional accidental deaths in the poorer villages where people couldn't afford magical items to heat their water. A lot of effort had been put into inventing more affordable magical items to heat bathwater.

"...If they made all the bathtubs the same size, couldn't they achieve the perfect temperature pretty easily by dispensing a preset amount of hot and cold water?" I asked.

But the bathtubs in people's homes were all different sizes, and depending on the family structure, it might be more practical for some families to have larger tubs so parents and children or multiple siblings could bathe together.

"I can't believe that never occurred to me!" Mama exclaimed, sounding shocked.

"But it would be unreasonable to expect everyone to buy new bathtubs," I pointed out, refuting my previous suggestion.

"Not that. We could make it so the magical item dispenses a preset amount of water. To fill a smaller tub, you'd only need one batch of water, and for larger tubs, you could use the magical item two or three times."

Oh, now I get it! She's saying that we can make it so that the magical item dispenses, for example, 10 liters of perfectly heated bathwater, and the user could use it as many times as needed to fill their particular bathtub.

"And if we make it so that each batch of water is smaller than what we've been using in previous models, that will also mean we can use smaller magical stones to create the items," Mama mused before muttering seemingly to herself, "This will certainly keep me busy!"

Mama really does love creating magical items, huh?

And so, after going off on a bit of a tangent, I ultimately determined that if we

secured enough staff to control the temperature of the water, we could build a theme park-level public bathhouse.

I want to make it fancy, with lots of different types of baths, just like the one the kobolds created in their cave! Let's make an artificial waterfall pouring into one of the tubs!

I explained the different features of the bathhouse I had in mind to the others.

First of all, we need to have some outdoor baths. I won't compromise on that! Then, there's the waterfall tub and a shallow pool where you can lie down flat. Some people love really hot water, so there should also be a tub set to a higher temperature than the others. And we'll need a cold-water bath for people to cool off in if they start getting too hot. Oh, and it would be nice if there were a sauna... I wonder if there's some way to create steam?

Maybe we can even figure out some way to create bubbles so we can have a Jacuzzi bath?

When I mentioned the sauna and the Jacuzzi, Papa made a doubtful face, so I determined that was probably pushing it a little.

But with Mama's incredible brain power, maybe she can come up with something!

"We could also add minerals and herbs to the water to create different baths with different purposes; some would be good for the skin, others would have healing properties, etc."

The hot spring water in the Shiana Special Region naturally contained healing properties, but there was no reason why we couldn't recreate this by mixing additives into normal water.

Saunas are good for detoxifying your body, and if we added some fad health-promoting menu options in the affiliated restaurant, I bet it would be popular with a certain subset of female customers in particular.

...Wait a minute; this is really starting to sound like we're trying to develop a tourist attraction!

“Are we planning to make this place a tourist attraction?” I asked the others.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to put it that way, but the project won’t be able to continue if we can’t draw in enough adventurers,” Grandpa Wayne replied.

“Not to mention, the real issue is how we’re going to get monsters to settle here and multiply when there aren’t any monsters in this area,” Grandma Mishri pointed out.

What does she mean by “multiply?!”

“You want them to multiply?!” I burst out incredulously.

“Of course. The severe decrease in the monster population is causing all sorts of problems, so we have to increase their population to remedy that, right?”

Well, yeah, but...

“To be frank, we don’t even need the facility for the adventurers until after the monsters have increased their numbers a bit.”

So they’re not going to build the public bath theme park after all?!

“What do you think, Shinki?” Papa asked, directing this question to Shinki, who had been quietly listening to our conversation without interrupting.

“I can’t say either way until I see the territory in person, but in general, I would suspect that as long as there’s enough to eat and there aren’t too many enemies, the population will increase quite quickly,” Shinki responded frankly.

That makes sense.

The next day, we made our way into the low, rolling mountains we’d spotted on our way here. We traveled part of the way by carriage, but once we reached the base of the mountains, we had to hike the rest of the way on foot.

Mama and Grandma Mishri elected to stay back at the villa since they weren’t interested in mountain climbing. Mama, in particular, was not a fan of such rough activities, so it had been a rare occurrence that she’d accompanied us on Mount Reitimo.

Karna, on the other hand, had eagerly dressed in riding clothes and boots, giving me the impression she was looking forward to the hike.

As for me, I elected to have Shinki carry me, so the hike was a piece of cake!

Although we were “mountain climbing,” there was an established road. Apparently, some people regularly ventured into these mountains. Originally, the area was private property under the jurisdiction of the provincial lord, but the residents of nearby villages were permitted to use it. So they’d created a simple but traversable road.

However, as we made our way along the road, we found it blocked by a fallen tree that appeared to be withered up and dead.

I got Shinki to put me down so I could examine it up close.

I didn’t know much about plants, but I was pretty sure that dried-up trees like this became very brittle and broke easily due to a lack of moisture.

Hmm, it feels a bit like the texture of sawdust, so I bet you could find plenty of bait to use for fishing if you poked around under there a bit. I don’t want to run into any millipedes, though, so I think I’ll quit while I’m ahead.

In the end, we got Shinki to help clear the path enough for us to proceed.

But no matter how far we walked, there didn’t seem to be any animals. There weren’t even any birds singing.

With my special ability, if there were any animals here, I’d expect them to pop out to say hi...

“There aren’t any animals,” I observed out loud.

“They’re probably hiding because they sense people,” Shinki suggested, but I wasn’t convinced.

We’d previously encountered animals even when traveling with a much larger group, including knights and adventurers. I pointed that out, but Shinki insisted that was different.

“This area probably has people coming and going on a near-daily basis. Not many creatures would make their homes in a place that sees so much activity.”

Oh, so that’s what it is.

“So what you’re saying is that people are living here?” Grandpa Wayne asked

suspiciously.

Who would visit a mountain that's so far from the closest village on a daily basis?

"I don't know about humans, but this location isn't far from the neighboring country, right? Beastpeople could cover the distance easily and are probably more skilled than humans at hunting as well," Shinki postulated.

Oh! That's right! The beastpeople who fled from Icoux probably passed through these mountains. Some of them might've even settled here for a while, causing the animals to leave.

"Do you sense any beastpeople here now?" Papa asked, but the answer was immediately apparent.

"It's not so much that I can *sense* them as I can *see* traces they left behind." Shinki pointed to a patch of bare earth a short distance ahead. Based on the blood stains, it appeared that they'd either chased prey through this area or possibly even killed it right there.

There were also notches in the trees indicating they'd been cut with something sharp, and signs of water and fire being used fairly recently. They'd carefully covered up all these traces, so we probably never would've noticed if Shinki hadn't pointed it out.

"I guess we'll have to forbid humans and beastpeople from entering this area..." Grandpa Wayne muttered, to which Karna objected.

"But won't it be dangerous for the beastpeople if they have to circumvent this mountain while fleeing from Icoux?"

"No, there are several shelters along the border for the refugees. The fact that they intentionally avoided the shelters and chose a route to avoid being noticed must mean..."

Papa picked up where Grandpa Wayne trailed off. Or rather, he swept in and stole the punch. "They're up to something shady."

If they're truly "up to something shady," does that mean they're either involved with Runohark or connected to the slave traders Will's been

investigating?

“Shall we see if we can capture them?” He said it as casually as if he were suggesting going out shopping at the market.

Can you just do that?!

Papa and Grandpa Wayne began discussing it. Apparently, they intended to try to capture whoever had left the traces.

“What do you think, Shinki? Could goblins live here?” I asked Shinki while Papa and Grandpa Wayne were deep in conversation.

“This immediate area won’t work. There’s no cave they could use for shelter, and I don’t see a reliable water source nearby.”

And so, we searched for a location with both shelter and water.

While Papa and Grandpa Wayne were absorbed in their discussion, Shinki and I, accompanied by Ralf, Karna, and the two butlers, Josh and Paul, set off to explore the area.

Papa and Grandpa Wayne trailed after us, still talking.

“Oh! What’s that?” Karna suddenly spoke up, pointing to something at the bottom of a gentle slope.

We made our way down to the area she’d indicated, where we discovered a small pool of water.

It looks like a natural spring?

However, the pool was shallow and mixed with dirt, meaning the potential “water source” was little more than a muddy puddle.

A gentle slope, water welling up from the ground, and dried-up trees? I’m getting a bad feeling about this...

It couldn’t be what I’m thinking, could it? Hmm, I’d better check just to be sure.

“Shinki, could you please ask the elemental spirits if there’s water underground?”

“They claim there is.”

“A lot?”

“Yeah.”

Looks like my “bad feeling” was right on the money.

“In that case, if we dig here, the water will come out, right?” Karna suggested.

Karna, don’t you know by now that nothing ever goes that easily for me!

There was a high likelihood that this entire area might be swept away by a landslide. Despite the presence of ample water storage underground, the trees that normally held up the mountainside had begun to wither and die. Thankfully the slope wasn’t too steep, so I thought it would probably just be a minor landslide, but if there happened to be torrential rain, it could easily become a true disaster.

“The same thing that happened during the Maguas Disaster could occur here,” I warned.

The Maguas Disaster occurred during the reign of the previous king. Following a period of torrential rain in the Dierta Province, a region called Maguas was swallowed whole by a terrible landslide.

I was not terribly well-versed in geology and the different types of landslides, but I did recall learning in school back in my previous life that when large-scale landslides occurred, there were always precursors such as small rocks falling, the sound of tree roots snapping, and water welling up from underground.

“Because of the presence of underground water?” Ralf asked, clearly confused.

“Um, well... I think it has more to do with the trees withering. Trees need water to survive, right? And more importantly, the trees’ roots spread out, holding the mountainside in place!”

“Then why don’t we just remove the water that’s trapped underground?” he suggested.

Oh, that’s right! With Ralf’s level of water magic, he could probably move the water...

But then that would probably cause the ground above to sink...

“If the water disappeared, the ground would cave in!”

Ralf seemed to be able to follow this logic, at least, because he muttered, “Oh, yeah... That’s true.”

“But what’s causing the trees to wither in the first place?” Karna wondered out loud.

“Well...” Shinki began, seeming to know the answer to this question. He walked over to a nearby tree and gave it a light kick.

PLOP! PLOP! PLOP!

“Ahhhhhhh!”

Suddenly, hundreds of insects came raining down on us, falling out of the tree and igniting a huge panic, particularly in Karna. She began shrieking and blasting all the insects that looked like they might land on her with fire.



Papa quickly came to our rescue, using his fire magic to incinerate the rest of the insects crawling and writhing on the ground all around us.

I think I'm going to have PTSD from the smell of burning insect carcasses! Bleh!

"The trees withered because all of their leaves were devoured by insects," Shinki concluded.

