

FLUFFY PARADISE

1

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Fluffy Paradise Volume 1

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Dayland Osphe

NEFERTIMA'S FATHER. HE'S THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE KINGDOM OF GACHÉ.

Gerulia Osphe

NEFERTIMA'S MOTHER. SHE'S THE HEAD OF THE ROYAL MAGICAL RESEARCH CENTER'S MAGICAL ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT.

Ralfreed Osphe

NEFERTIMA'S OLDER BROTHER.

Karnadia Osphe

NEFERTIMA'S OLDER SISTER.

Nefertima Osphe (Neema)

A GIRL WHO WAS REBORN IN ANOTHER WORLD. SHE POSSESSES THE SPECIAL ABILITY OF BEING ADORED BY ALL CREATURES OTHER THAN HUMANS.



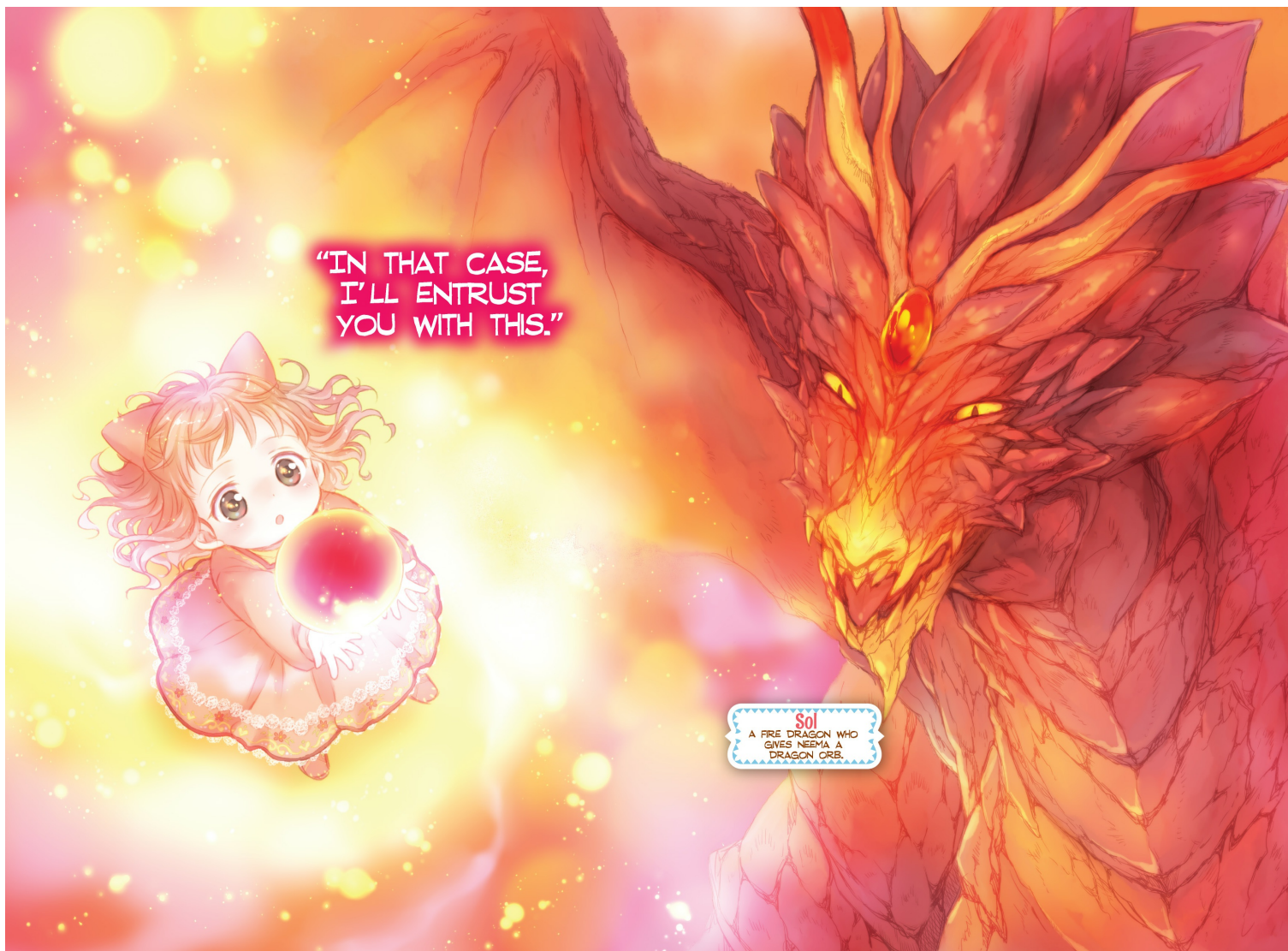
"LARS, WHAT'S THAT
ON YOUR BACK?"

Wilhelm Rega Gaché (Will)
CROWN PRINCE OF
THE KINGDOM OF GACHÉ.

"IN THAT CASE,
I'LL ENTRUST
YOU WITH THIS."



Sol
A FIRE DRAGON WHO
GIVES NEEMA A
DRAGON CORE.





Nox
A
RAIN HAWK.

Gratia
A FROST SPIDER.

0 - Prologue

TO cut straight to the conclusion, my name is Midori Akitsu, and I died at age twenty-seven. It was a sudden death, but I guess it was from overworking? I knew I was probably working too much and feeling pretty ragged, but still...

I suppose it was my fault for being so busy that I never made time to go to the doctor. I wonder what criteria they use to determine “overwork” as a cause of death, anyways.

I’m not suffering from delusional love for my company or anything, but I feel a little bad about what “death-by-overwork” will do to the company’s image, even if I was a temp employee, especially when the parent company just went public and started selling stocks.

I worked for a smaller offshoot company, not the parent company, but I hope they don’t go bankrupt over this... Oh man, I can imagine those assholes from the parent company chewing my supervisors out when they find out.

Honestly, I couldn’t care less about the parent company. They don’t even check on those of us on the front lines, so forget them!

Yeesh, what a mess...

I was lost in my thoughts when suddenly God spoke to me!

I didn’t have much to lose, so I accepted it as a conveniently timed divine intervention and listened to what he had to say.

God claimed that if I accepted his conditions, he would take care of me.

Those conditions included “reincarnation.”

He nonchalantly told me I’d be thrown into a different world called Asdyllon to determine the ultimate destruction or salvation of mankind. That seemed a little extreme, but I tentatively asked for more details.

To sum it up, the humans in Asdyllon justified mistreating the elves,

beastpeople, demons, and other species by claiming, “As God’s chosen species, it’s our duty to rule the world.”

No matter the world, humans aren’t all that different, huh? Human history has always been full of things like that, after all.

So I asked God why he couldn’t decide for himself whether or not to eradicate humans. But he responded that he created all species and loves them equally, so he couldn’t.

What a cop-out!

...But wait a minute. Reincarnated? That means I’m really dead. End of the line, right?!

God said it was my fate to die at age twenty-seven, and even he can’t change that... But if I agree to be reincarnated and decide for him whether or not to destroy humanity, he’ll let me choose the manner of my death.

Choose the manner of my death? That doesn’t sound terribly appealing...

So, should I accept his conditions or give up and go with this sudden, probably overwork-induced death?

Hm... Our parent company is affiliated with the government (or, rather, employs several influential former government officials), so they could probably sweep this scandal under the rug...

As I was about to refuse, God suddenly added that he would give me a special ability of my choice.

A special ability...? Like a superpower?!

Reincarnation might not be so bad if I start with a cheat skill in my back pocket!

He asked what ability I’d like, and...

“Unlimited cuddles! I want to play with tons of adorable animals! Emotional support animals galore!” I shouted from the bottom of my soul.

God seemed taken aback by my unusual enthusiasm, but who cares?

For a huge animal lover like me, petting and snuggling with fluffy animals is

the best stress relief imaginable. I used to latch on to my parents' cat, hugging and stroking her even though she always quickly decided I was an enemy and clawed me into a bloody mess.

...Ahhh!!

Oh crap, this means I just accepted his offer, doesn't it?!

"Wait a minute! Time out! That didn't count!" I cried.

"I'll make it so all creatures other than humans automatically love you," he offered. "You can decide which ones you want to interact with."

Whoa! That means I can experience unlimited cuddles with animals I never could've dreamed of getting close to in this world, like large felines and birds of prey?!

Wait! I need to stop letting myself get distracted! And you too, God— Are you even listening to a word I'm saying?!

"Don't worry; everything will be fine! I've chosen a wonderful family for you!"

He's skilled at not letting resistance phase him, huh?

Why did my fate end up in the hands of someone like this? Is this because of my deeds in life? If so, I hate my past self!

In any case, I'm going to slap that goofy smile off of his face, and then I'll depart for this new world.

1 - I Wasn't Prepared for This!

THE Kingdom of Gaché was in Larshia, the largest of the three continents in Asdyllon. There, Duke Ophe and his family, who had blood ties to the royal family, celebrated the birth of their third child, a baby girl. She was named Nefertima, and she was ten days old.

Huh?! I'm a freaking baby! Who ever heard of a baby with this level of self-awareness?! Is this a sick joke? As if I could be satisfied with this! Grr, this is all his fault!

When I awoke, I was surprised by the fact that I couldn't move and by the astonishingly beautiful woman before me. The beauty queen was my mother, and my father was a mega-hottie too. Shortly after, I learned I also had an older brother and older sister, and of course, they were just as attractive as our parents.

Come to think of it, how are my parents and siblings—er, my past life's parents and siblings, I mean—doing? I left home and moved to Tokyo in my twenties, but no one would've guessed I would end up dying there alone. I was the healthiest of all my siblings, so it must've shocked everyone that I was the first to die. After all, in all my twenty-seven years of life, I never had a single major illness or injury. Heck, I never even got the flu!

I'm sorry for being such a bad daughter. It looks like it'll be a while before we can meet again, so please wait for me.

Anyway, in the last ten days, all I'd managed to gather was that I was a baby, my name was Nefertima, and my father was a duke.

What a crappy situation to end up in! How am I supposed to cuddle fluffy animals if I'm stuck as a damn baby?!

I was in the middle of feeling sorry for myself when I learned that my family had a pet dog. The fierce-looking, wolf-like white dog was as big as a Great Dane, and she always stayed close to me, like my own personal bodyguard or

something. The dog's name was Dee, and whenever I cried, she would brush my face with her fluffy tail!

All I have to do is eat, sleep, and let my parents take care of my every need. Life as a baby isn't all that bad... In fact, I always secretly dreamt of being an unemployed bum living in my parents' basement!

When you put it that way, babies have a pretty sweet deal.



BEFORE long, I could hold my head up by myself, and my mother took me for a walk in the garden, but...I got buried alive in a mountain of feathers.

I'm not even exaggerating. So many different kinds of birds swarmed around me that I almost couldn't breathe. It was rough. My mother was shocked, to say the least.

It would've been a shame to die of suffocation when I'd just been reborn, so I sent a request to the birds silently, thinking, *"That's enough."* Somehow, they got the message.

Thank you, God, for this totally awesome ability! If nothing else, I'm grateful for these powers!

Though, honestly, I would've preferred to be reborn as a peasant, not a duke's daughter. If I were a peasant, I wouldn't need to waste time socializing with other people; I could sneak off into the forest to play with animals whenever I wanted! That really would've been the life!



TIME passed while I did nothing but lay around all day being cared for by my doting mama and papa and entertained by my kind older brother and sister. Soon, I learned how to crawl!

Once that happened, Dee became even more overprotective. Whenever I wandered too far, Dee would pick me up by the scruff like a baby animal and bring me back.

This animal-cuddling power that God gave me is incredibly soul-healing!



I was living my best baby-life and enjoying every minute, but in no time, I had grown up quite a bit.

Kids sure do grow up fast.

I figured I should be able to stand up by now, but when I tried, I immediately fell over and smashed the back of my head. It hurt so much that I wailed... It sounded more like a screeching dinosaur than a human child, really.

It's amazing how such a huge noise can come out of such a tiny body. Children are mysterious beyond comprehension.

Dee, who judged this situation to be particularly dire, found someone to help.

Tears obscured my vision, but from the feeling of the arms that scooped me up in a hug, I knew it was my older brother.

Wouldn't you usually get the child's mother in this situation?

"Neema, are you hurt anywhere?" my brother asked, gently checking me for injuries.

Because I had lost nearly all sense of dignity since becoming a baby, his hands on my body didn't bother me. Once my brother discovered the lump on the back of my head, he gently stroked the area for several moments. To my surprise, the pain slowly dissipated.

Once the pain was no longer a bother, fatigue overcame me.

"I'll keep holding you; it's okay to sleep. Next time you do something reckless, make sure someone is with you when you do it, okay?"

Okay... That sounds like a good idea. Until I get the hang of standing by myself, I'll only practice when someone is around to support me.



THE time has come! I'm going to do it for sure this time!

Only... Why is it so damn hard to balance in a baby's body?! My legs are as wobbly as a newborn fawn. But I won't give up! Once I can walk, I might even be able to ride on Dee's back!

Determined, I planted my shaking legs in a wide stance. Nearby, my mother

and Dee held their breath in anticipation as they watched. I gathered my courage and surged to my feet... Then lost my balance and pitched forward.

I'm going to smash my face this time?!

I pictured myself kissing the carpet.

Thankfully, my savior rescued me right before I face-planted onto the floor, so I ended up kissing a mouthful of Dee's fur.

Ahh, so fluffy! Her fur smells like sunshine. I feel so peaceful.

"Daa!"

Hmm, I can't pronounce Dee's name properly. Oh well, I guess it can't be helped. I am a baby, after all.

"Neema, you sure do love Dee, huh? Mama's going to get jealous!"

My mother looked sad, so I obligingly called out "Mama" and cuddled her.

Even though my mother was an aristocrat, she didn't just hand her children over to a nanny or wet nurse—she cared for us as much as possible. She went to the royal palace sometimes for work, though. Apparently, she was a super-talented wizard. Or magic user. Or something.

When my mother wasn't around, my father took care of me. Honestly, it was more like I looked after him. My father was incredibly accident-prone.