"Shinki! You didn't need to shower us with insects to make that point!" I cried.

"I thought you were fine with insects, Miss..."

I'm fine if it's just one or two! But nobody would be fine with hundreds of insects swarming all over their body like something out of a horror movie!

If anyone is okay with something like that, there's clearly something wrong with them! What do they call the opposite of insect phobia? Insect mania? Yeah, they would have to have a very bad case of that!

"Could it be that these insects can fly?" Papa asked. He seemed to have thought of something because he'd wandered over to another tree to catch one of the insects and was inspecting it closely.

"Once they're fully mature, they can fly," Shinki confirmed.

Are they this world's version of termites or maybe bark-beetles, then?

"I've seen them inside of fruit before as well, so they can probably eat just about any kind of plant."

"So these are the culprits responsible for eating all the crops in the Mieuxga Province."

I gasped at Papa's deduction.

Come to think of it, Uncle Sanrus did say that starting a few years ago, they'd been losing more and more of their crops to pests.

"We should probably close off this whole area. If humans and beastpeople stop coming here the animals will return, and that should reduce the number of insects at least a little," Grandpa Wayne said.

“Good idea. Let’s investigate the other potential sites as well to make sure the same thing isn’t occurring there,” Papa agreed.

With that decided, we were about to head back when Shinki astounded me again.

“Is it okay if I collect some of these insects? Suzuko and the others would love them.”

Without waiting for an answer, Shinki proceeded to fill an entire bag with the insects.

Shinki... Your bag is moving!

I asked him how he was going to get the insects to Suzuko, and he replied that he would send the bag to Healran via magic circle tapestry and have him deliver it.

I’m sure Healran will just love that...

In fact, he might even be traumatized by the experience!

“At least have the elemental spirits carry your voice to him first so you can explain before suddenly sending him a bag full of live insects, please!” I insisted.

15 - Grandparents, Uncle, and Mama: Part 1

AFTER returning to the villa, Papa set to work writing a huge stack of letters. He explained that he was sending out recommendations, based on today's findings, that the potential site of the Mieuxga Special Region should be reconsidered and that a geographical study should be conducted in the Mieuxga and Dierta Provinces due to the newly discovered potential for landslides.

I figured that if Lars enlisted the help of the elemental spirits, they could probably identify any mountainous areas where there was water underground and the trees were dying.

Then, they could close off the areas where landslides were likely to occur and fortify and reinforce the slopes in areas close to towns and villages with magic. On the other hand, if they reinforced *every* spot where landsides seemed likely, the ground would become hard, and there would be nowhere for the roots of surviving trees to grow, so it was better to leave any areas where a landslide wouldn't cause casualties as-is.

Not that Papa needed *me* to tell him all that. It was only common sense that we should do all we could to prevent natural disasters so people wouldn't suffer.

Unfortunately, this also meant we had to go back to the drawing board regarding the Mieuxga version of Project Shiana.

Personally, I'd been a bit concerned about the goblins' numbers, so I wasn't completely disappointed by the news.

If you considered the clan living on Mount Reitimo as the "main army," the group who would be sent to the Mieuxga Province was like a platoon, but no goblins were ready to lead that platoon. Shuki had only just received a name, so I wanted to wait a while and see how his development progressed. If we *did* put Shuki in charge of the platoon, he would need a strong right-hand man.

Who should we send?

I thought the goblins from Cass Village who'd joined Shinki's clan were strong candidates. They already had a hobgoblin who acted as their leader, and they'd made it all the way to Cass Village on their own as a relatively small group while also fleeing from Runohark.

But would Shuki be able to get along with this group if we threw them together?

In any case, I decided to ask Shinki to name that hobgoblin.



I thought we were finally heading home, but for some reason, we were in an unfamiliar city.

Where are we?

From inside the carriage, the city looked lively and bustling, with wide streets lined on both sides with shops. A river ran alongside the road, teeming with boats coming and going. Other boats moored along the riverside seemed to be operating as shops.

Somehow, this scene, so different from anything I'd seen in the royal city or Osphe Province, seemed foreign and exciting.

"Wow!"

"That is the pride of the Mieuxga Province and the crux of transport with the province, the Auwaine River," Papa said.

I wanna ride on a boat! A couple of larger vessels look like houseboats with lots of people on them, so they must also do leisure cruises on this river, right?

I really wanna ride on one of those!

I was so excited that I didn't register anything Papa was saying.

"Neema, please calm down a little. I promise to show you around the city when we have the time," Mama scolded lightly, smiling wryly at my clear over-excitement.

Mama's going to show me around? Herself?

“You’ll show me around personally?!” I asked incredulously.

“Yes. I was born and raised here, after all. I haven’t been back much since marrying your father, but not a lot seems to have changed, so I’m sure it will be fine.”

This is Mama’s hometown?! Now that I think about it, I’ve never heard Mama talk about her side of the family! I don’t even know what social rank her birth family holds!

How could I have made such a huge oversight?!

I was dumbstruck with shock at the realization that I hardly knew anything about Mama’s background. And then the carriage finally drew to a stop in front of a large manor on the outskirts of the city.

An unfamiliar man who appeared to be a butler came out to meet us. When we entered the manor, another group of unfamiliar adults was gathered in the entry hall, seemingly waiting for us.

“Your Grace Duke Osphe and my dear older sister, we’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival,” a young man said, stepping forward to greet us.

What does he mean, “older sister?!”

“Long time no see, Reyus. Lord Garst, word of your activities has even reached the royal city,” Papa said.

“I’ve heard rumors of your latest project as well, Lord Dayland. I’d very much like to hear more about it later if that’s all right with you.”

I’m pretty sure the young man is Reyus, and the older gentleman who strongly resembles him is Lord Garst. I wonder who they are and how they’re related.

“It’s our first time meeting in person, Nefertima. I’m your mother’s younger brother, Reyus. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

...Mama’s younger brother?! That means he’s my actual, blood-related uncle?! Does that mean that Lord Garst and the woman standing next to him are...

“Neema, these are my parents, Lord Garst Bielisov and Lady Melanie Bielisov. My younger brother has already inherited our father’s title, so he’s the current marquess and head of the family,” Mama explained.

I suppose this is where I'm meant to bust out a perfectly mannered greeting, befitting my station as a duke's daughter?

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. I am Dayland Osphe's youngest daughter, Nefertima."

Oh yeah! Take that! My curtsy and the degree of my bow were spot-on, right?!

Grandfather Garst and Grandmother Melanie both took turns greeting me as well, after which they turned to Ralf and Karna—who they'd clearly met before—and welcomed them affectionately.

As for the sheer perfection of my greeting, Mama smiled down at me and whispered that I'd done very well, so it seemed she approved.

Phew! That's a relief!

It was decided that we'd retire to the guest parlor to talk. Grandmother and Grandfather led us there, but I was surprised that the guest parlor was quite different from the one in our house. The décor was more old-fashioned but in a refined, tasteful way.

"Reyus, I'd like you to try your hand at creating the smallest teleportation circle possible," Mama said.

"Smaller than the current smallest size, you mean?"

Oh!

That's right! Papa was talking about a person named Reyus Bielisov at the restaurant inside Asmunlorta! I see! So the person Papa suspected might be capable of inventing a smaller teleportation circle was actually my uncle.

"I've compiled the magical formulation here to make it easier for you," Mama said, passing a sheet of paper containing the magical formulation to Uncle Reyus.

"You want it to be 2 gell or less? Even for a one-directional teleportation circle, I think the smallest I could possibly make it would be 4 gell..."

If I've got my math right, 2 gell is about 3 inches, so he's saying the smallest we could hope to make it would be 6 inches?

A call button with a 6-inch diameter would take up a lot of room on the table.

“But couldn’t we make the formula a bit shorter by erasing this part since we don’t need it to be voice-activated using a spell word?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s true... We could make it activate when the magical stone touches the magic circle, causing magic to run through it.”

From there Mama and Uncle Reyus’s conversation became more technical and excited. Karna and Grandfather Garst listened intently, but Grandmother Melanie’s face became more and more closed-off.

“It’s fine if the magic circle on the receiving end is a little bigger. And we’ll need to figure out a way to display which table the signal came from... Hm, this is a very interesting challenge!”

Uncle Reyus asked me question after question, such as how long the table number should be displayed for and what kind of noise should alert the waitstaff that someone had pushed their call button.

“What if we built a non-magical mechanism into the call button to produce the noise? That would allow us to shorten the magical formulation even further,” Grandfather Garst spoke up, getting in on it as well.

“Would that make the call button itself less than 2 gell in diameter?” Mama asked.

“Yeah, I think it might be possible.”

“In that case, I think that might work. Father, could I ask you to develop a prototype?”

“Goodness gracious, that’s quite enough!” Grandmother Melanie finally snapped. “You all are always, *always* going on about your inventing obsession! You don’t seem to have a single ounce of aristocratic nobility amongst the lot of you!”

Grandmother launched into an impassioned rant, declaring that it was an embarrassment for members of the nobility to lock themselves up all day creating magical items and scorning polite society. She’d become so enraged by the end of her tirade that her face was as red as a tomato.

“Melanie, darling, I understand how you feel, but I just can’t stop creating things. It’s in my blood!” Grandfather Garst protested.

I see, so that’s where Mama gets it from...

“Mother, you knew very well before you married into the Bielisov family that we’re a family of inventors, right? Isn’t it a little late now to despair over such a thing?” Mama pointed out.

“This family may be beyond hope, but *you*, dear, have married into the noble Osphe family! And yet you’re still *working* like a commoner in the royal palace, isn’t that right?”

Grandmother Melanie ardently subscribed to the traditional way of thinking, in which the wife of a titled nobleman’s sole profession should be supporting her family. When her husband was out of the house working, she would manage the home, give orders to the servants, and socialize with other noble ladies to gather information and form connections that might benefit her family.

However, I felt that failing to make use of Mama’s incredible talent would be a detriment to our entire country. She was constantly inventing various magical items that had made daily life easier for all citizens.

But Grandmother Melanie still wasn’t done.

Next, she turned her ire on me.

She said that, as our father’s heir, it was fine for Ralf to learn about all sorts of things to receive a well-rounded education, but Karna and I should not waste our time on ridiculous things like inventing and instead focus on preparing to marry well. She even went as far as to say that if we pursued career aspirations instead of trying to catch a man, we’d miss our chance to get married and might end up as spinsters like Auntie Olive.

On one hand, I understood what she was saying—it was a typical way of thinking among the nobility.

However, even if she was unmarried, Auntie Olive was the pinnacle of all working women! Just like Papa, she was excellently fulfilling both her roles as a cabinet minister and a provincial lord, and her competence and dedication to

her work befitted her rank as a duchess.

She wasn't in a hurry to get married because, for the time being, she wanted to focus on doing her job properly, and her parents had also accepted that decision.

If you asked me, no one else had any right to have opinions about it.

"Even just among family, that's going too far, Mother. Olive is the current Duchess Wise," Mama said in a biting tone.

Historically, it was common for females to inherit the title and cabinet position in the Wise family. Auntie Olive always said that this was because the women from their province were tough as nails.

When I first heard that, I felt sympathy for the men of the Wise Province, who must have a hard time keeping up with the extremely capable women around them.

"I'm just trying to illustrate a point, dear. There is no need for noblewomen to work like *men*. Besides, one mustn't underestimate the valuable work done by women; it's a very important role that only wives can fulfill."

Mama let out a deep sigh, then frankly voiced her true feelings. "I knew you would be like this, which is why I didn't want to come here."

Hearing that made me incredibly sad.

She never wanted to return to her childhood home. In fact, she'd unconsciously gone as far as to say "come here" instead of "come *home*."

Mama's presence always gave me a deep sense of peace and safety, and whenever she welcomed me home after I'd been out, it filled me with warmth and a sense of belonging. So, in my eyes, it was terribly sad if the house you grew up in wasn't a place you felt safe and happy.

The awkward tension in the air was enough to cut our family reunion short, and servants were quickly summoned to show us to our rooms. Once we were alone, I asked Karna why Mama and Grandmother Melanie didn't get along.

"I'm sure you also noticed, but grandmother has a very traditional way of thinking. On the other hand, Mama is not only proud of her abilities but also

wants to use them to help others.”

That’s why she focuses on making convenient magical items. Magical items are super helpful, after all!

“The Bielisovs are notorious for being a family of inventors. Why, Mother’s grandfather even invented the clock! And Grandfather Garst is truly a genius at making tools.”

“Tools?”

“That’s right. People need tools to make things, right? Take, for example, the needles we use for embroidery. There are also a variety of specialized tools used for making magical items.”

The term “tool” is very broad, but I suppose you would need tools to trim and pound things you’re working on...

“Grandfather Garst has nimble fingers, so he’s even able to create toys that move on their own without using magic!”

Whoa! Now that’s something I’d like to see! Does that mean the “mechanism” he mentioned earlier is something like that?

“What does Uncle Reyus make? Magic circles?” I asked.

“Uncle Reyus specializes in written magic. Before inheriting his title, he traveled all over the continent, researching region-specific forms of written magic. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“Yeah, it does sound fun!”

Traveling around, learning about different cultures, eating local delicacies, and experiencing things unique to each region sure is the life... When you think of it that way, going to the Linus Empire might not be so bad after all!

“Karna, when we go to the Linus Empire, let’s eat lots of delicious food!”

“Okay! And let’s go on lots of outings.”

I chatted on and on with Karna until, before I knew it, dinnertime had rolled around.

Wowie, when girls get together, we sure do love to talk! That’s one thing Will

always complains about, but he might actually be onto something.

Grandmother Melanie didn't come to dinner that night. She sent word that she wasn't feeling well and would be retiring early.

I hope she's okay...

After dinner, Grandfather Garst, Uncle Reyus, Mama, and Karna held a development meeting about the call button project.

I guess inventing something new is exciting to people in the business of making things. Considering I'm the one who's always asking them to invent things, I'm grateful they enjoy it and happy to see them working on it so eagerly!

But, personally, I was more concerned about Grandmother Melanie. I decided to have Paul inquire if it would be okay for me to visit her.

"She didn't respond, so it appears she's already sleeping."

Oh, I see. That's too bad. I'll just have to try again tomorrow.



THE next day, Mama and the others were just as eager as the night before.

It turned out that the way Mama's eyes sparkled when she was working on something was a genetic trait.

Grandfather Garst was even more energetic than he'd been the previous day, and Uncle Reyus carried his hastily jotted notes everywhere, refusing to put them down for even a moment.

If they're like this whenever they're working on something, I can totally see how that would give Grandmother Melanie a headache! I'm used to it, though, since I live with Mama and Karna.

After lunch, I spotted Grandmother Melanie taking a walk in the garden.

Now's my chance! She might be frightened if I bring Shinki with me, so I'll leave him behind. Haku and Gratia, you can get Shinki to play with you! Just make sure to tell me all about it later, okay?

I dragged Paul along with me in Shinki's place.

“Don’t you think it might be better not to interfere in family matters?” Paul suggested pointedly.

He’s sharp! But I can’t just let Grandmother Melanie be excluded!

“Mother looked so pained last night... I want to see her smiling all the time!”

I’m sure Mama has a lot of memories in this house. So I want her to want to come home.

“Grandmother, are you feeling better now?” I asked.

“Nefertima, where are your manners? You must always begin with a proper greeting.”

“Oh, that’s right. Good day, Grandmother?”

The first “proper greeting” that popped to mind was “Good day,” but I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate after inquiring about someone’s health, so I attempted to use the inflection of my voice to make it into a question.

“In a situation such as this, you should say, ‘I’m delighted to see that you seem to be feeling better.’ You mustn’t neglect to learn proper social etiquette, young lady.”

“Yes, Grandmother!”

Oops, I’ve never practiced that phrase before, so it didn’t even occur to me! Looks like I’d better put a little more effort into adopting a more refined manner of speech.

“The weather is very nice today. Will you join me for tea?” Grandmother Melanie surprised me by asking.

“Is it really okay? You’re not busy right now?”

“It’s fine,” she confirmed weakly, sounding tired.

I scored an invitation to tea with Grandmother, but she still seems a bit under the weather. Maybe I should ask Ralf to use his healing magic on her?

“Grandmother, are you feeling unwell? Why don’t we have Ralf heal you?”

“I’m just feeling a bit down. It’s not something that magic can heal, unfortunately,” Grandmother Melanie explained, smiling sadly.

It reminded me distinctly of Mama's pained expression the night before.

"If you don't mind talking about it, I'm happy to listen!"

"Nefertima... May I call you Neema?"

"Of course!"

My name is pretty long, after all. If you keep saying "Nefertima" over and over again, you might accidentally bite your tongue!

"You must keep this just between you and me. That means you can't speak of it to your mother, you understand?"

Weeeeell, if Mama really interrogates me, I'll probably cave, but...

"I promise not to tell!"

And if I do, I'm really sorry!

"I was born into an earl's family. Knowing what I know now, I feel I probably should have married into a family of the same rank."

Grandmother Melanie explained that as soon as her engagement to Grandfather Garst was decided, she was forced to undergo a severe training regimen to educate her for the role of marchioness.

Her birth family hired an army of private tutors and forced her to study and practice from dawn until dusk every day so that she wouldn't shame the higher-ranked marquess's family she married into.

If it were me, I would run away from home!

Well, either that or I would beg for frequent fluffy-petting breaks!

"Even after I married, I continued to focus all my efforts on supporting and promoting the family. But to my husband, it might've been more of a burden than a blessing..."

The Bielisovs had their own way of doing things, and everything focused on prioritizing inventing. The servants were trained to carry out their work without disrupting their master, so they didn't require orders from Grandmother Melanie.

No matter how hard she tried to fit into upper-class society, people only saw

the Bielisovs as “that weird family of inventors,” and her husband saw little use in gathering information by cultivating relationships with the other nobles.

Grandfather Garst had already developed his own information sources through his inventing work, and the craftsmen and merchants spoke highly of him. That earned him a measure of respect amongst the men in high society.

But the society women didn’t hear about such things, so they snubbed Grandmother Melanie.

The reality of her situation was entirely different from what she had so rigorously prepared for, and she didn’t know what to do. Despite how determined she’d been to raise her children to be proper aristocrats who wouldn’t be looked down upon in society, they both ignored her advice and became just as obsessed with inventing as their father.

“That must’ve been so hard for you, Grandmother.”

When I said that, tears began flowing from Grandmother Melanie’s eyes.

She must’ve been holding back tears this entire time. She’s trained herself to never show emotion in front of others.

“Grandmother, I think you should do what you love! Everyone else is doing what they love, so why shouldn’t you?”

“...I’m not sure what it is that I love.”

It’s not good to not have any hobbies! Having things you enjoy doing makes it so you can do your best when you’re working, and they help you relax and soothe your weary soul!

“What about embroidery or growing flowers?”

“I do those things but don’t particularly enjoy them...”

If that’s no good, then how about looking after a pet? If she got a dog, she could train it, and then it would listen to her commands and maybe even become a guard dog!

Yeah, fluffy animals are the best!

All right, let’s go with that, then!

“Then how about an animal? Wolves are very well-behaved, and they’re strong, so they could protect you!”

“An animal? I’ve never touched one before... I wonder if it would be okay?”

Say whaaaat?! She’s never petted an adorable little fluffball, even once in her whole entire life?!

Talk about a life wasted!

“Would you like to try? I have plenty!”

“You have plenty? Of... animals?”

“Nox! Come here!”

You’ve been on your best behavior, hiding your presence so you don’t disturb us, but I know you’re there, Nox! Don’t think I didn’t notice during “the insect incident” that you were hiding in the shadows, gobbling up all the insects you could get your hands—er, beak—on!

I also know that you’ve been quietly catching plenty of prey since we arrived here as well. I just didn’t say anything because you’ve been kindly sharing with Haku and Gratia. You must be hungry after flying so far for the first time in a while. You were flying the whole time I was riding in the carriage, after all.

Come to think of it, maybe you’ve been enjoying this trip even more than me!

“Screech!” Nox let out a cheerful cry as he gracefully descended from the sky.

You look particularly wild and majestic today, Nox, but don’t even think about returning to live in the wild!

“This little guy’s name is Nox. Nox, this is my grandmother.” Nox landed on my arm and obediently let me pet him. “Nox was trained by the beast knights, so he won’t attack if you touch him.”

Although he will attack if I order him to or if I’m in danger. That’s what the beast knights told me they trained him for, at least.

I took Grandmother Melanie’s hand and gently brought it towards Nox.

She paused just shy of touching him, but after I reassured her several more times that it was okay, she tentatively reached forward. When her fingertips

came into contact with Nox's feathers she flinched and snatched her hand back, but I encouraged her to try again, and she slowly, hesitantly stroked his back.



“It’s softer than I imagined,” she said.

“The surface is sleek, but underneath, it’s super fluffy!” I directed her hand to Nox’s pride and joy, his magnificent chest plumage, and she sank the tips of her fingers into the soft feathers to touch his undercoat.

“Oh, my...”

The feathers over his chest are the fluffiest! Aren’t they incredible?! You can’t help becoming addicted to touching them!