That's right! Of course, there's magic! What kind of fantasy world would this be without magic, right?! My pain went away when my brother stroked my head because of healing magic.

However, I didn't appear to have much magic. Or maybe I couldn't use magic at all.

Oh well. Even if I had some strange power, I'd probably end up getting wrapped up in some kind of trouble, so maybe it's better I don't.



I played with Dee and the birds in the garden, was showered with love by my family and the servants, and all the while I continued to grow. Before I knew it, an entire year had passed since I arrived in this world. Time sure flies.

It was my birthday, and my family held a small celebration with the five of us. It was spring, but the weather was sunny and warm, so they set up a table in the vast garden and had a mini party.

I still couldn't chew very well, so I only got soft foods, but everything was delicious.

"Neema, say 'ah'!"

My brother fed me a minestrone soup with finely chopped vegetables and ground meat.

"Ah!"

...Yummm!

My brother was a handsome boy who'd inherited our mother's honey-blond hair and azure blue eyes. His name was Ralfreed, but he usually went by Ralf. He was ten years older than me but handsome and talented in academics and swordsmanship, a promising heir to our father's title.

"You spilled a little, Neema," my sister said as she wiped my face.

Her name was Karnadia, nicknamed Karna. She was seven years older than me and would be eight on her next birthday. She had our father's red hair and eyes the color of jade. Her facial features also resembled our father's, so she was sure to be a knockout beauty when she grew up.

In case you were wondering, I had copper hair and black eyes.

Apparently, black hair and eyes were rare in this world. The people here seemed to have features more similar to the Caucasian race in my world.

When I said my eyes were black, I didn't mean dark brown like most Japanese people's eyes. They really were as dark as the night sky. It freaked me out the first time I saw myself in a mirror.

My facial features were average; vaguely northern-European-looking, I guess? I was disappointed with my nose, though. It was flatter than I would've liked. I hoped it would become a bit more regal and pronounced as I got older.

I compared myself to my parents and concluded that I looked nothing like either of them.

If I were gorgeous, in addition to being a member of the nobility, it would lead to nothing but trouble, so I'm actually relieved. I don't need to be super-elite like the rest of my family; no thanks!

"Tanks, Kawna!"

Although I knew all the words, I couldn't get my tongue to pronounce any of them properly.

When do kids normally start speaking, anyway?

"You're such a good girl, Neema," my father said, grinning broadly. He was a disgustingly doting parent.

Papa, you're a total hottie, so act cool! Don't make such sappy-looking faces!

After eating, we played in the garden. My brother taught me the names of the different flowers in the flower beds and showed me how to make a flower crown. My sister demonstrated some simple magic for me. I thought this was a little backward compared to standard gender norms, but my sister was a total tomboy, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised.

Using magic, Karna created a small bird about the size of a pigeon made out of flames. The bird leapt out of her hands and flew into the air, then with a sudden pop, it dissolved into tiny grains of fire, almost like fireworks, and faded away.

My brother explained that this was a type of magic used for practice, where the magic user would create a shape of their choice out of magic, and as it moved out of their range of control, it would lose its power. He said this magic was used only to learn how to cast and release a spell.

I guess that's what you call a one-trick wonder, huh?

After that, it was time to explore the garden alone! I was by myself, but not really alone. Dee followed beside me, which was reassuring.

There were a surprising number of animals in our garden. I wasn't sure what all the different species were called, but there were birds, creatures resembling squirrels, and even fish living in the pond. I wanted to look at the fish, but Dee wouldn't let me anywhere near the pond, so I had to make do.

I'm not gonna fall in; I'm not that much of an idiot! I thought while heading toward the base of a tree.

Thunck!

My foot got caught in the root of the tree, and I fell over.

Damn, that really hurt!

“Waaaagh!”

I couldn't help but instinctively burst into tears.

I'm still a toddler; it's not my fault!

Dee came over to me and licked my face.

Hey, that tickles!

My brother heard me crying and came to find me. He scooped me up in his arms, checked me for injuries, and used his healing magic on me.

“There you go. It doesn't hurt anymore, right? You're going to be okay.”

You're so kind, Ralf! I love you!

I gave my brother a grateful hug.

Papa, I see you back there looking jealous. Knock it off; you're ruining your cool-guy image!

2 - I Visit the Royal Palace

MY mother had to go to the royal palace for work, but my father was also working that day, and my brother and sister were at school. I tried to plead my case, insisting that I'd be fine at home by myself, but, for some reason, that suggestion was rejected.

Looks like she hasn't gotten over that teeny tiny incident a few days ago when I snuck off when Dee wasn't watching to look at the pond and accidentally fell in. Since then, she's been treating me like there's no telling what I'll do if she leaves me alone for even a minute.

So I would visit the royal palace with my mother.

Dee would have to stay home. Apparently, pets weren't allowed inside the palace.

I suppose I should've expected that.

"Neema, will you be a good girl while Mama's working?"

"Uh-huh!"

I'll be on my best behavior! I won't interfere with your work at all, Mama!

We traveled by horse-drawn carriage to an enormous, sparkling palace.

The king and his family live here, and the central government is here as well, so I guess it has to be impressive to serve as a symbol of the country.

While my mother was working, I was left to entertain myself in a room in the royal magic users' tower in one corner of the palace. My mother had tried to assign a babysitter to watch me, but I refused. I still couldn't tolerate spending a long time with people other than the members of my family.

I'm not especially shy, but social interaction is exhausting.

I whined so much—which was very out of character for me—that my mother conceded and cast a protection spell on me instead. I wasn't sure how effective

it would be, but it seemed to be a simple spell. I didn't feel any different after she cast it.

Once she cast the spell, my mother lingered as if reluctant to pry herself away, telling me many times to "Be a good girl, okay?" before finally leaving.

Hmph, I thought I was about to see some awesome magic; what a letdown.

I was bored out of my mind, so I opened the window and called to some birds in the garden.

I can't get enough of these fluffy feathers!

The birds closed their eyes, apparently enjoying being petted just as much as I enjoyed petting them.

So cute! Come to think of it, this room is on the ground floor, right? I want to go outside and explore the garden...

...Sorry, Mama. I'll stick to the area just outside this tower; she'll never know!

Using a chair in the room as a stool, I climbed out of the window.

Crash!

Failed landing. Damn, that hurt! But I have to suck it up. If I cry, I'll be caught, for sure.

I explored the garden with the birds as my guides.

Many animals were in the garden. I saw a potte, which looked like a squirrel with droopy ears (I learned the name of this animal from an illustrated encyclopedia), and a ria, which resembled a cougar, only much smaller.

As soon as the animals noticed me, they approached without fear and let me pet them. I was petting and cuddling to my heart's content when they all turned and fled.

Why did they run away? Is someone coming?

I looked around, searching for the cause of the animals' strange behavior, and spotted an animal that was extremely rare in my original world.

Oh my god, here it comes! A white tiger! A real-live white tiger! He's much, much bigger than me, but who cares! Here comes a super-rare large feline! My

target is within my sights! I want to touch him, cuddle him, love him, and— I can't just stand here waiting!

The white tiger noticed me—perhaps he had been alerted to my freakishly excited aura. Then he crept toward me!

Is it okay to touch you?! I think you're telling me to go for it...!

The white tiger was within reach when he stopped to smell me. Then he licked my face with his giant tongue. I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him with gleeful abandon.



Oh. My. God. This is amazing! I expected the tiger's fur to be rough, but it was silky and soft. *It feels so nice!*

I took my time enjoying the sensation of the tiger's luxurious fur to my heart's content, and the tiger didn't mind at all—he patiently let me pet him.

Once the tiger and I were acquainted, he told me he would show me around the garden, so I climbed on his back, and we went for a walk together. Score!

...Wait a minute. Where are we? I don't recognize this area. Oh man, Mama is going to give me an earful if she finds out! I need to get back before she notices I'm gone.

"Lars, what's that on your back?"

Whoa! That surprised me; someone's here!

I looked in the direction the voice had come from and saw a shockingly handsome boy who was definitely on par with my brother in the looks department.

"Don't worry; Lars is a gentle feline," he told me. "But you should get down. It's dangerous up there."

Aww! I don't wanna!

I tried to resist but was pried off the tiger's back. The handsome boy was holding me in his arms...

I can tolerate it when it's my brother, but this is embarrassing!

The most noticeable thing about this boy was his eyes.

His eyes, which almost seemed to glow with inner light, were a delicate almond shape and the color of amethysts.

He sure is easy on the eyes! Ha!

His hair was slightly wavy and seemed to fall perfectly without any effort. The indigo-colored strands looked so soft and silky that I wanted to touch his hair and see if it was as soft as it looked. Not only that, but his facial features were perfectly symmetrical.

Looks like it's true what they say—that symmetry correlates to beauty!

...But now I'm even more embarrassed!

"No hug!" I whined.

Put me down!

When I struggled and flailed, the boy laughed.

You demon...!

"Nooo!"

I fought to escape until the white tiger, apparently named Lars, came to my rescue.

Thank you!

The white tiger grabbed me by the scruff and gently placed me on the ground. Once my feet were on solid ground, I clung to the tiger, seeking comfort. The tiger stood protectively between the handsome boy and me.

"It's rare for him to let anyone other than me get close to him."

Oh, so this boy is the white tiger's master.

"So, what are you doing here, kid? Where are your parents?"

Where is 'here,' anyways? I don't know my way around the palace!

"Mama ish... warking..."

Damn it! Why is it so hard to speak properly?! This demon! Spawn of evil! His face is smiling, but I can see it in his eyes—he's laughing at me!

"What's your name?"

"I'm Ne-farty-ma Oppe!"

Oh my god, I can't even pronounce my name right! I spent so much time practicing, and I still can't say it!

"A relative of Duke Osphe, hm? ...Come with me."

Wait a minute! I have to get back! Mama is going to be furious...! What, do I not even get a say in the matter?! I'm happy that Lars is letting me ride on his back again, but I don't want to go! The boy seems to be leading us deeper into the palace; are we even allowed here?

Before I knew it, we'd stopped in front of a closed door in a ridiculously opulent room. Two men who appeared to be guards were standing watch outside the door.

This is kind of scary!

The door opened, and on the other side was a room that appeared to be an office. The door was gaudy, but the interior of the room was normal. All that it contained was a desk and several bookshelves.

Hold on, is Lars even allowed indoors? Well, I suppose someone would've stopped us by now if he wasn't.

"What is it, Will? Who is that child?" an older man sitting at the desk asked.

This handsome boy's name is Will? ...Hm, I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before...

"Duke Osphe, she seemed lost, so I brought her here."

I wasn't lost! I could've found my way back if I wasn't abducted!

"Neema!"

Huh? Why is Papa here?

"She was playing with Lars alone in the garden, so I took it upon myself to help her find her way back."

"Huh?!" the older man and my father exclaimed at the same time.

Hmm, I don't know what's going on, but I guess I'll go to my father.

"Papa!"

I slipped off Lars' back and reached up toward my father for a hug.

"Neema!" he cried, hugging me tightly.

Papa, your face looks practically deformed when you rub it against me like that. There you go again, ruining your cool-guy image!

"What are you doing here, darling?"

I don't even know where here is!

"Came wif Mama! Wash lonely, so Larsh play wif me!" I responded with a

winning smile. I was sure my kind papa couldn't be too angry with me.

"You were lonely, huh? I'm sorry, honey."

You're so kind, Papa, I love you!

"Thank you very much, Your Highness."

Tch! What did he just say?! What did you call this demon, Papa?!

I must have misheard!

"You too, Neema. Say thank you to His Highness."

Send up the white flag; I surrender! 'Your Highness'... That's, like, what you call a prince or something, right? No freaking way! His face may be nice, but his personality is terrible... He seems like a cliché, stereotypical character in a novel or something...

"...Tank you vewy much."

I got my papa to put me down and even curtsied properly as I said it. Let's call the terrible articulation *charming* and leave it at that.

When I rose from my curtsy, the prince ruffled my hair affectionately.

What a pain in the neck...

"No!"

I ran to my father and hid behind him.

"Is this your youngest daughter?" the man seated at the desk inquired.

Now that I think about it, if my father, who's a duke, is here and a prince is also here, then this guy's probably the king, right? That would make him my father's boss. I need to greet him properly, or it will reflect poorly on Papa.

"I'm Nefertima Osphe. I'm twee yearsh old."

All right! The pronunciation was a bit off, but I managed to say my name correctly this time, at least!

"What a clever girl. My name is Gauldi Russ Gaché; I'm currently serving as king of this country."

Thought so. He has the same easy-on-the-eyes amethyst eyes as the prince.

Anyway, I'd better do what I can to make sure Papa stays in his favor.

"Naish to meet you, Mishta King!" I said with the most charming smile I could muster.

I prefer cuddly animals, but the smile of a little kid is formidable as well, right?

Okay, good; the king is smiling too.

...Papa's making that disgustingly sappy face again, though. What am I going to do with him?



IN the end, my father, mother, and I all returned home together. My mother scolded me very thoroughly. For some reason, my father was also a recipient of her wrath.

Mama's scoldings are like a sucker punch to my heart. Enough already! I can't take anymore!

Dee told me, "I'm glad you made a new friend."

Huh? She's talking about Lars, right? Definitely not that demon prince!

However, due to this incident, my parents finally noticed my unusual ability!

I suppose it makes sense that they initially failed to notice something was up just because animals tend to like me.

Lars gave it away. Turns out his species of large feline was also incredibly rare in this world.

My mother explained that Lars was a sky tiger, a type of holy beast. Apparently, holy beasts didn't usually allow anyone to get close to them other than the master with whom they'd formed a bond. According to my mother, holy beast was a general term for animals that could use elemental power. Sky tigers primarily controlled wind and lightning and could run through the sky!

Sky tigers are incredible! Next time, I'll ask Lars to take me for a walk in the sky!

In addition to sky tigers, earth tigers could manipulate the earth. Earth tigers were black. Additionally, golden lions, called day lions, could control the

element of light, and silver lions, called night lions, could control the element of darkness. Even dragons existed in this world—they were called primordial dragons.

It would've been impossible back home, but I guess this is par for the course in a fantasy world. And what is more stereotypical of a fantasy world than elemental power, right?