“This is how birds’ feathers feel, but wolves’ fur is thick and plush, and the short-haired ones have glossy fur,” I gushed.

“Hehe, I can see that you clearly love animals, Neema.”

Yes, ma’am, I do! But more importantly...

“Grandmother, you’re even prettier when you smile.”

When Grandmother Melanie smiled, she looked sweet and kind.

She must’ve been really cute when she was young. Why couldn’t I have inherited her beauty?

Well, I’ve made friends with Grandmother Melanie, but that still leaves Mama...

Can I figure out a way to talk things over with her without breaking my promise to Grandmother Melanie?

I’ll do my best!

16 - Grandparents, Uncle, and Mama: Part 2

WHEN I returned to my room, it was just in time to catch sight of Shinki lobbing Haku across the room with all his might.

Huh?! What are they doing?!

“Shinki! Why did you throw Haku?!”

“Because it told me it wanted me to?”

Next, Shinki chucked Gratia across the room.

He’s throwing them really hard...

The Hanley stuffed animal was set up at the far side of the room as a kind of makeshift landing pad. Gratia’s body made a soft *PUFF!* as it crashed into the stuffed animal’s stomach region, disappearing into its fur.

...Now I’m kinda jealous; I wanna try, too! It’s like diving face-first into Hanley’s incredible fur at full speed! These guys make the most of how light and durable their monster bodies are, huh?

“Mew!”

Haku begged to be thrown again, and Shinki obliged without a moment’s hesitation.

I want to have him throw me like that, too, but... I’m worried I would get hurt. I guess I’ll have to do it the normal way.

“Haku, it’s my turn next!”

Swinging my arms to build momentum, I threw myself headlong onto the Hanley stuffed animal atop the bed. The soft recoil of the mattress and the long, silky fur of the stuffed animal’s stomach region combined to make for a truly transcendent experience. It was so soft and plush that I couldn’t help letting out a moan of delight. I wrapped my arms as far around the stuffed animal as they could go and gave it a big squeeze and that incredible fur...

Well, I guess they're actually artificial fibers?

In any case, the *undercoat* was otherworldly! I could do this every day and still not get sick of it.

I drifted off to sleep like that, still hugging the Hanley stuffed animal. When Ralf came to call me for dinner, I may or may not have even had a bit of drool on my face...

I got Paul to clean me up quickly, and then Ralf gallantly escorted me to the dining room.

Oh, Grandmother Melanie's here today. It looks like she's feeling a little better.

Grandmother Melanie smiled at me, and I beamed at her in return.

Everyone seemed surprised to see Grandmother Melanie like that—that is, everyone but Mama. Mama staunchly avoided so much as glancing at her, so she didn't even notice Grandmother's smile.

"When did you become so friendly with Grandmother?" Ralf asked in a hushed whisper.

"It's a secret!"

Overhearing our covert exchange, Karna cut in, "Having our little secrets makes us ladies more mysterious and alluring, after all! Of course, I, too, have my secrets!"

I think Karna probably has a whole mountain of them! If any of them were revealed, she'd be in for a harsh scolding from Mama, no doubt about it!

"Don't hoard them all to yourself, Karna. Why don't we come up with a secret together?"

I don't think that's possible, given your squeaky-clean personality Ralf! Every time I ask you to keep a secret, you always convince me to come clean to Mama and then take her scolding along with me.

"Keeping secrets doesn't suit your image, Ralf," Karna quipped.

"You think so? I, too, have things I can't speak of to my darling little sisters,

you know.”

I’m curious about what Ralf’s secrets might include, but I’m also a little afraid to find out, so I think I’ll quit while I’m ahead.

“That’s enough silliness from the three of you,” Papa scolded, and we all obediently apologized before returning our attention to the meal.

Although, even while we were eating, the conversation still focused primarily on inventing.

After dinner, there was another development meeting.

For my part, I waited patiently for the meeting to finish.

Once Paul informed me that “Her Grace appears to have returned to her room,” that was when I made my move.

I knocked on the door to Mama and Papa’s room, and Aurphan answered.

Does the fact that Aurphan’s here mean that they’re still working?

“I’d like to speak with mother.”

“Very well. For your drink, may I presume you’d like the usual?”

“Yeah!”

I always had the same thing whenever I visited Mama or Papa in the evening—hot milk without any kind of sweetener.

“Mother...”

Papa appeared to be reviewing some kind of documents, but Mama was leisure-reading. When I ran over to Mama for a hug, Papa threw a despairing glance our way.

You’ll have your turn, Papa! Finish your work first!

“You always become clingy like this in the evening, huh?” Mama remarked indulgently.

There’s no other opportunity to claim your attention but in the evening! I certainly wouldn’t complain if you let me snuggle up to you during the daytime!

“Well, you see... There’s something I’d like to talk to you about, Mother,” I

began.

“And what’s that?”

“Grandmother.”

Immediately, Mama’s expression grew cold.

This really is a deep-rooted issue...

“Did she say something to you?” Mama asked icily.

“Grandmother looked lonely and sad, so I suggested she get a pet.”

Mama appeared to be turning my words over in her head.

“...She looked sad?”

“Yeah. Grandmother was crying. So I wanted to do something to help her...”

Now, Mama looked a bit doubtful, but ultimately, knowing that I wouldn’t lie, she seemed unsure how to respond.

“Neema, did Lady Melanie tell you to keep your conversation with her a secret from your Mother?”

I should’ve known Papa would figure it out. He’s really sharp!

“Yeah... But I’ll apologize to her properly tomorrow! I just want to see both Mother and Grandmother smile.”

It’s going to be impossible to convince Mama without revealing Grandmother Melanie’s situation. So I’ll just have to own up to breaking my promise and apologize sincerely.

And so, I did my best to explain to Mama everything Grandmother Melanie had told me. My retelling was a bit disorganized, and I went off on tangents a few times, but Mama and Papa listened attentively.

Once I’d finished, Papa acknowledged my efforts with a pat on my shoulder, but Mama just looked sad. With his other hand, Papa was gently rubbing her back.

“It’s okay, Cerulia. There’s still plenty of time to make things better. For a parent, even if their daughter gets married and goes on to have children of her

own, that doesn't change the fact that she is still her parents' irreplaceable child. The same is true for you, right? Even if Karna and Neema get married and have children, they'll always be our precious treasures, right?"

"...Yes, that's true."

It looks like I should leave this to Papa. Good luck, Papa!

I tried to slip out of the room unobtrusively without being noticed, but Papa caught my eye at the last moment and gave me a wink that seemed to say, "next comes grown-up time."

...I won't be surprised if we end up getting a little brother or sister. Not that I'd mind that!

A younger sibling, huh? What would it be like to have one of those...?

I was the youngest child in my previous life as well, so I don't really know what it's like having anyone younger than me. It's gotta be a little different from having younger cousins, right? I wouldn't be "like" an older sister, but an actual older sister, after all.

Hmm, but I bet they'd be really cute! Oh, but if the baby was a boy, I bet he'd be bratty. Well, I can't picture Ralf ever being bratty, though. If the baby was like him, I bet they'd be absolutely adorable! If it was a little sister, and she was anything like Karna, I bet she'd get into all kinds of mischief with me. That might be fun!

I drifted off to sleep while fantasizing about having a younger sibling.

The next day, I figured they'd have yet *another* development meeting, but I was wrong.

However, Mama and Papa had something they needed to attend to because I didn't see them.

"Hey Ralf, would you be happy if Mama and Papa had another baby?" I asked.

"Another baby younger than you, you mean? I'm sure I'd be happy once it was born, but I suppose I'd have mixed feelings about it."

"Why?"

“Ralf is already entering adulthood, so if people saw them together, they might misunderstand and think it’s *his* child,” Karna pointed out.

Oh, that’s true. There would be a huge age difference there!

“There are all kinds of families out there, though. It’s not that uncommon for siblings to have a large age difference, especially if they have different mothers or one was adopted,” Ralf reasoned.

“But I’m certain you wouldn’t be able to resist doting on him or her, Ralf,” Karna teased.

I could say the same of you, Karna!

“I can’t picture Neema as an older sister, though...” Ralf chuckled.

“That’s true,” Karna agreed, “Neema’s more suited to being the one to be doted on!”

...Hold on, is she saying that my younger brother or sister would end up looking after me?!

...I suppose I can’t deny that’s a very real possibility!

“I bet they’d be a helpful and responsible younger sibling,” Ralf speculated.

“And it would be adorable seeing them follow Neema around everywhere, helping her out all the time!” Karna said.

Even if we get a younger sibling, it looks like my position in the family won’t change much! I think that would be fun, but it would leave me in a rather undignified position as an older sister.

While my siblings and I were excitedly discussing the possibility of a younger sibling, Paul interrupted and asked if he might ask a question.

“Lady Neema, between His Lordship and Her Ladyship, which do you like more?”

“Mother!” I answered immediately.

I love Mama! Of course, I love Papa, too, but if I could only choose one or the other, it would have to be Mama.

“What about you, Ralf?” I asked curiously.

Now that the topic had arisen, I wanted to know who Ralf and Karna would choose.

“I... Hmm, I can’t choose. I love both of them equally,” Ralf answered, looking troubled.

“As for me... Yeah, I think I’d have to go with Mother. I love Father, too, naturally, but as a fellow woman, it’s easier to relate to Mother,” Karna stated.

So Karna’s Team Mama, too.

I heard Paul mutter, “There’s no way I could possibly report *this* to His Lordship.”

I was curious about that comment, but Karna cut me off before I could ask him about it.

“But my favorite person in our family is Neema!” Karna declared.

“I thought so. But when Neema was first born, Father and Mother were so busy taking care of her that I remember asking you several times if you felt lonely, Karna,” Ralf said.

Hmm, I wonder how Karna replied?

I waited to hear the rest of the story, and thankfully, Ralf didn’t make me wait long. With a chuckle, he adopted a feminine voice and mimicked, “‘Don’t worry about me—worry about Neema instead! Then, I’ll also have more time to dote on cute little Neema!’” Resuming his normal voice, Ralf added, “I was quite dejected by your outright rejection of my brotherly affection, I’ll have you know!”

That sounds just like Karna. Poor Ralf; he must’ve been a bit traumatized by those words if he can still remember them verbatim to this day!

“Oh, did I say something like that? But there was no need for you to feel sad. Ultimately, we spent more time together than ever, both doting on Neema.”

“I love you too, sis,” Ralf said sheepishly to Karna.

In response, Karna chuckled and smiled brilliantly before quipping, “I know! You’re my beloved older brother, after all!”

"I love you both very much, too!" I cried, determined not to be outdone by Karna.

It should come as absolutely no surprise to anyone that Karna threw her arms around me and nearly throttled the life out of me with the force of her embrace.

"Karna, it's terrible manners to hog things all to yourself, you know. Come here, Neema." Ralf gave me a much gentler hug, and I felt deeply grateful that I'd been born as their younger sister.

"Hmph! Now you're the one hogging Neema, Ralf!"

"Sorry, sorry," Ralf apologized, hugging Karna next.

"I'm no longer a child, so please stop treating me like one," Karna complained, but the undeniable happiness in her voice gave away her true feelings.

Thanks to that exchange, I felt our sibling bond had deepened, but just as Ralf embraced Karna, Papa intruded on our special moment.

"Hey, my turn for some Neema hugs!"

He seems a little different from usual.

"Father, is something wrong?"

"Something really great happened. It made me want to see you, Neema."

I had no idea what that had to do with me, but I was glad to hear something good had happened.

"Neema, you really are my precious treasure," Papa cooed.

"Excuse me, Father!" Karna interrupted. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

That's right. I'm not the only one; Ralf and Karna are precious treasures, too!

"She's *our* precious treasure too!" Karna declared.

Wait, that's what she was complaining about?!

"Heh, I guess you're right. Neema is our entire family's precious treasure," Papa allowed.

You don't need to correct yourself, Papa. I don't know what to do with either

of you!

“Neema, your mother would like to speak with you, so please go see her,” he said.

Does she want to talk about what we discussed last night? If it means I can escape this hug-fest, I don't care what she wants to talk about!

When I reached Mama's room, I found her inside, crying.

“Mother, what's wrong?! Are you hurt somewhere?”

“...I'm fine. I was just reflecting on my incompetence.”

If Mama's incompetent, what hope is there for any of the rest of us?!

“Thank you, Neema. It seems my mother was sheltering me this entire time, and I was letting her.”

Mama began telling her story in a quiet voice. When she was young, she was fascinated by her grandfather's passion for clock-making. She said that when he completed his first large clock, she began wanting to invent something, too.

Under her grandfather's tutelage, she found herself fascinated by the process of using magic to create all kinds of magical items. She devoted herself to her studies and worked hard on her etiquette and other lessons to appease Grandmother Melanie.

But this was all just to avoid being prevented from doing what she really loved.

As Grandmother Melanie had said, she never cared a lick about avoiding being looked down on as an aristocrat.

When she was taken on as Elder Salzar's apprentice and then got hired to work at the Royal Magical Research Center, thanks to the recommendation of her fellow apprentice, the king, the distance between her and Grandmother Melanie only widened further.

“I do understand what Mother said. But we Bielisovs are different! I always hated that she couldn't accept that. But I guess that, even if you *are* parent and child, some things need to be *said* to be understood.”

Mama seems somehow younger and more vulnerable right now. Even her manner of speech is less formal than usual.

“But I foolishly believed that because she was my mother, she should understand how I felt without me having to explain it. I should’ve known better, especially given how much effort *you* always put into making me understand your feelings...”

“Mother...”

“I don’t remember my mother ever once praising me. If she’d only so much as said ‘Well done, Cerulia’ that would’ve made all the difference... But come to think of it, I don’t praise you children nearly enough, either.”

“Father praises us more than enough to make up for it! It’s the father’s job to take care of the things the mother’s not good at, after all.”

Mama might only praise us on exceedingly rare occasions, but Papa praised us for the tiniest, almost insignificant things, so it all evened out in the end.

You could say that Papa holds the carrot, and Mama holds the whip!

“Does seeing how Papa spoils us so much make you feel a bit left out, Mother?”

“Dayle certainly does spoil the three of you. I suppose you’re right, and he’s just making up for my shortcomings.”

“Father loves you very much. You can depend on him to spoil you a bit more, you know! And not just him, but Grandmother and Grandfather as well!”

But Mama seemed to feel resistant to the idea of getting spoiled at her age because she remarked, “I couldn’t possibly!”

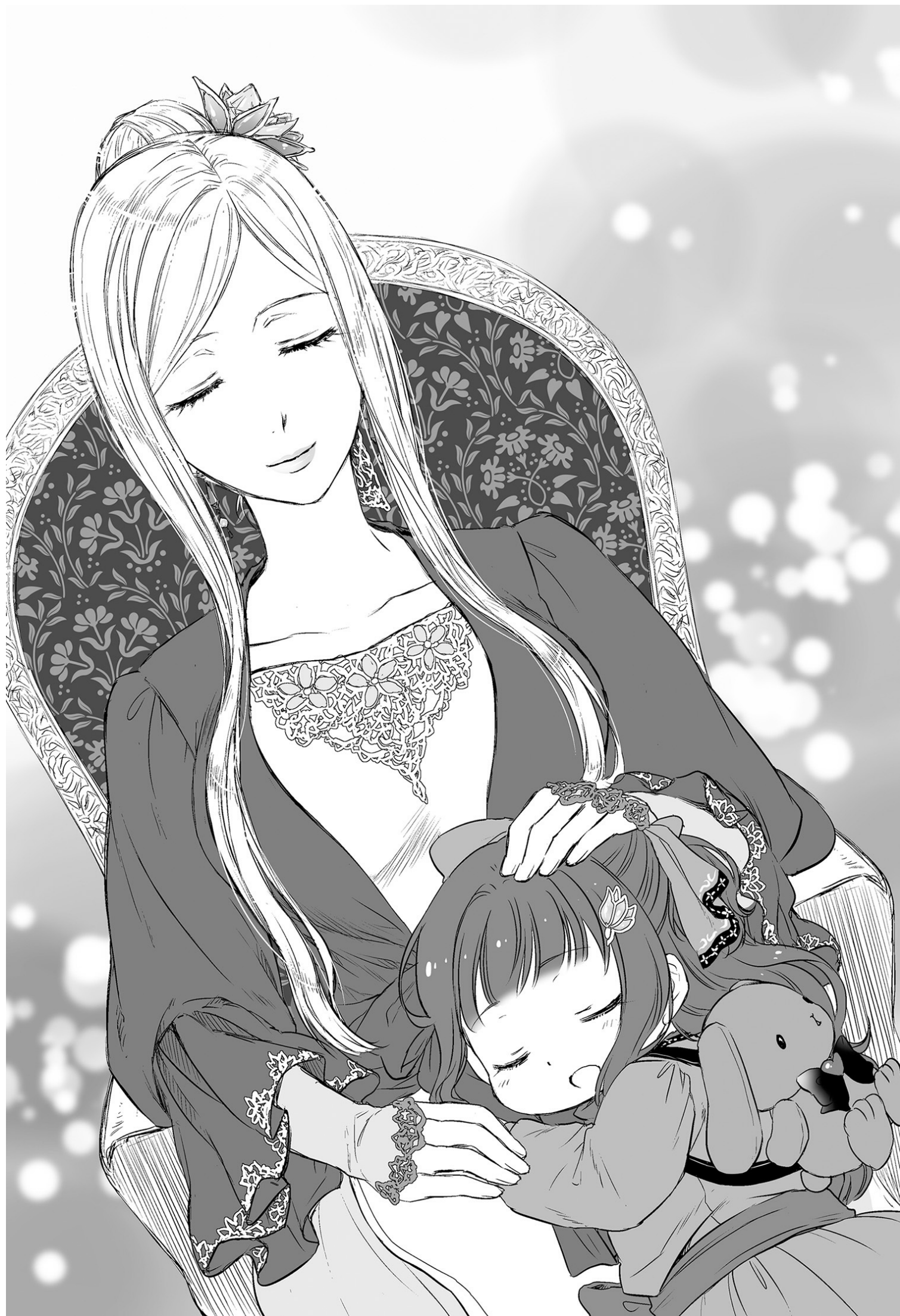
“It’s a child’s right to be spoiled by their mother and father,” I protested.

I mean, I suppose it depends on what form that takes, though. I would never expect Mama to go around at her age demanding money from her parents or anything.

“Oh? Should I take this to mean that you plan on being spoiled by your father and me, even after you become an adult?” she asked.

“Of course! When I become an adult, I won’t be able to see you every day like I do now, right? So when we do meet, I’ll hog all your attention, chatting, going for walks, and getting my head pats!”

“Like this?” Mama asked, gently stroking the top of my head.



Mama's hands are so comforting. I love it when Papa strokes my head, too, but Mama's head-pats are the best!

"So you should also go for a walk with Grandmother!" I prodded.

"Will you go with me?"

She's still nervous about being alone with her, huh? If it will help Mama feel more confident, I'd be happy to!

"Sure. There's one more thing... I want to go see some animals with Grandmother."

"You're thinking of helping her choose a pet, aren't you? I'll make the arrangements."

It's okay if it takes time, but I hope Mama and Grandmother Melanie can become closer.

"Oh, that reminds me. I'd better visit Grandmother next. I broke my promise to her, so I need to apologize!"

"You'd better hurry, then. Get along with you!"

Mama still seems a bit fragile, but I'm pretty sure she's going to be okay. I hope Grandmother Melanie isn't too angry with me...

I beelined straight to Grandmother Melanie's room, and when I arrived, Grandfather Garst was there as well.

"Grandmother, I'm so sorry—I broke my promise to you."

"Neema, come here."

I walked over to Grandmother Melanie's side, and she reached out to grasp my cheeks in her wrinkled hands.

"For the first time in my life, I heard that girl speak her true feelings. I realize now that I was wrong. I should have told her and her brother every day to ignore what others might say and that they are amazing children, my pride and joy. Other people's opinions are insignificant in the grand scheme of things."

Her hands, so similar to Mama's but lined with wrinkles, were incredibly warm.

“You can say it now. Tell Cerulia that we are so very proud that she’s our daughter. After all, she’s the one who gave us such an exceptional granddaughter. Thank you, Neema,” Grandfather Garst said a bit awkwardly, reaching out to ruffle my hair.

Is Grandfather bad at showing emotion?! Or maybe he’s not sure how to interact with little kids?

After that, the two regaled me with stories of when Mama was little.

Grandfather Garst recounted how proud he’d been when Mama invented the magic circle tapestry. It had made him really happy to see proof that his child had inherited his family’s skill for inventing.

Grandfather Garst wasn’t very skilled at inventing. Instead, he’d discovered his talents were more suited to making tools that others would use to create magical items, as well as designing and building items that could move without magic.

When I remarked that I was the same as him because I didn’t have any magic to speak of either, Grandfather Garst looked at me pityingly. I’d expected him to be able to sympathize with me about being magicless, but it turned out he could use low-level earth magic.

I’d not thought magic was a hereditary ability, but it turned out that Grandmother Melanie was an advanced-level water magic user just like Mama.