The primary elements were fire, wind, water, and earth, and manifestations of them were called attributes. Let's take using magic to create flames as an example. Flames are a manifestation of fire, so that would make this spell an attribute of the element of fire.

Magic users used their own personal magic to cast spells, but this world was also full of elemental power that originated from God. The practice of harnessing and using this power was called elementalism, but unfortunately, this ability was lost long ago.

Hmph, so humans can't access elemental power? Bummer.

...Well, I hardly have any magic to start with, so I suppose it doesn't affect me either way.

There was one exception—each continent had its own elemental kings.

If things here work like any of the novels I've read, there shouldn't be just one all-powerful elemental king, but one for each of the elements.

Asdyllon had three continents, each of which had its own elemental kings. And since there were four elements, each of the three continents should have four kings, for a total of twelve.

Furthermore, light and darkness were the dominion of God alone, so there was no elemental power or magic that could manipulate them. This power was given only to the day lions and night lions, and so they were known as the messengers of God.

Oh, and there was a place on each continent called the elemental palace. You could meet the elemental kings if you went there. However, you had to be bonded with a holy beast to be allowed inside.

That means that demon prince has probably met with the elemental kings! Oooh, I'm so jealous! But maybe I'll get lucky, and I'll also be able to meet them someday. Yeah, that's what I'll do!

Oh, and Papa bought me a detailed book all about holy beasts.

He forbade me from playing with any more holy beasts in public in the future. If I disobeyed this order, he said he would get Mama to give me another terrifying scolding...

Too bad I have no intention of heeding his warning!

3 - Let's Go to School (Big Brother Edition)

TODAY I was going on an outing with Papa and Mama. There was going to be a class-observation event at the school my older brother and sister attended.

I wonder if the school has any rare animals as class pets.

My brother and sister's school was a short distance from the royal palace. The first king of this country founded the royal academy, and every generation since the reigning king filled the role of school principal. It was the only school in the country designated as a *royal* academy rather than a public or private school. Anyone who passed the entrance exam could attend the academy regardless of social standing, and if you graduated from the royal academy, you would be regarded as a member of the elite and receive preferential treatment wherever you went.

There were various specialization tracks, including knight, magic user, beast knight, maid, government official, *etc.* Most graduates worked in the royal palace or at the estates of one of the noble families that governed each territory. Those who worked in the royal palace were classified as national government officials, whereas those who worked in the territories were regional government officials.

The doors of the royal academy were open to any worthy individual regardless of social status, but one specialization track was only open to the children of noble families: the elite officer class. My brother and sister were both members of the elite officer class.

I'm starting to sound sickeningly proud, like Papa.

Today my brother's lesson would take place in the schoolyard. When we arrived, tiered seating was set up for the visiting parents. Special seating was arranged for the noble families, and the seating differed depending on the rank of the family.

The seating prepared for our family was a fluffy sofa complete with a tea set. Furthermore, a senior student from the maid class was waiting to serve us.

Don't you think a sofa in the middle of the schoolyard is overdoing it just a bit?!

But my mother and father didn't find this arrangement unusual; they ordered their tea as if this were perfectly normal.

Fine. When in Rome, become a Roman. I'll play along.

I sat on the sofa with a sigh. Sipping a cup of delicious tea, I casually turned to examine the rest of the schoolyard and was shocked.

An incredible diorama was set up in the middle of the schoolyard. According to Papa, several teachers had worked together to construct it using magic. There was a mountain and a river that looked like they'd been copied and pasted from some real-life location, and on the far side of a stretch of flat ground lay a rocky area.

Compared to the real thing, the mountain must have been about 1:100 scale, but even so, the mountain's peak was level with the roof of the five-story school building.

They're going to use this in their lesson?! I'm so jealous; I wanna play on it too!

On each end of the diorama waited dozens of miniature soldiers about a foot tall. Constructed using a type of illusion magic, they would be the opponents for the students to fight in the upcoming battle simulation. There were several types of soldiers, including foot soldiers, officers, beast knights, and magic users. It looked just like a game of chess come to life.

Now this is what I'm talking about! Come on, fantasy world, don't let me down now!

"Amayshing!" I said to my parents, with a smile so huge it almost took up my entire face. Mama squeezed me a little, and then Papa scooped me up in a big bear hug.

Oh no, I'm instigating his majorly uncool behavior!

Finally, it was my brother's time to shine!

I didn't know the first thing about fighting, but even to the eyes of an amateur

like me, from the way my brother herded a group of foot soldiers until they were backed up against the mountain and the way he cast a magical booby trap in the area he'd cleared, he was obviously incredibly strong!

It didn't take long before my brother had won.

"Walf! Shooo cool!"

Seeing how excited I was, my brother picked me up and patted my head.

Keep on patting!

It would be a while until my sister's turn came, so we took a tour around the academy. This school was in the former royal palace building. As such, it was ridiculously huge.

...Uh-oh, nature's calling me. Well, then...

"Walf! Neema pee-pee!"

My brother obligingly carried me into the bathroom.

I don't need help to pee! I don't care if you are my blood-related brother; that's too embarrassing! Get out!

I talked my brother down and went into the stall alone.

Once I'd relieved myself, I came out to find my brother speaking with an important-looking person.

"Walf?"

"My sister's returned, so I need to go now..."

"Your sister? She doesn't look anything like you..."

Who does this jerk think he is? That's an incredibly rude thing to say about someone you've literally just met!

"You should just get the servants to look after your sister."

Oh? Is he the stereotypical "snobby bully" character? He seems to see Ralf as his rival, but if he genuinely thinks he's anywhere near being in the same league as my brother, he's seriously deluding himself.

It's a shame he's such a loser because he's not all that bad-looking.

“Or maybe you plan to use her as an excuse once you’ve lost to me?”

Ka-ching! This guy is pissing me off!

“Walf’s weally stwong! Walf neber lose!”

“Psh! What would a kid know?!”

He’s laughing down his nose at us!

I’ve wondered lately if my mental age hasn’t also regressed to that of a child, but I’m almost thirty! This guy is the quintessential spoiled-rotten-rich bully. He’s got an overinflated sense of pride despite having done nothing in his life worth being proud of.

“Better than an idiot who doesn’t know his place,” I shot back.

Ralf stared at me in wide-eyed shock.

I should’ve expected that. Sorry, Ralf. Your little sister has an incredibly foul mouth. But I can’t help it; I don’t have an ounce of respect to spare for someone with absolutely no manners.

Just as suddenly, Ralf’s expression transformed into a wide smile. He looked just like Papa when he smiled like that.

“...You little brat!” the bully hissed.

Oh? Are you really about to get violent with a sweet little child? You really are a piece of crap, huh? What are they teaching at this school, anyway? Despite the fact that this is a school, it’s not okay to throw social status to the wind. Even if he were a member of another duke’s family, there’s no way he could expect to get away with being so rude to us. After all, our family has royal blood, and Papa and Ralf are in the line of succession for the throne.

Our great-grandfather was the then king’s younger brother. Generally, it was customary for the siblings of the reigning king to marry royalty from other kingdoms, thereby losing their place in the line of succession to their home country.

However, our great-grandfather had abdicated his place in the line of succession to marry our great-grandmother. At the time, it was a huge scandal, but based on current royal household law, our family was still in the line of

succession.

Even though, among all the nobility, our family is second only to the royal family... Papa is like that... Sigh...

“What are you doing?”

The voice wasn't loud but carried an air of overwhelming authority.

I have a bad feeling about this...

“Your Highness!”

I knew it! Time to hide behind my brother.

My brother and the human scum were both bowing. They wouldn't be permitted to rise until told to do so. I stared at the ground, avoiding eye contact.

Yeah, I'm an unmannered beast. Sue me.

“At ease.”

Once His Highness gave his permission, the two boys straightened up. I remained as I was, hidden behind my brother.

“Tristan Disdall, do my eyes deceive me, or did I just see you about to strike a child?”

“By no means, my prince!”

You big, fat liar! You were so infuriated your hand was practically moving by itself!

“Is that so? In that case, why is Nefertima cowering behind her brother?”

I'm not hiding because I was afraid of being hit! I just don't want to be captured by a demon prince!

“Your Highness, you're acquainted with my sister?” Ralf asked, unable to hide his surprise.

“I previously found her wandering around lost in the garden of the royal palace and returned her to your father.”

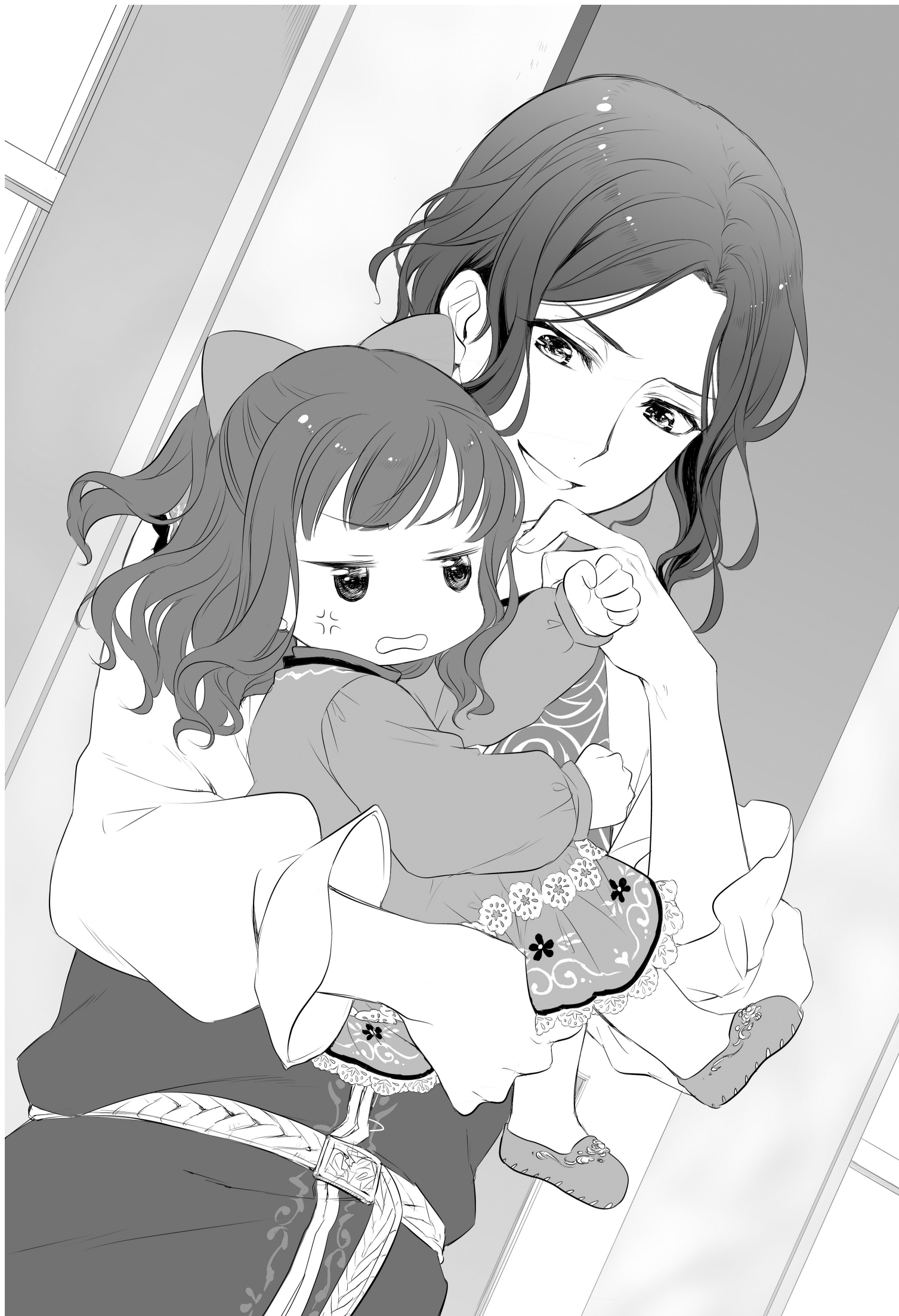
“I wasn't lost!”

Crap! My mouth just moved on its own...!

“Heh, so you’re mouthing off to *me* now, are you...?”

Kyaa! The demon prince is coming this way! Gotta run!

I was about to flee when a pair of strong arms lifted me off my feet in a forceful hug...



“Nooo! Lemme goooo!”

My brother and the human scum were rendered immobile with shock at the sight of an amused-looking prince holding a very annoyed little girl.

Some help over here, please?!

“You’re as amusing as ever. Why don’t you become my plaything?”

Calling someone amusing to their face... Treating me like a toy... He really is a demon, this, this... demon-prince!

“Waaalf...!”

Halfway to tears, I called out to my brother for help.

He finally came to his senses, but there was nothing Ralf could do to force the demon prince to release me until he felt like it.

“What if I make it so you can freely enter the royal palace whenever you like?”

At these words, I stopped struggling.

A free pass into the royal palace would mean I could play with Lars as much as I wanted!

The demon prince seemed to be fighting back a smile as if he could read what I was thinking on my face.

“Do you like Lars that much?” he asked.

“Larsh ish my fwend!”

Please, God, do something about this wretched lisp!

“I beg your pardon, Your Highness, but you can’t possibly be considering granting a child like this permission to move about freely within the royal palace...” the human scum protested.

Don’t you dare get in the way of my meeting with Lars!

“It won’t be a problem if it’s Nefertima. My father is also very fond of her.”

“Mishta King?”

“That’s right. Make sure you visit my father when you’re at the palace.”

Ho, ho, ho. Looks like I’ll have another chance to meet the king as well!

“Okay!”

“You seem to like my father well enough, so why do you hide from me?”

Isn’t it obvious?!

“Because you’re a demon prince!” I replied without hesitation. Apparently, my linguistic abilities improved when I talked crap about people. Turns out I have such a bad personality that I honestly have no right to talk about anyone else. Who would’ve guessed?

“I see. In that case, I suppose I should act appropriately demonic...”

That is an incredibly evil smile you’re wearing right now, prince...

Squeeze!

“Leggoooo!”

Don’t pinch my cheek! Can I cry now? It’s okay to cry, right?