I guess it is inherited, after all, then...

But if that’s true, why don’t I have any magic at all?! Hey, God! I would like to speak to your manager, please! This is completely unacceptable!

While I was still reeling from the renewed shock of my lack of magical ability, a knock sounded on the door.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Mama’s personal butler, Feio, said as he let himself into the room.

“If your ladyship is feeling up to it, Her Grace has asked me to pass along her invitation to accompany her and Lady Neema on an outing.”

“An outing?”

“Yes. I believe that Lady Neema was saying that she would like to help Your Ladyship choose an animal to raise as a pet?”

Oh, this must be about my request to go see animals together. But we just finished discussing that!

Mama sure moves fast!

“If it’s okay with you, Grandmother, let’s go!”

“Okay. I’d like you to teach me as much as possible about caring for a pet before you leave.”

And so, it was decided that we would set out right away. Grandmother and Mama, Karna, and I were the only ones going, with Paul and Feio as our bodyguards, of course. Shinki was once again being left behind.

It’s okay, Shinki, you can play outside with Nox!

“Is there a pet shop in town?” I asked while we were riding in the carriage.

“Yes. Although there aren’t any exotic animals there like you’re used to seeing at the beast stables.”

Well, yeah! The beast stables are practically a safari park!

The pet shop was in a less-traveled section of the city. Engraved on the shop’s sign was a mark I’d seen before.

“The beast knights legion?” I muttered doubtfully.

No matter how you looked at it, it was clearly the rhinoceros and sword motif from the beast knights legion’s official seal.

Maybe they just wanted to go with something similar since they’re both related to animals?

“Welcome!”

The store’s interior looked more like a petting zoo than a pet shop.

None of the animals were in cages.

Dogs were playing in a large fenced-in area, and birds flew around freely in the shop.

It must be tough cleaning up all their poop!

A pabar—an animal that looked like a wallaby with a protruding head—ran freely around the shop.

“We’re looking for a pet that’s easy to care for, even for someone inexperienced with animals like Grandmother!” I announced.

“I see. Her Ladyship will be the pet’s owner, then? In that case, I recommend something small. The smaller animals tend to be easier to care for,” said the shopkeeper, a man who appeared a bit older than my father but still too young to be called elderly. Based on how he interacted with the animals in the shop, I could tell he had a natural way with them. “Either a small dog or perhaps a flare hog? They’re all the rage lately. Oh, and banorls are really cute but a bit expensive.”

They have those dogs that look just like dachshunds—I think they’re called cargies—at the beast stables, too. But this is my first time seeing a dog that looks like a cross between a chihuahua and a papillon.

I’ve never seen one of those dogs with the terrier-like face, either. It’s not cute like a Yorkshire terrier, but more fierce looking, like a bull terrier.

And, of course, I’ve seen flare hogs before at the beast stables.

There was that one flare hog in particular... What was her name? Her entire job was to let the beast knights soothe their weary hearts by feeding her. What a life, eh?!

As for the banorl... It looks just like Princess! I see. So that’s the name of Princess’ species. She’s a banorl...

I have no idea what animal family this is, though. It’s not a canine or a feline... Maybe a type of rabbit? It vaguely... very vaguely resembles a rabbit...

“I don’t know which to choose,” Grandmother said, sounding a bit overwhelmed.

“Trust your gut! Pets and their owners will naturally be drawn to one another, so you have to follow your gut.”

All of the species the shopkeeper had recommended were well-behaved and

could be trained to poop and pee within a permitted area, so they didn't produce too much unpleasant odor either.

And the dogs could be bathed easily, so long as they weren't afraid of water.

"How much training have these animals received?"

The topic of bathing had led me to wonder what we would do about disciplinary training, but Mama beat me to the punch when she came out and asked the shopkeeper.

"They've been trained to eat from their food bowl, to relieve themselves only in a specified location, to follow some simple commands, and they've been introduced to water, so none of them are afraid of bathing."

Oh! Fantastic, all of the basic training is already taken care of, then!

The shopkeeper whistled, and all the dogs in the shop immediately sat at attention.

...This looks very familiar!

"Isn't that the same command they use at the beast stables?" I asked.

"Have you been to the beast stables before, young lady?" he asked me.

"I go there to play all the time! Lestin has taught me many things!"

"Lestin, eh? Now there's a nostalgic name."

Before I could ask the shopkeeper what I was wondering—how he knew Lestin—he explained that he was a former beast knight.

So that's why he uses the same signal as them!

He explained that he used the same basic training technique as the beast knights legion and that the animals here had all been born at the beast stables. It turned out that no matter how careful the beast knights were to control the population, there were always inevitably more baby animals born than the closed environment of the beast stables could sustain. For this reason, once the baby animals were old enough to be separated from their mothers, the excess numbers were sent to shops like this one. Of course, they carefully vetted the shopkeepers before selling animals to them, with most being either former

beast knights or trusted associates of the beast knights legion, and all of the shops were required to display the beast knights legion's official seal.

"Back when I was still working for the beast knights, that boy had just joined the legion and the animals were always running circles around him!"

I couldn't even picture it, knowing him now.

The animals used to walk all over Lestin, huh?

While the shopkeeper and I chatted, Grandmother Melanie went around to each animal and stared intensely into their eyes, one by one.

I think she's trying to determine which one she's on the same wavelength with?

Seeing Karna petting the dogs and exclaiming over and over again "They're so cute!" Grandmother Melanie nervously reached out a trembling hand towards them.

The dog that looked like a cross between a chihuahua and a papillon immediately noticed. With its big ears standing up at attention it leaned forward to sniff experimentally at Grandmother Melanie's hand.

A slight smile tugged at Grandmother Melanie's lips. For all her practiced refinement, even she couldn't hide her delight that the dog had made the first move and approached her.

The dog seemed to read Grandmother Melanie's reaction as *"This is someone who will play with me!"* because the papihuahua began vigorously shaking its tail.

"Grandmother, give that doggie a *very thorough* petting!" I instructed.

"...A very thorough petting?"

"Yeah!"

At my urging, she gently stroked the top of the dog's head.

More, more!

Seeming encouraged by the fact that the dog hadn't balked at her first attempt at petting it, Grandmother Melanie proceeded to pet it with both

hands, stroking them all over its furry little body from head to tail.

“It seems to be a good fit,” the shopkeeper concluded after watching them.

“Grandmother, let’s get that one!”

“Yes, I like this one.”

And so, a new family member joined the Bielisov family!

The papihuahau still didn’t have a name, though.

Grandmother Melanie was struggling to pick a name.

Uncle Reyus quickly got used to the dog, but Grandfather Garst couldn’t bring himself to pet it. He said it was too small and fragile-looking, so he was afraid to touch it.

I understand how he feels...

But it’s only going to be this tiny and cute for a short while! You’ll regret it later if you miss out on the chance now! I did my best to convince him of that, and in the end, Grandfather Garst got up the nerve to hesitantly pet the dog.

“Nefertima, your entire personality changes when it comes to animals,” Grandfather Garst observed wryly.

Hmph, I could say the same of you and Mama! When it comes to magical items and inventing, you become totally different people!

“I guess that makes me the same as you, Grandfather!” I replied.

He answered with a gruff “Hrmph!” but I didn’t think he was really angry. More likely, he was a bit embarrassed—or so Grandmother Melanie claimed.

On the day of our departure, Grandmother Melanie finally decided on a name for the papihuahua. The four-month-old female was named Leanne.

Next time I visit, let’s play together lots and lots, Leanne!

Side Story: The Slimes of Mount Reitimo

THE slimes awoke with the sun and began their day motivated by the desire for food. This pattern of sleeping and waking could only be observed in the slimes living on Mount Reitimo; normally, slimes were active 24 hours a day, as they had no biological need to sleep.

“Pew-pew!”

The parent slime, named Shizuku, extended and contracted its body repeatedly, then let out a strange noise as it headed for the water’s edge.

Faint rays of light from a small hole in the ceiling reflected off the surface of the underground lake, making it appear as if the lake itself was shining. It was an ephemeral sight, but Shizuku seemed unimpressed as it called out with a singular focus on its children playing on the shore.

“Pew-pew!”

When Shizuku announced it was time to eat, its newborn children happily gathered around. It was difficult, not to mention dangerous, for young slimes to travel through water, so Shizuku sucked them inside of its body.

Normally, the male siren named Kai would lead the way, but unfortunately, he was away today. Ever since Shizuku and Kai’s mistress, Nefertima, had fallen into a deep sleep, the prince occasionally called him away. Shizuku knew the prince’s face but didn’t remember his name.

“Oh, welcome Shizuku.”

When they arrived at the cave where the female sirens lived, the ladies almost instantly surrounded them. The sirens were obsessed with the slimes’ trademark soft and squishy texture and had agreed to help them out from time to time in exchange for being allowed to touch them.

“Where would you like to go today?”

“Are you in the mood to go fishing in the ocean, or would you prefer to receive something from the kobolds?”

The slimes could leave by traveling through the system of caves, but it was faster and easier to have the sirens carry them, so Shizuku always asked them to.

“Peeew. Pew-pewpew!”

Shizuku explained that it was curious to see how its first litter of babies born on Mount Reitimo was doing, so it wanted to visit the kobolds today.

“Okay, leave it to us!”

“When you come back, let us touch you some more, okay?”

One of the sirens exited the water, and in the blink of an eye, her tail transformed into legs, and her arms became wings.

“Pew!”

After agreeing to the siren’s request for more touching later, Shizuku climbed onto the back of the one who’d transformed into a bird, molding its body to fit the shape of her back and suctioning on. That was the method of transport that Shizuku had determined put the least strain on the sirens.



WHEN they reached the kobold pack’s territory, the siren promised to return to retrieve Shizuku before it got dark, then turned and headed not back to the cave but off into the forest. It didn’t bother Shizuku to know that the siren had probably gone off in search of people to feed on.

“Hey, Shizuku!” Nefertima’s friend, Fika of the Herb Family, called out as he approached Shizuku.

“Peeew, pew-pew-pew!”

“Oh, you want to let the babies eat some magic? I’ll lead you to the family leader of the Philosopher Family.”

Fika was unfazed by Shizuku’s request for an offering of magic. The kobolds were used to it by now.

Shizuku wasn’t sure if it was a side effect of being named by Nefertima or what, but all of the babies it had birthed since then possessed the abilities

normally found only in parent slimes to neutralize and eat magic. None of the babies Shizuku had birthed before being named had that ability.

However, that didn't bother Shizuku either.

Slimes could live just fine even if they couldn't neutralize and eat magic; in fact, that was their normal state of being.