“Pardon me, Your Highness. It’s almost time for Karna’s presentation, so might I ask you to return my sister now?”

Nice one, Ralf!

I was released from the pinch attack, but I couldn’t even begin to let my guard down as long as I remained in the demon prince’s arms.

Let me go, already! I beseeched from the bottom of my heart.

“In that case, I’ll join you.”

Th-Thanks, but no thanks!

You know what, scratch that, no “thanks” at all. Just NO!

“It would be our honor. However, I couldn’t possibly burden Your Highness any further by having you carry Nefertima around for me...”

You can do it, Ralf! You’re my only hope!

However, a child like my brother was no match for a member of the royal

family.

“It’s fine. *This* is my toy now, so I’ll carry it myself.”

Ralf’s face was a mask of uneasiness as the demon prince made this blasé announcement.

Oh, man... I’m questioning if I made the wrong choice by agreeing to be reincarnated.

I’m sorry, Ralf.

“Tristan, be warned that Nefertima is under my protection. You’d do best to see to it that something like this does not happen again.”

The human scum jumped, alarmed, at the menace in the demon prince’s words. Then he went white as a sheet, finally realizing that he’d incurred the prince’s wrath.

Sucks to be you.

With me still a captive in the arms of the demon prince, we headed off toward Karna’s lesson.

Just how long is he planning on carrying me around for, anyway? It might not be that big a deal for an adult, but for a boy around my brother’s age, I must be pretty heavy...

Not that I’m fat or anything! ...Well, I don’t think I’m fat...

“Aren’t I heavy? I can walk...” I said.

“Carrying you is a good workout.”

Tch! You...! I know I was the one who asked, but still! You won’t be popular if you aren’t kind and gentle to girls!

...Oh, right. He’s a handsome prince. Even if he’s a complete narcissist, because of his bright and shining future, there’s absolutely no possibility he won’t be popular with the girls.

I searched the demon prince’s face as I pondered this.

“Hm? Nefertima’s eyes are black?”

Where the heck did that come from?!

Oh, I see; it must've been because I was staring at him. I suppose with how close we are, it was inevitable he'd notice as soon as our eyes met.

"I believe they're actually a very dark blue. So dark they almost appear black," my brother responded smoothly.

Apparently, it sounded bad to say that my eyes were black, so my family doggedly insisted on calling them blue.

No one's bothered explaining to me why that is yet... Buuut, in any case, let's change the subject, shall we?

"Call me Neema," I insisted.

Nefertima is really long, so I'd rather go by a nickname. But, you know, recently I've been thinking that "Nefer" or "Erti" would've been more obvious nicknames? It's just occurring to me now how lazy and unimaginative it was to take my name's first and last syllables to form my nickname.

"Neema, huh... In that case, you can call me Will."

"Wiw..."

Damn, I still can't pronounce L's properly...

"...You'll get there eventually. Until then, Wiw is fine."

Did the demon prince just say something kind and considerate?! I'm starting to contemplate the possibility that he might not be all bad after all...

Oh no! Don't tell me I'm falling under the demon prince's evil spell?!

4 - Let's Go to School (Big Sister Edition)

MY brother and the demon prince brought me to what appeared to be...a coliseum?

Why is there a place like this in a school, anyway? Oh, maybe it's leftover from when this used to be the royal palace? Even so, a coliseum? That's too weird!

Papa and Mama were waiting at the entrance to the coliseum. They must have been surprised to see Demon Prince Will carrying me but concealed their shock and maintained serene and dignified expressions as they bowed respectfully to their social superior.

Papa knelt on his left knee, placed his right hand over his heart, and bent at the waist. It looked like something you'd see on a medieval European movie set. Mama lifted her skirt with both hands and curtsied deeply. She looked incredibly graceful, but holding that position must've been painful!

After all, they're not allowed to rise until given permission, right?

It wouldn't be much longer until I, too, was forced to learn and practice proper social manners, and I dreaded it.

"I'm joining today's demonstration not as the crown prince but as a fellow student at the academy. Therefore, behave not as subjects but as graduates of this academy, and provide us with your knowledge and experience today."

His words were gracious, but the air of superiority with which he spoke was so stereotypical of royalty that I couldn't help but find it ironic.

Will noticed me snickering and looked at me inquiringly.

"It's a sheecret!"

If I answer honestly, he'll pinch me again.

Nothing was inside the coliseum besides the seating on top of its high walls. The only thing out of place was a summoning circle on the ground. According to Will, the summoning circle would call forth monsters randomly for the students to defeat using magic.

That's brutal and cruel! Don't make children do something like that! Is this country preparing to go to war or something? I was gritting my teeth in anger when my sister appeared.

"Kawna!" I exclaimed.

My sister stood with her usual quiet grace, so beautiful that it was hard to remember she was only ten.

Before long, a flash of white light came from the summoning circle. The light shone intensely for a moment, then slowly condensed. Once the light had completely condensed, it revealed the *thing* that had been summoned standing in the center of the circle.

The creature was huge... Absolutely enormous.

"This has to be a joke..." my brother muttered, shocked.

Beside him, Mama called out Karna's name in a trembling voice.

Hmm, that's... No matter how you look at it, that's a dragon, isn't it? And if I'm not mistaken, it appears to be a fire dragon. Which means it's the worst possible opponent for Karna...

Karna's skill with fire is high-level, but her skill with water is very low, isn't it? And the elements here work the same as in my world—to fight fire, you need water. With the vast difference in Karna and the dragon's abilities, it's hard to think this will be a fair fight... And, besides that...! Fire dragons are revered holy beasts, aren't they?!

What the heck are the teachers at this school thinking, treating a holy beast like a common monster?! Aren't they condemning it to death by forcing it to fight with my sister?

The knights and magic users tried to rush the field once they noticed something was wrong, but...

Karna's in danger! She's closest to the dragon; save her first! And you, Karna! Wipe that determined look off your face and high-tail it out of there this instant!

Huh? Wait a minute, what are you doing, Mama? Why are you taking up a fighting stance?! What happened to my elegant, aristocratic Mama from just a

moment ago?!

I'm getting the feeling the poor dragon's a goner for sure...

After all, my mama was an elite-level magic user like Papa, and the maids at home whispered that she was the most powerful in the entire country with water magic.

Oh man, this is not good... What should I do?!

I leapt off Will's lap and searched for a way to enter the arena. There didn't appear to be any entrance from the seating area to the arena, only the staircases leading outside the coliseum.

What should I do? It would be wonderful if I could jump down from the wall, but it's at least a ten-foot drop. But I don't have time to waste pondering what to do— Will's on my tail.

Looks like it's time to show these boys how brave a girl can be!

"Neema!"

Here goes nothing...!

I jumped... Oh my god, I jumped!

I'm going to splatter on the ground for sure!

I did not think this through enough. Somebody, help!

As I was coming to a deep understanding of the meaning of the old saying, "Regret comes too late," a warm and gentle wind enveloped my body.

That was a gentler landing than I was expecting... It felt different than the type of magic I'm used to, but what do I know? I don't have any magic to speak of anyway.

"Tank you bewy much!"

I have no idea who saved me, but I'd better thank them properly. They saved my life, after all.

I hurried toward the dragon, running as fast as I could—ultimately about the same speed as an adult's walk.

That's right! My goal is the dragon, not my sister!

It might be common sense to run to my sister if I wanted to save her, but given my special ability, talking to the dragon is my best bet. My power is supposed to work on "all creatures other than humans." Theoretically, that should include dragons.

Ducking around the adults who tried their best to stop me—once they recovered from the shock of the sudden appearance of a child in the middle of a battlefield—I stopped once I reached an area where the dragon could see me. The dragon was about as big as an airplane, so it seemed like a death wish to run up to its feet.

That would be one way to get squished flat as a pancake.

I looked around and shouted to the adults around me, "No! Leave him alone!"

The adults were dumbfounded.

They don't seem convinced, but at least they stopped attacking him. Well, I suppose they can't attack with a little kid in the way. Still, they're professionals, so they'll watch the dragon cautiously, waiting for a chance to resume their attack. I guess they're not the elite staff of the royal academy for nothing...

Just as I was pondering this...

"This is no place for a child."

The dragon spoke!

He must be one of those archetypical, nearly immortal dragons! In this world, wyverns and giant lizards are also classified as sub-species of dragons, but this guy seemed to be the real deal.

In any case, if he can speak, that makes this easier for me.

"You hafta stop fighting too, Mishta Dragon!"

"I can hardly ignore that I was forcibly summoned here and subjected to unwarranted violence."

He does have a point; it's basically self-defense on his part. They attacked him first. And although he called it 'violence,' I think 'attempted murder' is a more

accurate description.

“But people will get hurt...”

If this devolves into a full-out battle, it won't end with people merely being injured. But maybe if my special power can tame even a fire dragon...

“I wonder what dragon scales feel like...”

“Hm, you want to touch me, little girl?” the dragon asked.

Oh crap! My true feelings slipped out! No way, I really shouldn't...

After all, he looked like a dragon from a video game or something. And not one of those wimpy reptiles we call “dragons” in Asia. No, this was a proper, European mythology-style dragon. The dragon was resplendent with sharp teeth and claws, huge leathery wings, golden reptilian eyes, and red scales.

But of course, I want to pet him! Please, let me pet you!

“Yeah! I want to pet you!” I admitted.

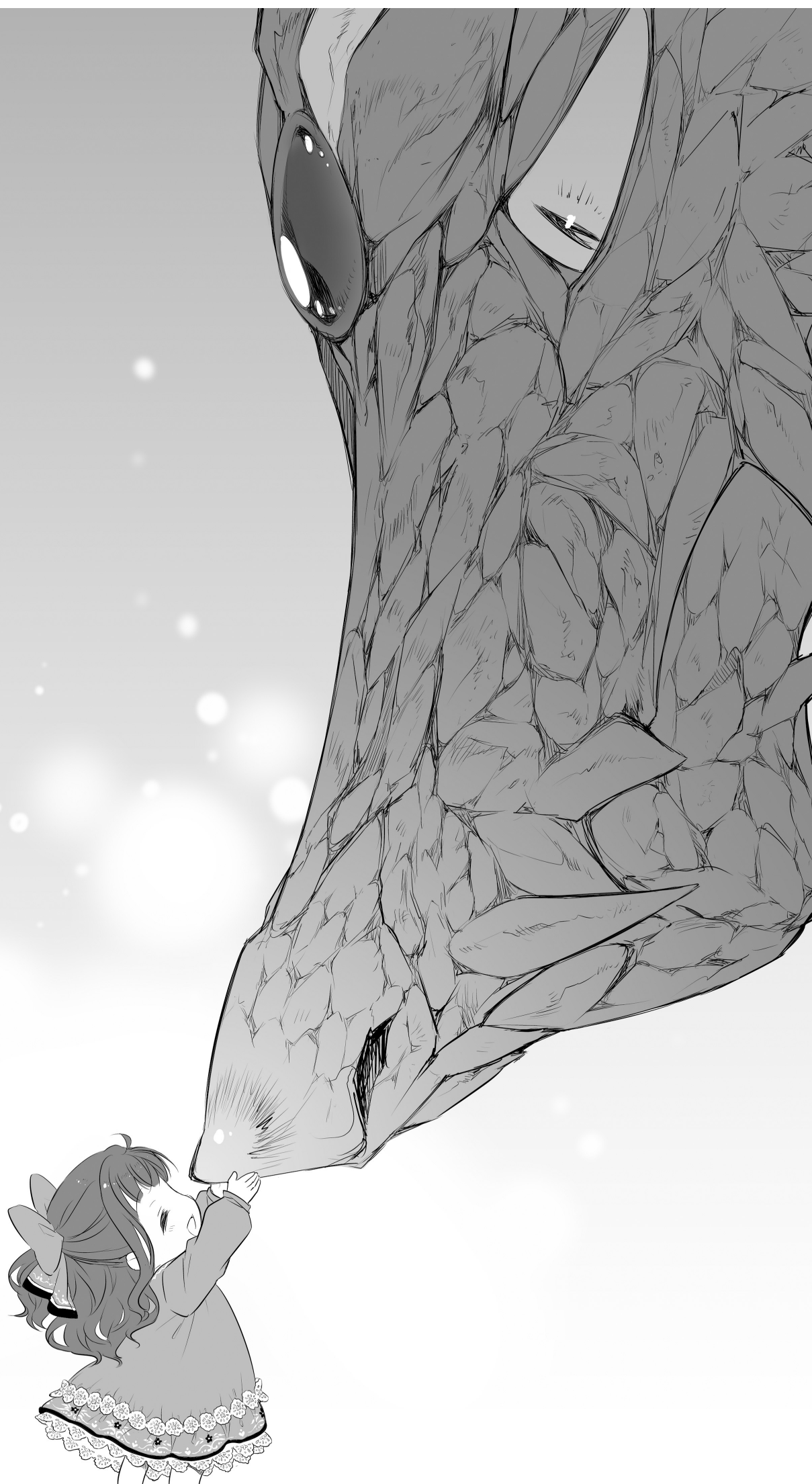
“Aren't you frightened of me?”

“Nope!”

No hesitation whatsoever! I don't think he's scary; just super-duper cool! I would do just about anything for a ride on his back.

“You certainly are an unusual child.”

As he said this, the dragon leaned down so his face was right in front of me. I took this as an invitation, which I gladly accepted. I enjoyed petting him to my heart's content.



Whoa! I expected him to be hot, but his scales are cool and smooth! He really is like a huge reptile. But his scales are hard, not soft like a snake's or a salamander's. Maybe because he's so big?

"It feels nice!" I gushed.

It may have been presumptuous, but I couldn't resist the urge to hug the dragon's giant snout.

I want a bed like this in the summer; his cold scales would be so refreshing!

"When you're grown, if you need me, I will accept you as my master."

With these words, the dragon spread his giant wings.

"Don't go!"

When exactly will that be?! Let's just bond right now—I want you to come live at my house!

The dragon narrowed his eyes in amusement at the way I clung to him, attempting to prevent him from leaving.

"In that case, I'll entrust you with this," his voice boomed.

A red light floated up in front of me. It had come from the fire dragon's body and swirled around before condensing into a round shape.

Then it slowly dropped into my hands.

It's warm...

The glowing light clutched in my hands dispersed, and in moments it quietly faded away. In its place, I held a red orb. It was a mysterious shade of deep red, even redder than a ruby.

"What's dis?" I asked with my usual lisp.

"It's a dragon orb. It connects us. Keep it with you at all times."

Sweet! I scored a super rare item!

He said to keep it with me at all times, but...it's bigger than both of my hands put together. And it's perfectly round, so there's no way I can hang it from a string to wear around my neck or something... How am I supposed to carry it?

“You just have to think it, and the dragon orb will change shape.”

It can change shape? Now that's nifty. In that case, I'll have it change into an item that wouldn't look out of place in the hands of a child. Hm... Maybe a stuffed animal?

I pictured a certain copyrighted mouse, and the dragon orb glowed. When the light faded, I was holding a stuffed animal that I could easily carry with one hand. It was a perfect replica of the copyrighted mouse. There was just one problem—it was bright red, which made it look terrifying. It looked like a crappy knock-off from the renowned country of copyright infringement.

What am I doing?! Bad self! It's even bigger now than it originally was. I suppose there's no chance of accidentally losing it this way, but it's really inconvenient!

Hmm, maybe some kind of accessory would be better? Something I could wear all the time and wouldn't lose... I've never been the type to wear jewelry or anything, though. I never saw the point since I'd probably lose it.

Oh, I've got it!

I pictured the item and stared at the stuffed animal. The light appeared again, and the stuffed animal transformed into the item I'd pictured. The new item was larger than the stuffed animal had been. It was a backpack shaped like a rabbit with long, droopy ears. Of course, it was red.

This way, it doesn't look strange for a child to carry it around all the time. Since it's a backpack, I won't lose it, and wearing it on my back leaves both my hands free!

Furthermore, if I opened the zipper on the rabbit's stomach, I could put things inside. As an added bonus, it was the perfect size for hugging.

I thought it was a good idea if I did say so myself.

“Okay! Dis is good!” I praised my handiwork.

“Hm... What a curious doll.”

Curious...? He has such an old-fashioned way of speaking.

“You use it like dis!”

I put on the backpack to show the dragon how it was worn.

“I won’t lose it dis way!”

I smiled widely at the dragon, who responded with a satisfied nod.

“The dragon orb serves as a spiritual connection between myself and the person who possesses it. It allows us to communicate telepathically and will convey strong emotions without the need for conscious thought. You can use my magic through the dragon orb, so it will help you if you’re ever in danger.”

Whoa... Somehow, I get the feeling that having this thing is dangerous. After all, if the dragon orb grants these powers to the person who possesses it, someone other than me could also use it, right? Everyone present heard every word of our conversation... I’m not confident I can protect it if someone who desperately wants it tries to take it by force! Yeah, I’m definitely going to complain about that part!

“What if someone twies to take it away?”

“To prevent that from happening, all you need to do is let the dragon orb memorize your magical signature.”

I don’t have any magic!

Thankfully, the dragon seemed to understand the cause of my hesitation.

“It would also work with a drop of your blood. Once it’s attuned to you, no one else will be able to use it.”

So it’s like fingerprint recognition, except using either magic or blood to verify my identity. He could’ve said that in the first place! I don’t want to get bloodstains on my bunny backpack, though... I’ll turn it back into an orb later and do it then.

“Okay! Wat’s your name, Mishta Dragon?”

I totally forgot to ask for a crucial piece of information. It seems like we’ll be seeing a lot of each other from now on, and calling him fire dragon all the time won’t do anything to close the distance between us.

“I can’t tell you my true name until we bond, but you can call me Sol.”

Sol... That means 'sun,' right? It's the perfect name for a fire dragon who can control mighty flames! So he also has a 'true name,' huh? I haven't heard anything about that before, but maybe only holy beasts have them? Mama knows all about this kind of stuff. I'll ask her later.

"My name ish Neema! Let's be good friends, Sho...Sol!"

Phew, I said it! I messed up the pronunciation a bit at first, but I said his name correctly in the end. Sorry, Sol!

"Well then, I believe I will return to my lair now," Sol said, spreading his wings once more.

This time, I didn't try to stop him.

It's a shame he can't come live with me, but at least we've formed a connection. I'll have to make do with that.

Sigh... It's too bad, though...

The beating of Sol's wings created a draft that kicked up sand and debris into the air. Between that and the strong breeze, I couldn't open my eyes, and it was all I could do to keep from being knocked over by the force of the wind.

By the time the wind died down enough for me to open my eyes, Sol was soaring through the air a great distance away. Once he disappeared, everyone around me breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Neema!"

I turned and saw my sister running toward me. As soon as she reached me, she enveloped me in a fierce hug.

You're crushing me, Karna. Come on; I can't breathe here! Loosen up, will you?!

Unable to bear the near-strangulation, I began hitting my sister to get her to loosen her grip.

"Oh, sorry, Neema!"

Once the pressure subsided, I gulped in a deep breath.

Oh man, I thought I was gonna pass out for a second there!

“Oh, Neema...! Don’t worry me like that...!”

Uh-oh, is Karna crying? I’m sorry for making her worry, but...

“You shoulda wun away, Kawna!”

She’s the one who made me worry first!

Even though she inherited our parents’ strong magic, it wasn’t a good idea to get overconfident and act recklessly. Healing magic existed, but it required the blessing of the Goddess, so the number of people who could use it was incredibly small.

While I was giving my sister a piece of my mind, I was swept up into another fierce hug. I say hug, but it was more like being tackled by a linebacker!

“Neema! Are you hurt anywhere?”

From the frantic dash my Papa made, it appeared he’d never heard of the concept of aristocratic dignity.

Stop rubbing your cheek against mine like that, Papa!

“Nooo!”

I struggled with all my might, trying to escape Papa’s arms.

His love has become extra intense lately.

“Darling... Neema’s going to hate you if you keep that up,” Mama said as she snatched me away from Papa.

I clung to Mama with a sigh of relief.

Mothers are incredible. Nothing can beat this sense of security!

Papa looked as depressed as one might expect, and I felt sorry for him.

I’ll have to snuggle up to him once we get home.

“You...!” Will broke in with an enormous sigh.

Before I’d even registered the hands grabbing both of my cheeks...

Pinch! Tug!

Not again! Ow, ow, ow! That hurts, damn it!

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay.”

No, I’m not okay! I am currently, in the present tense, taking intense damage, thank you very much! Ugh! Please don’t tell me this is what passes for an expression of love for this demon prince?! What a nuisance...

“Duke Osphe, have the royal magic users look into this incident,” Will said. “I’m sure the palace will want to get their hands on Neema after this. Think carefully about how you’ll proceed.”

“I will see to it that the investigation is carried out according to your orders. But I hate to think of my precious Neema coming to the attention of those power-hungry vultures... Perhaps I’ll get rid of all of them permanently?”

Papa, I’m sure I just heard you say something incredibly unreasonable... It must’ve been my imagination, right?

I looked around to find Will looking dumbfounded, my brother smirking, my sister smiling with guarded eyes, and my mother appearing lost in thought.

Why isn’t anyone trying to stop Papa? Hmm, things certainly have gotten quite troublesome all of a sudden. What am I going to do?

5 - Summoned

SEVERAL days after the encounter with the fire dragon, I received a letter summoning me to appear at the royal palace. Many important people would be there, so I was primped, fussed over, and dressed like a doll.

I wore a charming light blue chiffon dress with white shoes that reminded me of ballet slippers. A large white ribbon and a pretty hair accessory made of small blue flowers adorned my head. There was a matching white ribbon for my bunny backpack, so I asked to have it tied around the bunny's neck.

This dress is cute, and I'm happy to wear it, but given how plain my face is, it's probably wasted on me.

My family praised my appearance exuberantly, but I didn't take them seriously. I knew they were hopelessly biased in my favor.

Today, we wouldn't be traveling in our own carriage; a carriage from the royal palace picked us up. You might assume we were receiving VIP treatment, but that wasn't exactly the case.

It's more like an armed escort or something. Four knights were accompanying the carriage as guards, and they were heavily armed. *Maybe this is because of Papa's comments about "getting rid of" important people in the government?*

I was a little afraid to get in the royal carriage, so I hugged my rabbit tightly. A backpack would look strange with my dress, so I carried it in my arms instead.

Mama was the first to notice my uneasiness, and she quickly hugged me before she helped me climb into the carriage.

I clung to my mother the entire way to the palace.

Once the carriage passed through the front gate, it headed toward the largest entrance, which was for official events. The road leading from the front gate toward the palace was so wide three carriages could travel it side-by-side.

Well, I suppose they intentionally made it this wide so they could use it for parades, military purposes, and so on.

In front of the main entrance was an iconic fountain, and in its center stood an eight-foot-tall Goddess statue. This goddess was the daughter of the God who created the world, and her name was Cresiolle. It was said that because Cresiolle supported the entire world, she held “this world” in her right hand and “the world of the dead” in her left hand.

According to myth, Cresiolle was the goddess of compassion and rebirth who bestowed the power to heal on the living and reincarnated the souls of the dead. Once Cresiolle reincarnated a soul, it would be sent to her father, the God of Creation, to be given life again in this world.

What you were reincarnated as allegedly depended on the merit of your deeds in your previous life.

But if the God of Creation is that God, I have a feeling he makes his decisions based more on his fanciful whims than meritorious deeds or anything like that. His daughter, Cresiolle, must have her hands full dealing with him...

Uh-oh, I'm letting myself go down a rabbit hole to avoid facing the issue at hand.

The carriage traveled to the right around the fountain and stopped in a parking area shaped like a rotary.

Two knights came out to meet us. They would be our escorts.

I guess they are wary of Papa?

Before getting out of the carriage, I thanked the knights who brought us here and waved goodbye. Even the stern-faced knights were no match for the innocence of a child because they waved back with smiles on their faces.

Our escorts led us down absolutely dazzling hallways.

At first glance, it was obvious a master craftsman had carved the fine designs into the pillars. The amount of detail was nothing short of a miracle. It looked like it would break if you so much as brushed against it accidentally.

The maids who clean this place must have superpowers!

I caught a glimpse of the garden, which seemed to be English-style, complete with a gazebo and a hedge maze made out of living bushes. The spring-green foliage was pleasing to the eye, and the flowers were predominantly pastel shades of pink and white.

I'd love to sit and drink tea in a place like this on a sunny day. I'd bring loads of baked treats and call all my fluffy friends to join me. Maybe I'll ask Will to arrange it for me sometime.

...I'm a little scared to find out what he'd ask for in return, though...

I was so absorbed in enjoying the scenery of the maze-like palace that I didn't notice the massive door until it seemed to appear in front of us.

This is way too big. It must be a case of putting on airs for appearances' sake, right?

The door was at least twice Papa's height, so it must've been around 12 feet tall.

Papa was around 6 feet tall. I couldn't be more specific because the unit of measure here was completely different from my world, and I didn't understand it very well. Length was measured in gell, mino, kai, and sahs, with 100 of one increment equaling one of the next largest increments. According to the unit of measure in this world, Papa's height was 73 gell. By earthly measurement standards, it seemed that 1 gell was equal to about an inch?

Not as if I can pull out a ruler and measure it to check, though.

Oh no, I'm doing it again—letting myself go off on a tangent to avoid the issue at hand.

In any case, there was no denying that the door was absolutely gorgeous. Guards were posted on both sides of it. Their uniforms were different from what the knights were wearing, so maybe they were members of the royal guard? Come to think of it, some of these guys were there when I met the king, too.

Based on these indicators, I could only assume that this door led into the throne room or something! Inside, there would probably be rows of cabinet ministers and other important people, and a red carpet would lead down the

center of the room to a set of stairs, where the king and queen would be sitting atop a raised dais.

Oh man, I really wanna turn and run.

While my imagination ran wild, Papa showed the letter of summons to one of the royal guards. Once they confirmed the authenticity of the letter, the two guards worked together to open the door.

Whoa, it looks really heavy.

My mother tugged on my hand, leading me into the room.

I panicked internally. This *was* the throne room. A voice boomed out from behind us...

“The Prime Minister, Duke Dayland Osphe, The Head of the Royal Magical Research Center’s Magical Engineering Department, Duchess Cerulia Osphe, and their noble daughter, Lady Nefertima Osphe, have arrived!”

He’s got an impressive pair of lungs.

...Wait a minute, Papa’s the prime minister?! Of all the ridiculous things! And Mama... What is “magical engineering”? And she’s the department head? That sounds like a pretty important job.

I knew my parents were very important people, but this was my first time hearing their job titles in my three years since being reincarnated.

The sources of my anxiety have officially reached maximum capacity...

Once our names were announced, we proceeded to the foot of the dais, where we paid homage to the king.

I curtsied deeply on wobbling legs, just like my mother. My bunny backpack was squashed under one of my armpits while I used both hands to hold up my skirt. I must’ve looked ridiculous.

“My apologies for the inconvenience of this summons, esteemed members of the Osphe family. Please be at ease.”

Thank goodness the king permitted us to rise so quickly.

I raised my head and looked around, taking in my surroundings. It was exactly

as I'd pictured. Atop the dais sat the king and queen, along with Will.

Immediately at the base of the dais were the cabinet ministers, but they were all familiar faces, which eased my fears a bit. In the lower seats were the aristocrats who held various official positions, as well as the royal guards serving as security for this meeting and the maids who waited along the wall.

"It is our great honor and distinct pleasure to answer Your Majesty's summons."

"The reason I've summoned you here today is in regard to the incident with the fire dragon that occurred at the royal academy several days ago. I heard that Nefertima bonded with the fire dragon. Is this true?"

The king's words ignited a commotion among the onlookers.

Even if they knew that a fire dragon had appeared, they apparently hadn't heard anything about it bonding with me.

"It wasn't an official bonding." Papa attempted to contradict the king's statement.

"And yet, she obtained the ability to use the dragon's power?" the king countered.

"Indeed, the dragon promised to lend her his power if she ever had need of it. However, my daughter has not received the holy beast's blessing."