However, being able to eat magic *did* increase their chances of survival.

The child who'd been named Kohaku had found itself a favorite person who it constantly begged to feed it magic. Among all the children of its litter, it had become the largest.

Shizuku followed Fika to a wide-open space where a human was facing off against a small group of monsters in a practice fight.

The human looked familiar. Shizuku strained its memory, trying to recall who he was. Shizuku knew he was an adventurer who was involved with its mistress and friendly with the sirens, but it couldn't for the life of it recall his name.

"Hey, Trevie!"

"Huh? Oh, Fika. And... Shizuku, is that you? It looks like the babies are all with you, so that must mean you're here for some magic, right?"

The high kobold named Trevie was, as Nefertima would've put it, an Afghan Hound who stood upright, holding himself elegantly, and had an elongated face and lustrous long-haired fur that fluttered in the wind as if enticing anyone watching to sink their fingers into the silky strands.

Shizuku's only impression of the kobold was that its mistress would probably like its fur.

"Pew-pew-pew. Peeew-pew!"

"Sure, that's fine. Eat as much as you like, kiddos!"

Once Trevie agreed, Shizuku released the children it had been holding inside its body.

With energetic screeches of *"Foood!"* the children rushed to gather around kobolds possessing the type of magic they each preferred.

Even the most stern-faced kobolds couldn't help but crack a smile when the adorable baby slimes descended on them, letting out little squeaks of *"U-kyuu!"* *"Nyan!"* and *"Punii!"*

Watching them, Shizuku adopted an expression of doting pride over how adorable its children were, but as it didn't actually have a *face*, it was unlikely anyone watching would've been able to read its expression.

"By the way, Shizuku, do you know how Neema's doing?"

Shizuku responded to Fika's question by tilting its head to the side and saying, *"Peew."*

Well, slimes didn't have necks, or heads for that matter, so it wasn't so much that Shizuku tilted its head as it elongated its body in a vaguely diagonal direction.

"Phillip says that some 'Goddess' is keeping her in a peaceful sleep or something, but it's already been an entire year!"

That was the adventurer's name—Phillip.

Fika wasn't connected to its mistress, so Shizuku figured he didn't understand. But Shizuku didn't know how to describe the sensation that its connection to its mistress allowed it to feel.

She wasn't just sleeping.

The closest thing Shizuku could compare it to was the state a monster entered into while they were evolving.

"Pew-pew! Peew, peew pew-pew!"

"Huh? But Neema's a human, right? Do humans evolve, too?"

As expected, Fika didn't get it.

"Peeew! Pew-pew-peew!"

Frustrated, Shizuku told Fika to direct all inquiries regarding its mistress to Shinki.

Fika readily agreed that was probably the quickest course of action.

Shizuku wanted to shout, *"Then why bother asking me in the first place?!"* but

ultimately chose to keep those thoughts to itself.

“I’ll keep an eye on the babies, so you go have something to eat yourself, Shizuku.”

Shizuku accepted Fika’s offer and disappeared into the forest.



AROUND that same time, somewhere on Mount Reitimo, the slimes named Jade and Violet were arguing.

“Ryuu! Ryu-ryu!”

“Nooon!”

Violet was the one screeching “ryu-ryu,” and Jade was the one letting out a drawling, almost lazy “noon.”

“...What’s wrong with you two?”

The person who came across them arguing was none other than the woman named Ariabelle, who looked after the humans. The two of them recognized her as a friend of their mistress, so they did their best to explain the situation to her.

“Ryuu, ryu-ryuuuuu!”

“Noon, noooooon!”

“Oh, I... I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you’re saying. Why don’t I go get Shinki?” Ariabelle appeared flustered about being unable to understand what the two slimes were trying to tell her.

Today, the de facto leader of all the monsters on the mountain, Shinki, just so happened to be in the area, so Ariabelle decided it would be best to leave whatever the problem was up to him to sort out.

“Noon!”

“Ryuu!”

Convinced this situation called for Shinki’s assistance, Ariabelle turned and ran back the way she’d come, towards the goblins’ den.

Even after Ariabelle disappeared, Jade and Violet continued shouting aggressively at one another, stretching and elongating their bodies, jumping up and down, and crashing into each other.

“...You idiots are going to get yourselves killed by adventurers if you play in a place like this.”

When Shinki finally arrived, he found the two slimes doing what he could only conclude was playing with each other. Their behavior closely resembled the kind of “play” Haku and Gratia loved to engage in.

“Ryu! Ryuu-ryuu!”

“Noon!”

Violet insisted they weren’t playing, and Jade protested that adventurers would *never* defeat them.

“So then what’s going on?”

In response to Shinki’s question, both slimes began pleading their own case.

To summarize, they were fighting over their favorite spot. In other words, it was a turf war.

“I see. Well then, if that’s all, I’ll leave you to it.”

Shinki felt that he had no place getting involved in a turf war, but the slimes immediately let out cries of protest when he turned to leave. The two of them saw Shinki as someone stronger than themselves and, more importantly, someone close to Nefertima.

Nefertima had previously referred to them as siblings, but while the slimes regarded Kai and the beastperson, Spica, like siblings, Shinki was more like a father figure to them.

Well, not that slimes had any concept of gender that would lead them to differentiate between “mother” and “father.”

In any case, Violet and Jade were hopelessly deadlocked, so they wanted Shinki to do something to resolve their disagreement.

“...Sigh. Fine, show me the place you’re talking about, then.”

In the end, Shinki gave in, heaving a deep sigh of exasperation.

Completely forgetting that they'd just been fighting, the two slimes eagerly bounced through the forest, leading Shinki to their favorite spot.

It was a place a short distance from a natural animal trail.

Because the slope was steep, hardly any large trees were growing on it. As a result, much more sunlight reached the ground there than on most of the mountain, and a variety of wildflowers had managed to grow, creating a colorful carpet pleasing to the eye.

The only downside was that there wasn't anyone around to properly appreciate the beautiful sight.

"Ryuuu, ryu-ryuu!" Violet cried, happily announcing that there were lots of delicious-looking poisonous plants growing here.

"Noon. No-noon!" Jade added, proudly explaining that a pleasant breeze blew through this area, and there was plenty to eat.

The two of them had different attributes, so they ate different things.

"Why can't you both share this place? It would be safer if something ever happened for you to be here together," Shinki said.

Violet possessed an affinity for poison, so it preferred poisonous plants and animals. It could also consume magic, but only non-attributed magic.

Jade preferred plants and insects, and its favorite type of magic to eat was wind magic.

At Shinki's suggestion, the two turned to look at each other.

Well, they possessed neither faces nor eyes, but the gesture was similar enough for Shinki to interpret that way.

"Ryuu!"

"Noon!"

Both slimes seemed satisfied with the suggestion because they simultaneously agreed, *"That's certainly true!"*

Immediately after, they abandoned Shinki to play amongst the flowers.

Shinki heaved another sigh, overcome with exasperated exhaustion not entirely dissimilar to that he sometimes felt while serving Nefertima.



WHILE Shinki was with Violet and Jade, a man found himself surrounded by slimes at the foot of the mountain.

“Roo, roo!”

“Huh? Oh, is that you, Kohaku? But why are you all here?!”

Healran, who’d ventured onto the mountain intending to speak with Sicily about something, had encountered what seemed like a small army of slimes the moment he stepped out of the transportation circle.

At the front of the pack was the slime named Kohaku, but there were also a number of other yellow and orange slimes, including Ou, Lemon, Goldenrod, Daidai, and Honey.

Personally, Healran couldn’t tell any of the others apart except for Kohaku.

“Rooo!”

“Oo-myu!”

The slimes insistently chanted that they wanted to eat magic. Healran couldn’t understand what they were saying, but even so, their meaning was clear.

“I have to speak with Sicily, so I’ll feed you after,” Healran said firmly, then began making his way up the mountain with the slimes trailing after him. In his heart, Healran was determined to get Sicily’s permission to use the kobolds’ hot spring baths.



FOR the most part, the slimes seemed to always wander around wherever they liked, and anywhere you went on Mount Reitimo, it wasn’t strange to spot them bouncing around exploring and playing, but this wasn’t the case for all of them.

The blue-colored slimes generally didn’t like to leave the cave where they

lived. But they also got bored spending all their time in that one cave, so they sometimes tagged along to play outside when invited by the other slimes.

Today, the red-colored slimes invited the blue ones to play, so they all headed over to the cave that contained the hot spring baths together.

When Nefertima first discovered the hot spring cave, there was just one large pool, but the kobolds had made some improvements. Now, there were multiple baths of various sizes.

One was a smaller, shallow pool reserved exclusively for the slimes.

Among the red slimes, one in particular, named Crimson, loved the hot spring bath so much that it would spend hours and hours soaking in the hot water, to the point that everyone would start worrying it might actually melt. It never did, though.

Crimson and its buddies were regular fixtures in the hot spring cave. The kobolds who came to bathe and soak in the refreshing hot water always made sure to call out greetings to the slimes.



WHILE the majority of the red and blue slimes were languishing in the hot spring bath, one of the red slimes was off on a solo mission.

This slime, named Seki, was in the Furnace Family's smithy.

"Seki, can you please lower the temperature for me?" said a kobold who Nefertima would've described as a cute bulldog with a muzzle that looked smooshed in.

"Fu, peew!"

Seki leapt inside the lit furnace, flames dancing all around it.

The members of the furnace family stared grimly at the fire.

"All right, that's enough."

Immediately, Seki leapt back out of the furnace.

It used its innate abilities as a red slime—the ability to withstand extremely high heat and to eat flames—to help regulate the furnace's temperature.

Regardless of how hot it was inside the furnace, Seki never caught on fire or even melted a little. And Seki wasn't the only one. Scarlet and Coral, two of the other red slimes, sometimes came to help the Furnace Family as well.



AND so, at long last, both the slimes and the kobolds were living the lives they'd always dreamed of on Mount Reitimo.

In case you were wondering, the slimes had a policy of staunchly avoiding the goblins.

It was fine if either Shinki or Healran were there, but when neither of them was around, the goblin children would sometimes grab the slimes and use them as their personal toys.

For their part, the slimes were not content to sit back and take this undignified treatment. But the slimes who had names, in particular, were so much stronger than the goblin children that they could very easily end up accidentally killing them.

Nefertima didn't seem to have noticed, but the baby slimes born to Shizuku, since it had become "Shizuku," were a higher grade of monster than normal slimes.



SHORTLY after the sun began to set, everyone gathered in the hot spring cave.

Shizuku and its children, both the named and the newest litter of unnamed babies.

Healran and Phillip's party of adventurers.

Shinki, Suzuko, Touki, and an assortment of other goblins.