Hm? What is the holy beast's blessing? Based on this conversation, maybe it's some kind of nifty power or compensational ability?

"Then there is no reason to be concerned that she will use the fire dragon's power against our country?" His Majesty asked.

"None at all. I, Dayland Osphe, vow it on my name."

In this world, vowing on one's name was the most weighty promise a person could make. A person's true name held the power of the God of Creation, and to break this vow would result in death. It was said that in that event, your soul would be destroyed and would not travel to the world of the dead. Furthermore, using a fake name was impossible when vowing on your name. If you attempted to speak a false name, supposedly, you would be unable to

speaking a single word. I'd never tried it myself, so I couldn't say if it was true or not.

And, finally, only the person in question could swear on their own name. It wasn't possible to make a vow on someone else's name on their behalf.

I didn't know the reason for this. It was a system that God built into the very foundation of this world, so I supposed it didn't matter if I understood it or not; it wouldn't change anything.

"Very well, I believe you. So, what have we discovered about the cause of this incident?"

An elderly man stepped forward in response to the king's question. He wore a hooded robe and carried a wand as if practically screaming, *Yes, hello, I'm a wizard!*

"Please allow me to explain, my king."

"Go ahead, Salzar."

I would later learn that Old Man Salzar was the director of the entire Magical Research Center and the most powerful and renowned magic user in the whole country.

"First of all, there was no error with the construction of the summoning circle. Protections were in place in case the summoner chanted the incantation incorrectly. I tested it myself after the incident took place. When I chanted the incantation correctly, a common monster appeared, and when I intentionally chanted the incantation incorrectly, nothing happened."

"So the fault was not with the magic user who cast the summoning spell?"

"It would appear not, my king."

"Then how do you explain the undeniable fact that a fire dragon was summoned?"

"It can only be due to some power beyond the control of human hands... Perhaps it was the will of God."

"...God?"

Hmm... I wouldn't put it past him to meddle like that!

It was probably some hair-brained scheme to bring me into contact with certain people. I wanted to be irritated at his meddling, but I met Sol because of it, which I was very happy about, so I couldn't bring myself to be angry about what had happened.

"...What do you think, High Priest?"

The person the king had called High Priest was the complete opposite of Old Man Salzar.

He wore white priest's robes. The overcoat had a high collar and slits up both sides, and it was fastened with a light blue cloth wrapped around his waist like a belt. The robes were decorated with elaborate embroidery done with blue thread, but to me, they looked like tacky geometric patterns. I couldn't see much of the pants he wore under the robes, so I couldn't tell you much about them other than that they were white. The entire ensemble reminded me vaguely of Changpao-style Chinese robes.

As for the High Priest himself, to be blunt, he was a huge fatso!

In manga and so on, there's often a stereotypical "corrupt priest" type of character, right? The type of scumbag who embezzles from the church's donations to line his own pockets and gorges himself on the finest delicacies. That description seems to fit this guy to a T!

"I believe this incident was the work of the God of Creation. The prevalence of holy beasts in this country must surely be a sign of God's divine plan for Your Majesty. Your Majesty will, without doubt, be the catalyst for transforming this world into a land of peace and prosperity, governed by mankind."

Sigh. So, this guy is part of the problem that God was talking about. Let me guess: he's following the typical pattern of claiming to be a mouthpiece of God, brainwashing the populace, and worming his way into politics?

The only religion in this world was the Church of Divine Creation, which focused on worshipping the God of Creation and the Goddess Cresiolle. The spiritual beliefs of the elves and beast people were not quite the same as those of organized religion. For this reason, the church held nearly equal power to the

government.

The headquarters for the Church of Divine Creation was in the mountains that divided the Kingdom of Gaché from the neighboring country of Milma and were the location of the church's only temple. The church's headquarters were practically an autonomous religious state.

In summary, is this part of a plot to use the Church of Divine Creation to indoctrinate the royal families and ordinary citizens of each country into the belief that "The world is meant to be ruled by humans" in order to persecute other species?

I'd already expected it would be something like this, and it's probably not a good idea to make any decisions based on just one observation. After all, I still haven't met any of the other species, and I don't fully understand how this world operates yet.

Since I started this mission as a baby, I can put off my decision about the fate of mankind until the day I die. In that case, I've got plenty of time to figure it out. Although, the average life expectancy here does seem to be a bit lower than in my world.

And, anyway, my primary directive is to cuddle and pet as many animals as I can! God will have to make do with his request being a second priority.

"Have you lost interest already, Neema?"

I flinched, surprised, at the sound of my name.

I jerked my head up, and my eyes met Will's as he watched me with an amused expression.

Hmph! What exactly does he find so amusing, I wonder?

Gasp! Don't tell me he could tell what I was thinking about just by looking at my face?! Was I making weird faces while lost in thought?

And he was getting sick amusement out of watching me?! I'm so embarrassed... Is this some kind of messed-up humiliation game...?

Overcome with embarrassment, I buried my face in my bunny backpack.

I had no doubt Will was probably even more amused by this display of my

abject humiliation.

*To be enjoying the plight of a three-year-old child squirming in humiliation...
He's not a demon prince—he's a pervert prince!*

Will spoke down from the dais above me with a slight chuckle as if trying to hold back a laugh.

Mama, Papa, help! Your precious daughter is being toyed with by a mega-pervert!

"If you're bored, why don't you go to the corner and play with Lars?"

What?! Is that an option?!

No, wait. I was summoned here by the king. I can't just leave without the king's permission.

"Ish dat okay, Mishta King?"

I hugged my bunny backpack to my chest and stared up at the king with wide, glistening eyes, really playing up the adorable, innocent child factor. It was my most effective weapon; it would be a shame *not* to use it to my advantage.

This would work on Papa for sure, but...

"This conversation must be difficult for you to follow, Nefertima. I'm sorry for not realizing sooner."

Sweet! It looks like it worked on the king, too! I'd better crank up the charm—they are the most powerful people in the entire country, after all.

"It's okay; I'm happy I could meet you again, Mishta King! And Mishus Queen, too!"

It didn't cost anything to be affable; it could be argued that this was one of the secrets to success in life.

I don't think this was what they had in mind when they coined that phrase, buuut... There's no shame in playing to my strengths!

In any case, the king and queen were smiling kindly at me, so I figured all's well that ends well.

"Lars," Will called. Lars appeared beside him on the dais, leading me to

assume that the tiger had been waiting off to the side just out of sight. Will whispered something to Lars, then instructed a maid as well.

Lars nodded his head indulgently to Will.

Oh my goodness, that gesture was so adorable!

While I was internally fangirling, Lars leapt down from the dais in a single giant leap, without even a running start, to clear the large distance.

He looks just like a cat! Well, I mean, I guess tigers are a type of cat, but...

Lars landed softly without a sound or even a vibration on the ground. The way the muscles along his back rippled as he moved was 100 percent feline.

Lars skulked up to me and sniffed my scent. Then he moved past me, giving a single “Growl” as he passed.

It seemed he was telling me to follow him, so I did, turning and following him with excited steps.

Wait, wait, wait! That was a close one! I almost broke Papa and Mama’s rule. Lars, did you use some kind of magical charm on me?! You naughty boy!

My parents had forbidden me from playing with holy beasts in public, but the prince instructed me to do so. I looked to my parents beseechingly, silently asking how to proceed.

For some reason, Papa was wearing a pained-looking smile, and Mama was smiling indulgently, seeming proud that I’d remembered the rule about not playing with holy beasts.

“We still have more to speak with His Majesty about,” Papa said. “Neema, please be a good girl and don’t get into too much trouble, okay?”

Haha... He hit the nail right on the head with that one.

Given my track record of causing mayhem, I did my best to appear convincing as I cheerfully agreed, “Yesh, Papa!”

I turned, determined to enjoy playing with Lars as much as I wanted without reservation now that I’d received permission, when...

Lars wagged his tail back and forth.

Almost by ingrained reflex, I reached out and grabbed his tail.

Oh no! Cats hate having their tails grabbed, don't they?!

In my previous life, I'd done the same thing to our family's pet cat on many occasions and was always clawed bloody, but I never learned my lesson.

I timidly, hesitantly, glanced at Lars' face, but surprisingly, he didn't seem bothered. In fact, he seemed to be in a good mood.

Then Lars walked off, letting me hold onto his tail.

Oh, I see. He used his tail as bait to catch me, like a fisherman. It was a calculated move!

Lars led me to one side of the throne room. Technically, it was more like a corner. The only thing in the corner was a ginormous cushion. It was navy blue in color, soft and fluffy, and incredibly comfortable-looking. The massive cushion was as big as three twin-sized beds.

Lars hopped up onto the cushion and lay down.

I knew you were big, but this drives home just how huge you are, Lars.

Lars' body was about the size of a bison. Does that make sense? Okay, let's say he was the size of a *very* large cow, maybe a little bigger than a prize-winning Holstein. In terms of height, he was at least twice as tall as me.

If he wanted to, I bet he could swallow me whole.

After all, a bowl was overflowing with a giant mountain of raw meat beside the cushion, and that was just a snack for Lars.

A small chair was next to the cushion. Did someone put it there for me?

I'll use Lars as a cushion, so I don't need a chair, but thanks!

"Lars, shay 'ah'!"

I grabbed a handful of the raw meat and held it up to Lars' mouth.



It might've been unorthodox for a young lady from a noble family to pick up raw meat with her bare hands, but it wasn't that different from giving a treat to a dog or cat, and how else was I supposed to feed him?

Come to think of it, my pet cat in my previous life loved fried chicken. Whenever I'd eat it, she would sneak up on me from behind and cat-punch me, then run off with the chicken. That cat's attachment to food was frightening!

Lars obediently opened his mouth, and I stuck my hand inside.

Chomp!

I should've expected that. It doesn't hurt, though. He didn't bite down with his teeth.

The people close enough to see what had happened reacted with shock, but I didn't pay them any mind. When I pulled my hand out of Lars' mouth, it was soaked with saliva. Lars chewed the meat happily.

I was staring at my sticky hand, wondering what I should do, when a maid brought me a wet towel.

"Tanks!" I thanked the attentive maid.

However, the maid's face was as pale as a sheet, and her legs were trembling.

I dunno what the problem is, but you should take a break if you're not feeling well, lady.

But when I tried saying this, the maid responded meekly, "Oh, I couldn't possibly!"

Why not?

Once I was satisfied with feeding Lars, I moved on to playing with the pads of his giant paws. I touched them with my fingers, then rubbed my cheek against them. Lars seemed content to let me do as I wished.

But they were rough, as you might expect from a giant tiger.

I had a feeling they would be, but still.

Even with a dog's paw pads, once they became adults, they started to get rough. Kittens were the best; their paw pads were soft and squishy. I couldn't

get enough of touching and playing with them.

After the paw pads, I moved on to his tail.

I petted up and down the long furry tail and squeezed it gently between my hands.

Lars playfully tickled me with the tip of his tail.

My clothing that day wasn't very revealing, but Lars ran his tail along every inch of exposed skin he could reach; at my neck, cheeks, and calves.

I had to fight not to laugh at the ticklish sensation of Lars' tail on my skin. I buried my face in his stomach to smother my voice.

Once Lars seemed satisfied and stopped his tickle attack, I was limp from exhaustion after laughing so much.

What are you going to do about it if I have retroactive muscle pain tomorrow?!

Maybe because I was exhausted from so much laughing, fatigue soon overcame me. I used Lars' stomach as a bed to take a little nap.

Sigh. His stomach has the perfect level of firmness and is soft and warm to boot. Best bed ever!

Good night...

6 - You Know Who's Really Terrifying... (POV: Dayland Osphe)

MY precious daughter was fast asleep, snuggled up with a sky tiger.

Her peacefully sleeping face was as cute as an angel.

To be honest, I was uneasy about her proximity to His Highness' holy beast since it was a male, but he was protecting Neema, so I tolerated it.

The nobles gathered in the throne room had gotten noisy, so I was grateful to the sky tiger for putting Neema to sleep. It was strange to think that the sky tiger himself consciously didn't want Neema to hear the discussion that followed, but that seemed likely.

Sky tigers couldn't speak the human language. However, they could communicate their thoughts with the human they bonded with. They could also understand human speech; if anyone dared to badmouth the royal family in his presence, the sky tiger could communicate it to the prince. Of course, if the sky tiger determined the person to be a danger to his master, he would probably solve the matter immediately by eating them.

For Neema, being with the sky tiger was probably the safest place she could be.

The eyes of the gathered nobles were shining greedily as they contemplated the possible ways they could exploit the fire dragon's power, and suggestions sprung back and forth about how to manipulate this situation in our favor.

The cabinet ministers seemed particularly interested in Neema.

The Minister of Internal Affairs, a woman named Olive Wise, demanded more details about the situation.

General Gouche Zelnan, who was in charge of the royal knighthood and the royal guard, asked about measures to ensure Neema's security.

They both seemed genuinely concerned about Neema.

The ancestors of the families that served as the ministers of internal affairs, external affairs, and trade, along with the general and the prime minister, were known as the founding heroes. Strong ties bound those of us currently holding these positions, as our families had worked together for generations.

The rate of generational turnover was fast in our positions. The prime minister and cabinet minister positions were especially exhausting. For that reason, it had become a tradition to hold these offices while young and pass them on to your successor during your lifetime. My father pushed the role of prime minister and the title of duke onto me when I was twenty-four years old and spent the rest of his life enjoying a leisurely retirement. An unforeseen accident had taken him into the arms of the Goddess prematurely, but I was eager to pass my position on to Ralf, too.

Gouche was the only exception. He was turning sixty and still served as a general. Apparently, he'd already passed his aristocratic title and the responsibilities that came with it on to his son, but I thought it was about time he handed over his governmental position and took it easy for a change.

"I would very much like to take Lady Nefertima under the protection of the church. What do you think?"

Someone interrupted our conversation...

What nonsense is this idiot spewing? There's no way I would send my precious angel to live in that disgusting place!

"Oh? I didn't know you were interested in young girls, High Priest... I know that my darling Neema is adorable, but that's quite the request..." I said with a straight face.

The others snickered, but *he* didn't get angry; he just doubled down with his brown-nosing.

"Oh no, please don't misunderstand. We at the church have much experience educating the holy maidens, so she would be in good hands with us."

Educating the holy maidens?! Is that what they're calling brainwashing these days?!

The church would all but kidnap children with strong healing magic from their

families, and through a regimen of so-called education that relied heavily on outright abuse, they would mold these children into “holy maidens”—subservient living dolls that had no thoughts of their own and would never dare to speak out of turn.

What part of that is “holy”?!

Come to think of it, this guy had been persistent about Ralf at one point as well.

“Neema is a bit naïve and can be a hellraiser, but that’s why so many people love her,” I said. “I doubt that the fire dragon or His Highness’ holy beast would sit by idly and allow me to hand her over to the church to be broken down until she’s little more than a living doll.”

As if in agreement with my words, His Highness’ holy beast gave a small “Growl!”

Don’t growl; you’ll wake up Neema!

“Forgive my asking, but is Lady Nefertima truly your blood-related daughter?”

This sudden question came from a fellow duke, Feldas Razul, who stood slightly off to the side.

I detested the sly old man. He was obsessed with money and power and went so far as to scheme to get his hands on the royal family’s power.

Well, His Majesty is well aware of all of his schemes. His Majesty’s personally trained intelligence agents are so skilled, it’s honestly a little terrifying.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked sharply.

“Oh, I don’t mean anything by it. I’ve just heard the rumors, same as anyone...”

I couldn’t deny that although our older two children looked like us, Neema did not. Some people questioned my wife, Cerulia’s, fidelity, but I didn’t harbor a single doubt. I had absolute proof.

Cerulia chuckled at Duke Razul’s words.

I know how you feel, darling.

“I beg your pardon,” she said, a smile on her lips. “There is no mistake; Nefertima was a blessing entrusted to Dayland and me by the God of Creation.”

“You can say whatever you want, but that doesn’t make it true...” Duke Razul retorted.

Cerulia’s eyes gleamed (or at least they looked like they did).

I hadn’t seen this expression on her face in a long time. Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes were narrowed with contempt as if she were looking at an insect, and an icy-cold aura of disdain cloaked her.

I would never admit it to our children, but Cerulia used to look at me the same way when we first met. At times, she even spoke to me with ire that you wouldn’t imagine her being capable of based on her usual easy-going attitude.

It would damage my papa image, so I will never let the children find out!

“For you, perhaps,” she replied. “But unlike you lascivious aristocrats, we’ve both taken the True Name Vow. The power that dwells in all things confirms that Nefertima is our child. What greater proof could there possibly be?”

Marriage involved sharing your true name, which contained the power of the God of Creation, with your partner, swearing fidelity to one another, and binding yourself to the other person. This was called the True Name Vow, and if you broke this vow by committing infidelity, you would incur the wrath of God. You wouldn’t die, but a “fallen” mark would appear on the forehead of the person who disobeyed God by breaking their vow.

This brand proved that a person had lost God’s divine protection, and anyone who had it would become a social outcast, despised by everyone until the day they died.

However, not many men were satisfied to tie themselves to only one woman for the rest of their lives, especially not men in positions of power. A common practice had developed to circumvent this issue, where only the bride would reveal her true name at the time of marriage. This was called a Lady’s Vow.

This way, if the wife committed adultery, she would be marked as fallen, but even if the husband committed adultery, he would be safe because he hadn’t revealed his true name. It still wasn’t fully understood how this phenomenon

worked.

According to the writings of elementalists from the distant past, it was suggested that when someone broke a vow made on their true name, elemental spirits sensed it immediately, whether the person admitted it or not, and transmitted this knowledge directly to God. Elemental power was present in all things, and although you couldn't see it, it was everywhere at all times. There was no way to hide from elemental power.

Perhaps for this reason, these days, the spread of adultery permeated not only the aristocracy but even the common citizens. The number of people who stayed single or lived together as common-law partners without getting married had increased, and the declining birthrate was becoming a grave problem in all the countries.

If at least one of the spouses didn't vow on their true name, they wouldn't be recognized as married, and God only entrusted children to officially married couples.

Due to this, some countries were having terrible difficulties securing the line of succession for the throne. Typically, the queen would be a princess from another country, but it was unthinkable to force a princess to accept only making a Lady's Vow. And yet, if she and the king made True Name Vows, he would not be able to take any mistresses, which would compound the pressure on the queen to produce sons to succeed the throne.

In our country, we at least had me and my son Ralf in the line of succession since, although my grandfather abdicated his own claim to the throne, he didn't marry out of the country entirely.

If the royal family's blood began to run too thin, some aristocrats would cause problems, so Ralf needed to marry someone connected to the royal family. The princess of Milma, whose royal family the king's older sister had married into, was a promising candidate... Of course, it would be simpler if His Majesty were blessed with a daughter, eventually.

Oh no, I'm letting my thoughts run away with me. This won't do.

"Do you see the brand of the fallen on my forehead?" Cerulia challenged the men in the room.

“It’s well known that Duke Osphe was madly in love with you. It wouldn’t be unthinkable to surmise that perhaps he was willing to be the only one to vow on his true name...”

“His Majesty attended our vowing ceremony. Are you doubting His Majesty, then?” Cerulia doubled down.

And just like that, victory was in sight.

No one could ever hope to match Cerulia in a battle of words. It would only result in social anxiety and depression, ultimately culminating in losing the will to live and becoming plagued by suicidal thoughts.

Things had improved greatly since we’d gotten married, but they had been horrible when Cerulia was single.

These aristocrats were mostly unaware of how terrifying Cerulia could be, which was why they’d dared to speak out against our Neema. But, with the king’s favor and her quick wit and sharp tongue on her side, Cerulia had torn the foolish aristocrats to shreds.

Her boss at the Magical Research Center and her long-time friend, the king, both had Cerulia’s back. The two of them doted on her terribly.

The only people to blame for this situation are Razul for igniting her fire and yourselves for underestimating her!

7 - So, What Did I Miss?

...IT feels so smooth...

No, actually, it's kind of rough? Hey, come on now, you don't have to scrub so hard! Huh? Scrub? Oh, is that a cat's tongue?

I opened my eyes to find myself up close and personal with Lars' face.

My entire face feels tingly; would you mind stopping now?

"Growl."

Hm? You want me to ride on your back? Well, if you insist... I scrambled up Lars' side and sat on his back. While I was there, I rubbed my cheek against his soft fur. *Ahh, it feels so nice! I should've taken a nap up here. I probably would've fallen off, though...*

Once he confirmed I was firmly seated, Lars began to walk.

I hardly had time to wonder where he was going before Lars cut straight across the center of the throne room and climbed the stairs leading up to the dais.

It seems like he's heading back to Will, but why is he bringing me with him?

Lars lay down at Will's feet, and Will picked me up, cradling me like a baby.

"Good morning, Neema."

Eek! Your eyes are practically glittering, pervert prince!

"Guwd mowning."

No matter the situation, proper greetings were important. I tried to give a little bow as well.

But hold on! Why are those amethyst eyes drilling into me as if asking for something? Why? What is it? You said good morning. I said good morning. Good morning, good morning... A good morning...kiss?

You've got to be kidding me...right?

I gave the pervert prince a little kiss on the cheek. The glimmer in his eyes doubled in vibrance. Apparently, that was the correct answer.

This perverted demon prince!

"No fair, Will. Come over here with me, Nefertima."

With this remark, the king swept me up into his arms.

I thought I heard Will click his tongue, but it might've just been my imagination.

That's right, la-la-la, I can't hear anything!

"Sowwy for falling ashleep, Mishta King."

I got the feeling that Lars had something to do with my falling asleep, but it was probably wildly inappropriate to fall asleep in a place like this, so I figured I'd better apologize.

"It's fine. Sleep is very important for children, after all."

Yeah, yeah. This king knows what he's talking about. I bet he was personally involved in caring for Will when he was little. But, hey... What is that beseeching look in your eyes? You're making the same eyes at me as Will was. They're glimmering just like his...

...I give up. These two have formidable eye power.

I planted a big kiss on his cheek.

The extremely satisfied-looking king gently patted my head...

I'm not a kissing demon or anything, you know! I'm not Papa...

"Let me have a hug too!"

The queen joined the battle, and next, I found myself sitting on her lap. It was my first time seeing the queen up close, and I was dumbfounded.

"Sho pwetty!"

She was so gorgeous the words just slipped out.

Her thick, glossy hair was a brighter blue than Will's indigo, more like the

ocean, and her eyes, framed by long lashes, were a clear pink, like rose quartz. Her skin was so pale it almost looked like she'd never been in the sun. Her lips were plump and perfectly shaped, and, most importantly of all, she had an incredible hourglass figure.

Bada-bum bada-bum! What a figure!

From where our bodies touched, I could tell she wasn't wearing a corset. She wasn't artificially constricting or lifting anything, it was all natural!

Did she really birth a child?! Even my mama has a little... Nooo, I can't say it! I can't even think of it!

"Oh, I'm so happy!"

The queen's delighted voice brought me back to my senses.

Somehow I shoved the image of Mama's terrifying glare out of my mind and introduced myself to the queen again.

"Naish to meet you; I'm Nefertima Osphe."

"Hehe. Nice to meet you. I'm Relena. Is it okay if I call you Neema?"

Even her smile is gorgeous. Does she have some elf blood in her or something?

"Uh-huh!" I answered enthusiastically, and the queen rewarded me with a hug.

Wow, she smells really good!

"I always wanted to have a cute daughter like you."

You're still plenty young, Queenie. If you try hard, I'm sure you can have a daughter, and she'll be a hundred times cuter than me.

On another note, I felt someone's eyes drilling into me so hard that it almost hurt. In the privacy of my mind, I silently screamed, *You're just jealous!* before hugging the queen tightly.

She seemed a bit surprised but happily patted the top of my head.

Heh, I'm going to get a superiority complex from this kind of treatment. Speaking of which, is it just my imagination, or am I also popular with humans lately? Or am I just getting a little full of myself?

...Yeah, that's probably it! I have a plain face, after all. People are probably just being nice to me because I'm a kid. Once I get older, no one will notice me anymore.

...It's a little depressing to have to come to terms with something like that about yourself, huh?

In any case, in the end, I got away with everything!

They'd chalked the incident up to "the will of God."

Yeah, sure! They may call it "God's divine plan," but knowing that guy, "Fooling around with people's lives for fun" would be a more accurate description!

Not only that, but my "royal palace free pass" was upgraded! Now I could go anywhere I liked without restrictions!

Isn't that awesome?! Well, even though I can technically go wherever I want, I need to be escorted by a member of staff at some places. However, I'm not sure if this is a token of the king's goodwill or if he's planning something. I'm a little worried.

Apparently, my concern was showing on my face because Will told me something cool. He said there was a legion of dragon knights, and they worked with a species of winged dragon called lindblossoms and a related species of earth dragon called lindrakes.

I definitely want to see that!

...Are all my thoughts that obvious just from looking at my face? I really have reverted to the mental age of a child... Whatever happened to the version of me who was respected for being cool and mature?!

Small Talk: The Case of Gwynn Fields

I'M Gwynn Fields of the second brigade of the royal guard. Out of the twelve brigades of the royal guard, the second brigade was in charge of escorting and protecting the royal family.

The first brigade was devoted exclusively to His Majesty the King, so our charges were Her Majesty the Queen and His Highness the Crown Prince. The first and second brigades, which directly served the royal family, were known among the royal guard as “the roses.”

Two cycles ago, I became the youngest person in history to be appointed brigade leader, earning me a lot of attention as a rising star in the royal guard.

To be perfectly honest, I have no interest in fame or adoration.

My coworkers liked to tease me, saying that my talents were wasted on me or that I was a bore, but I didn't care.

I finished my report to the captain of the royal guard, then headed back to the second brigade's guardroom.

In the guardroom, guards on their break could eat, chat, nap, or generally spend their free time however they wished. The place was a bit disorganized, but it *was* an all-male workplace—kinda came with the territory, unfortunately.

Since becoming brigade leader, I'd beaten it into the men to dress smartly and pick up after themselves. Things had improved quite a bit.

A frantic-looking guard came running in.

“Hey, guys! The angel of healing is here!”

The guardroom fell silent, and then wild cheers broke out. Those eating wolfed down the last few mouthfuls, and those napping leapt to their feet.

It was my first time seeing them this enthusiastic about anything.

“All right! I call dibs on guarding His Highness Prince Wilhelm next!”

The others glared at the guard who'd made this proclamation with envy and

longing.

What on earth are they going on about? Angel of healing? I've never heard of this "angel" before and have no idea who they're referring to, but it seems like it might interfere with their work, so I'd better give them a stern warning.

"Don't get so excited that you get sloppy and make mistakes, men."

"Oh, Brigade Leader, I didn't know you were here..."

"It's okay, sir! We would never mess up in front of our angel!"

These guys...!

Murderous intent crept over me, but thankfully, I was able to smother it.

"By the way, what is this 'angel of healing,' anyway?"

The royal guards whipped around and stared at me in shock as if they couldn't believe their ears.

"Umm... Do you not know of the angel of healing, boss?"

"Obviously not. I wouldn't be asking if I already knew," I retorted.

The guards' expressions transformed from surprise to grief and pity.

They really are a bunch of unmannered ruffians.

"She's the youngest daughter of Duke Osphe, Lady Nefertima."

Lady Nefertima... I'd seen her at the council meeting to discuss the fire dragon incident, but she seemed like an ordinary little kid to me.

Sure, she looked like the daughter of an aristocratic family wearing a high-quality dress, but if she'd been wearing a peasant's dress, I doubted anyone would've supposed her to be anything other than a peasant.

She had an ordinary face, neither exceptionally beautiful nor ugly, and my strongest impression of her was that she didn't leave much of an impression. If she hadn't been a member of the highest ranks of the aristocracy, the espionage department would've probably been interested in recruiting her.

Her parents and older siblings were not only incredibly good-looking, but also exceptionally talented in academics, fighting, and magic. Rumors had circulated

that Nefertima might have been the result of adultery at one time, but the duchess squashed that theory.

“...She’s just an ordinary kid—” I began to say.

“She isn’t ordinary!” the men shouted in unison.