And even the sirens were there, including Kai, who'd just returned.

It must've been a strange sight, humans and various species of monsters getting along like that, but it was just the way of things there.

If Nefertima could've seen it, she would've been happy for sure.

Glossary

Characters **Sol** - Fire dragon holy beast who has chosen Neema as his master but is waiting to bond with her until she's older. He gave her a dragon orb that connects her to his power, which she transformed into a bunny-shaped backpack that she carries everywhere with her.

Haku - A white slime and offspring of Shizuku born before Shizuku was named. Haku is the sole offspring to inherit the potential to one day become a parent slime itself.

Koku - A black slime and offspring of Shizuku from the first litter of baby slimes born on Mount Reitimo. Inhabits Neema's body most of the time.

Hai, Charcoal, and Silver - Gray-hued slimes and offspring of Shizuku from the first litter of baby slimes born on Mount Reitimo.

Nox - A male rain hawk gifted to Neema from Lestin on her 4th birthday.

Gratia - A male frost spider; a 'deviation' with mysterious powers.

Gwynn Fields - Brigade leader of the second brigade of the royal guard (second brigade are dedicated to protecting the royal family; first brigade protect exclusively the king). He is described as an 'ice beauty' — very handsome but cold and aloof. He doesn't necessarily dislike Neema but doesn't really get why everyone else loves her so much; he sees her as a cheeky kid that he mildly resents being ordered to 'babysit.'

Captain Nahal Lingar - Captain of the royal guard, and owner of a borderline-psychotic pink fluffball-like animal named Princess.

Dan Yates - Legion commander of the Dragon Knights. Formerly a member of the Beast Knights legion, where he was partnered with a wild bear named Bae.

Lestin Ogma - Legion commander of the Beast Knights. Nickname: Les.

Runohark - A shady group who appear to be 'enemy' of the series. They are responsible for hiring adventurers to drive monsters out of their homes, and also theorized to be involved with kidnappings related to the slave trade as well

as ritual sacrifices designed to harvest magic from the victims.

Lady Creo / the Goddess Cresiolle - One of two deities in this world, Cresiolle is the daughter of the God of Creation and is known as the Goddess of Mercy and Rebirth. She provides healing magic to healers, occasionally Descends to the mortal world to perform miracles, and cares for the souls of the dead in the World of the Dead, watching over them as they heal from the psychological damage accrued during their previous life until they are ready to once again be reborn into the world.

King Gauldi Gaché - King of the Kingdom of Gaché, and Will's father. He and Cerulia used to be fellow disciples of Elder Salzar.

Queen Relena Gaché - Queen of the Kingdom of Gaché, and Will's mother. Before her marriage she was an imperial princess of the Linus Empire.

God of Creation - The primary deity of this world. He created the world, and is responsible for taking the souls who were prepared for rebirth by Cresiolle and actually sending them out into their new lives. Unlike Cresiolle, he is unable to have any direct contact with the living except for beloved children.

Riliardo Judar Wagajeetar (Ardo) - A male elf, and guild master of the adventurers' guild.

Velcia Judeau Coggfen (Vel) - A female elf, and the leader of the newly founded Healers' Guild, as well as the resident healer for Project Shiana. She was one of the only people in the world who still retained the knowledge of how to use the birth control spell.

Gouche Zelnan (Grandpa Gouche) - General of the royal guard and royal knighthood.

Olive Wise (Auntie Olive) - Minister of Internal Affairs and provincial lord of Wise Province.

Eugene Dierta (Uncle Gene) - Minister of Foreign Affairs and heir to the position of provincial lord of Dierta Province; his father currently still retains the role of provincial lord since Eugene spends so much time traveling abroad for work.

Sanrus Mieuxga (Uncle Sanrus) - Minister of Finance and provincial lord of

Mieuxga Province. His father currently retains the title of Duke Mieuxga.

Marjace Dasnee - Steward of the Osphe household.

Paul Dasnee - Marjace's son, Neema and Karna's personal butler, and presumed future steward of the household once his father retires.

Josh - Ralf's personal butler.

Feio - Cerulia's personal butler.

Aurphan - Dayland's personal butler.

Leah - Neema's personal maid, married to the cook Yodar.

Yodar - Head chef for the Osphe household, married to Leah.

Nino Ireiga - Twin sister of Pino Ireiga and daughter of Earl Ireiga, Neema freed her when they were all kidnapped by goblins in Volume 1. Her personality is described as 'tsundere.'

Pino Ireiga - Twin brother of Nino Ireiga and son of Earl Ireiga, Neema freed him when they were all kidnapped by goblins in Volume 1.

Suzuko - Female hobgoblin named by Neema, she is Shinki's second-in-command and the day-to-day leader of the goblin clan on Mount Reitimo.

Touki - A hobgoblin who asked Neema to name him so he could become stronger. He is Suzuko's right-hand-man.

Shizuku - Parent slime who temporarily inhabited Neema's body.

Healran Dewitt - Former financial auditor from Cass village, he was recruited by Neema to work for Project Shiana.

Ariabelle Tellouse (Miss Belle) - Former receptionist for the adventurers' guildhall in Cass village, she was recruited by Neema to work for Project Shiana.

Spica - A beastperson of the previously extinct Star Wolf Tribe, she was abandoned at birth by her parents for this shocking reappearance of ancestral DNA, and was rescued and raised by the Star-Reader Family of kobolds as Sicily's younger sister. Neema named her and afterwards Spica swore she would train to become a servant of the Osphe household so she could serve at Neema's side in the future.

Gosei and Rikusei - The fifth and sixth children of the Family Leader of the Herb Family of ninja-like shiba inu kobolds. They were named by Neema.

Kai - A rare male siren. Female sirens feed on 'deeds' (essentially karma accrued during the course of a person's lifetime) but male sirens feed on 'desires.' Kai was forced out of the all-female clan of sirens on Mount Reitimo because whenever he fed on the men they captured, the men lost their sexual desire and could no longer serve the female sirens' purpose of fathering children. Now he lives in a separate cave with the slimes and feeds on their bottomless desire for food. Kai can shape-shift at will between his human form, siren form, bird form, and horse form.

Phillip Chouxnbelle (Uncle Phillip) - The son of an earl who petitioned the king for permission to renounce his position in the nobility to pursue his true passion as an adventurer. He is the leader of a famous group of adventurers known as Purple Gandal. After finishing school but before inheriting his title, Dayland used to adventure with Phillip for a few years to build practical life experience.

Racul - The younger of a pair of grand rabbit tribe beastperson sisters from Icoux who Neema met when they were interviewing for jobs with Project Shiana. Racul is severely shy due to being treated as an oddity amongst her people for lacking many of their characteristic features. With Neema's encouragement she was able to make it through her interview despite her shyness.

Places Fauxbe - The closest city to Shiana Special Region that has a teleportation circle.

Zigg village - The fishing village at the base of Mount Reitimo, and the closest human settlement to Shiana Special region.

Mount Reitimo - The mountain chosen to become the site of Project Shiana. Since before the kobolds and goblins arrived, a group of sirens has been living in the aquatic caves inside the mountain.

Icoux - A country on the continent of Larshia that has been suffering a severe

drought in recent years, leading to a crop failure that resulted in famine. The Church of Divine Creation claims that the drought is 'divine punishment' for some kind of wrong-doing, but Neema theorized the drought was caused by ecosystem imbalance following Runohark driving all of the monsters out of the area. Icoux has a large beastperson population and slavery is legal in the country.

Terms “Journey home to be with the Goddess” - A euphemism for dying.

Beloved Child(ren) - Individuals who have the favor of the God of Creation. Holy beasts and elemental spirits are naturally drawn to them and will assist and protect them so long as it doesn't upset the divine balance. Neema learns from the Goddess Cresiolle that beloved children are actually souls reborn into this world from another world, and that because they are outside of the spiritual framework of this world, they are able to do things that souls native to this world couldn't without upsetting the divine balance; however this fact is not common knowledge. Beloved children always have a 'knight' who receives special abilities in order to be able to protect their master; Neema's knight is Shinki. The legendary first king of the Kingdom of Gaché was also a beloved child.

“Vow upon (one's) name” - When a person takes a vow upon their name, they invoke the power of the God of Creation and should they break this vow the 'mark of the fallen' will appear on their forehead, causing them to be socially ostracized for the rest of their life. In extreme cases, the God of Creation may even choose to 'obliterate' them, meaning they are killed and their soul is erased from the cycle of rebirth entirely.

Elementalist(s) - Mortals who can communicate with elemental spirits and use elemental power. In the past they were commonplace, but in modern times this power has been lost to humans almost entirely. Aside from the Elemental Kings, individuals bonded to a holy beast, and the elves, very few others can see or speak to elemental spirits or use elemental power.

One color - A period of time equivalent to 30 minutes.

One cycle - A period of time equivalent to 1 year.

Great Monster Extermination - A historical incident 400 years ago where a (now defunct) country was attacked by ogres, suffering enormous casualties, and the humans and beastpeople retaliated by wiping out all the monsters they could get their hands on. This incident immediately preceded the Era of Turmoil.

Era of Turmoil - A period 400 years ago where a series of natural disasters all over the continent of Larshia resulting in severe famine spurred a continent-wide war. The Kingdom of Gaché was founded during this time.

Ancient Divine Creation Faction - A group of priests within the Church of Divine Creation who hold to the old beliefs, primarily that all things in this world were created by the God of Creation and that the complex relationships between these things make up the framework of the world, known as the Divine Balance. The opposing faction, who make up the majority of priests within the Church of Divine Creation, are the Supremacist Faction, who believe it is humans' God-given right to rule over all other species.

Royal Academy - The only school of its type in the Kingdom of Gaché, it prepares students for government-related careers serving in the royal palace or in local government positions in the provinces. Most children of the nobility attend this school, but it's also open to commoners provided they pass the entrance exams and can either finance their own education or achieve high enough marks on the exam to be awarded a merit-based scholarship.

Feliance - An animal that resembles a pure white fox with bird wings on its back. There is also a beastperson version of this animal.

Ralga - An animal similar to a raccoon.

Gell - Units of measure for length in this world are, from smallest to largest, 'gell, mino, kai, and sahs.' 1 gell is roughly 1 inch, and there are 100 gell in 1 mino, 100 mino in 1 kai, and 100 kai in 1 sahs.

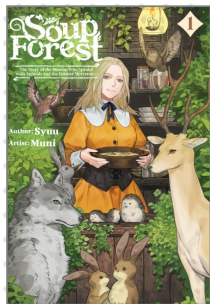


Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner

By **Hiironoame**

Illust **Misumi**

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By **Syuu**

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