Hey, don’t you know it’s rude to interrupt someone when they’re speaking?!

“Lady Nefertima is an incredibly kind person. She speaks to us as if we’re friends despite the difference in status.”

“And she’s incredibly knowledgeable. She taught me tons of things about plants and animals, medicinal herbs, and healing techniques.”

“She helped me when a disagreeable aristocrat was harassing me. Lady Nefertima said that the aristocracy was entrusted with the power and authority of their status to protect the weak. I’m sure Lady Nefertima has also assisted many other people and healed them with her words and actions.”

“Lady Nefertima has a pure soul. Wouldn’t anyone be happy to hear her call them cool and amazing with that carefree smile?”

Hold on, we’re talking about a three-year-old here, aren’t we?! What does a three-year-old know about status and authority, anyway?! Don’t you guys remember how she ran off to play with His Highness Prince Wilhelm’s holy beast in the middle of the council meeting?

“You’d understand Lady Nefertima’s greatness if you spoke with her. Right, guys?”

That last bit had been directed at the other guards, and all agreed.

“Is that so? In that case, I look forward to meeting her,” I said.

A little girl who has the men this worked up over her... I must admit, I am curious to meet her.



FORTUNATELY, I immediately got the chance to do so.

I was informed that His Highness, Prince Wilhelm, would like to speak to me, so I left my duties to the assistant brigade leader.

Two of my subordinates were standing guard outside the door of His Highness' private quarters. Something seemed different about them than usual.

Their expressions were determined and focused, and they were standing at attention. They appeared to be working at least 20 percent more diligently than usual.

If this becomes the new norm, it'll make my job a lot easier.

I saluted the two guards, then knocked on the door.

"Brigade Leader of the Second Brigade of the Royal Guard, Gwynn Fields, answering His Highness' summons."

The door opened, and the chief maid assigned to His Highness curtsied respectfully.

"We've been waiting for you, Mr. Fields. Please come in."

I followed the chief maid into the room.

The simplicity of the décor struck me, as always, even though it wasn't my first time visiting His Highness' private quarters.

His Highness was not fond of excessive adornments or extravagant items. As such, nothing unnecessary was in his rooms, only practical and high-quality furnishings.

The laugh of a young voice echoed across the room, seeming out of place in His Highness' private quarters. It would appear that the legendary Lady Nefertima had come to play.

The chief maid announced my arrival, and I paid homage before His Highness.

"Thank you for coming. You may rise."

Once I received His Highness' permission, I rose to my feet.

"Neema, this is Gwynn Fields, the brigade leader of the second brigade of the royal guard. Gwynn, this is Duke Osphe's daughter, Nefertima."

After His Highness introduced us, I gave the formal salute of the royal guard and repeated my introduction.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady. I'm Gwynn Fields."

The young girl, who'd been reading a massive book, got down from her chair and greeted me politely.

"I'm Daywand Osphe's youngesht daughter, Nefertima. I shaw you in the throne room befowe, sho it's not our fiwst time meeting!"

Oh. She noticed me on the day of the council meeting?

"Neema, if you ever run into trouble at the palace, you can ask Gwynn for help."

"Okay. I'm cownting on you, Mishta Gwin!" Lady Nefertima said with an unabashedly full-faced smile.

"It would be my pleasure to assist you in any way I can, my lady."

I couldn't deny feeling that His Highness had saddled me with a troublesome task, but I couldn't very well act that way in front of a child, so I returned her smile.

"Gwynn, please take Neema to the dragon stables."

Huh? He's ordering me to babysit? And to take this kid to the place where that guy I can't stand works?

As the name suggests, the primary directive of the royal guard was to guard the royal palace.

Policing the royal city, subjugating monsters, and going to war were the work of the royal knighthood. For that reason, their numbers were great, totaling around 100,000 members, including those stationed at the fortresses along the country's borders.

The royal knighthood was also divided into twelve divisions, known as legions, but only about a third of their members were stationed in the royal city. The others were in the four territories in each of the cardinal directions.

The commander of one of those legions—the twelfth legion, also known as the Dragon Knights—and I got along like cats and dogs.

Just thinking about him makes me sick!

But if it was His Highness' order, I needed to swallow my personal feelings

and obey.

“Of course, Your Highness. But isn’t that dangerous?”

Lindblooms and lindrakes were classified as aggressive species of dragons. The dragon knights first had to win a dragon’s favor before they could ride on its back.

“Neema will be fine. If there’s any danger, I’m sure the fire dragon will take care of it.”

If His Highness insisted, there was nothing I could do. To be safe, I would bring two other guards along as escorts; between the three of us, we could probably handle anything that might occur.

In the end, I still had no idea why the guys idolized this child so much.

8 - We Meet at Last!

I was forbidden from playing at the royal palace until things calmed down. So, for the entire month following the audience in the throne room, I lay low at home.

During that time, my brother taught me about the medicinal herbs and other plants he was growing, and my sister taught me many things about magic. I also challenged myself to read through as many books in our private library as possible.

Will also visited a few times that month.

Aren't you supposed to be in school?! What about your official duties? Why do you have so much free time on your hands?!

But when I asked my mother about it, she explained that Will was practicing sword fighting with my brother. At these times, I was bored, so I entertained myself by playing with Lars and the royal guard who came along as Will's security. Of course, the royal guards obtained Will's permission before playing with me.

Then, at long last, Will said he would let me meet the dragons he'd told me about, so I eagerly visited him at the royal palace.

First, we met up in Will's room so I could learn a bit about the lindbloom and lindrake dragons I would meet today.

They were highly intelligent and could understand the human language but couldn't speak. Allegedly, they hated having their throats, wings, and tails touched. Sometimes they even attacked if anyone other than their partner, whom they were very fond of, tried to touch them.

Apparently, it really rubs them the wrong way, haha.

The dragons were divided into three categories.

The fire dragon, Sol, was a “primordial dragon.” In terms of my world, I guess we would call him an ancient dragon? Primordial dragons were holy beasts that could control the four elements and had a lifespan of thousands of years. They could speak the human language, and with their long memories, they were like living records of history. Along with elemental spirits, the primordial dragons were revered as beings nearly on par with God.

Lindblooms were a smaller species of dragons with wings and were categorized as winged dragons. Their bodies were shaped like lizards, but their snouts protruded like a crocodile. The well-known wyvern was another type of winged dragon.

Lindrakes were a sub-species of lindbloom that didn’t have wings. Dragons that walked the earth were earth dragons. Other types of earth dragons included serpentine dragons and giant worms that burrowed underground.

A dragon knight needed the approval of the dragons before they could be considered a full knight. Of course, their skills surpassed those of a regular knight, but the most important criterion for being a dragon knight was that the dragons were willing to allow the knight to ride on their backs.

For this reason, the dragon knights’ training was grueling. They worked their tails off to care for the dragons. Sometimes, knights tried a little too hard, and it backfired on them. Will regaled me with amusing stories of these dragon knights and the ridiculous things they did while trying to win the dragons’ favor when a man entered the room.

Based on his uniform, he seemed to be someone important in the royal guard.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d seen this silver-haired, handsome young man somewhere before. I pretended to be absorbed in a book while covertly glancing at the handsome young man.

The silver strands of his hair were long, reaching to his waist. His hair was braided to keep it out of the way, but the hairstyle didn’t look the least bit feminine on him, which was surprising because he had a more slender build than many of the royal guards.

His eyes were probably to thank for this. The intensity of his blue eyes was as

cold as ice. Anyone would get the shivers if those eyes glared at them!

Huh? Come to think of it, I vaguely remember being the target of a stare that felt like an ice beam piercing straight through me... When was that?

...Oh! It was in the throne room!

It had come from somewhere behind the queen... When the queen hugged me, someone glared at me *fiercely*. I hadn't been impressed, so I hadn't shrunk in fear.

Will introduced me to the man, so I got down from my chair and responded as a proper aristocratic young lady.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady. I'm Gwynn Fields."

Based on his introduction, he gave the impression he was a slightly eccentric "ice beauty" dedicated to his job.

He seems like he could be a pain to deal with. I'll do my best to avoid him. But Will's here right now, so I need to act mature and friendly. I can do it! My body might be that of a child, but my mind is that of an adult!

But, you know, it's been one annoying thing after another ever since I came to this world...



YEESH, Will... *Is there something wrong with your hiring process?*

Gwynn is ignoring me to bicker like a child with some dude. When am I going to meet those adorable little dragons? Although the subordinates he brought along also seem exasperated with him.

Hmm. Guess I should wait and see what happens. But I'm bored out of my freaking mind!

Just when I was thinking *Somebody, anybody, pay attention to me!* someone came!

A bird that happened to be flying past stopped and landed on my head. The bird pecked at my hair, hopped down on my hand, and seemed to ask, *"You got any food?"*

Oh... No, sorry. I don't have anything with me right now that I can give you.

I guiltily stroked the bird's soft feathers.

Just then, a potte appeared and held out an acorn as if saying, *"Here, you can have this!"*



Ack! He's so cute! And kind too!

The potte had droopy ears like a Scottish Fold breed of cat, and a fluffy tail, and I couldn't get enough of the adorable way he tilted his head coquettishly as he looked up at me.

Thanks, but no thanks. This acorn is too big for the bird to eat, so you keep it. Instead, please let me touch those precious little ears of yours!

With the tip of my finger, I traced the base of the potte's ear, then gently pinched his earlobe between my thumb and forefinger.

His ears are thicker than I expected.

The potte was trembling—perhaps it was ticklish.

Oh no! Somebody stop me; I don't know if I can control myself! I want to give him a big hug, like with Lars and Sol!

If no one were around, I'd probably be rolling around on the ground from the agony of holding back from acting on this impulse.

...But there are dragons nearby. I could hug them as tight as I wanted without hurting them—if only I could meet with them already!

...Are they still going at it?!

Good grief! He really is a pain in the butt! Can I ditch him and go in by myself? It's fine, right? I might be the child here, but I'm acting like the least childish one. I'm pretty sure the person Gwynn is arguing with is the leader of the dragon knights. So I can ask him directly, can't I?

Besides, that jerk Gwynn is saying he stinks like animals! But reptiles don't usually smell much. Maybe faintly of hay and grass, if anything...

He really is an idiot, isn't he?

And so, I smashed my way into the conversation.

“Excuse me! Can I go see the dragons now?”

I tugged on the other man's pants to get his attention. Once he noticed me, the legion commander crouched down so we were at eye level.

This is already enough to give me a favorable impression of him!

This might not have been unusual in everyday life, but I could count on one hand the number of people connected to the royal palace who would do that for me.

The more attached to status and position a person was, the more likely they were to find it disgraceful to kneel before a child.

Gwynn certainly hadn't done it.

We're making eye contact now, so I'd better greet him properly.

It was technically proper manners for a person of lower social status to introduce themselves first, but since I was making a request of him, I figured I should go first this time.

"I'm Dayland Osphe's youngesht daughter, Nefertima."

I smiled and curtsied, and the legion commander patted my head affectionately.

"So clever for such a young child! My name is Dan Yates. I'm the leader of the dragon knights. You can just call me Dan."

"Okay, Mishta Dan!"

I like his frank and no-frills attitude. Despite being an important person, he's friendly and not at all arrogant.

"I don't mind as long as you just look, but don't try to touch the dragons, okay? If you try to hug one, you'll get eaten as a snack!"

Between Sol's power and the gift God gave me, something tells me I'll be fine, buuut...

"Okay! I pwomise!"

I held Dan's hand like we were already good friends, and we finally headed into the dragon stables. Gwynn grumbled behind me, but I didn't pay him any mind.

If you hate Dan all that much, you don't have to come in with us...

"You don't haf to come in if you don't want to, Gwynn," I suggested, but the

men accompanying him enthusiastically objected.

Fine, but don't get in my way!

Based on its name, I'd been picturing dragon stables as a little barn like they use for horses or cows, but... This was an entire ranch! Even more incredibly, there were different areas with differing environments.

There was a desert, a wild area of rolling fields bordering a dense forest, and allegedly, even a lake was deep in the forest.

Magic was used to create the different environments of the ranch. So while air from deep within the earth heated the desert, the forest was cool.

The lindblossoms and lindrakes roamed freely here.

I asked, "Won't the dragons run away?" and was told that the dragons had been bound using their true names, so they couldn't escape.

I could tell from his tone that Dan loved the dragons and treated them very well.

They kept the area where the dragons slept clean and provided them with fresh food. Dan told me they even changed the habitats periodically so that the dragons wouldn't get bored of the scenery.

The dragons were lying around relaxing and didn't look the least bit aggressive.

They're so cute!

The lindblossoms looked as if their front legs might have evolved into wings because they only had rear legs. The way they walked on two legs with their wings tucked up like a bird was adorable.

The lindrakes were four-legged and walked with a creeping gait. I couldn't get enough of the way their tails swished back and forth as they walked.

"Sho cuuuute!"

Dan beamed from ear to ear as if I'd just complimented his own children.

But now I want to pet them more than ever... What should I do? If I ask Dan, he'll probably say no... Oh, I've got it! I won't touch them—I'll get them to touch

me!

"Come here, come here, little dragons!" I mentally called with all my might, and a whole bunch of dragons reacted.

"What is it?"

"You called?"

"Let's play!"

I was surprised to hear the dragons' voices inside my head.

What's going on?!

I started to freak out when Sol's voice popped into my head.

"As long as you possess the dragon orb, you will be able to communicate with all dragons."

Oh, so that's it. Hey, that's pretty nifty! I guess I shouldn't be surprised; the dragon orb is a super-rare legendary item, after all!

"Okay, thank you!"

Dan seemed wary of the swarm of dragons approaching us. Gwynn and his men drew their swords and watched the dragons carefully.

You don't have to be so nervous...

The dragons were on the other side of a tall fence. And they seemed to behave themselves out of respect for Dan. They'd heard a compelling request to "Come here" and really, really wanted to comply, but the fence was so tall they couldn't cross it.

Then, a lindbloom flew over the fence and landed directly in front of me.

Dan stepped in front of me, trying to protect me, but the lindbloom hissed and stopped approaching.

For my part, I smiled broadly at the lindbloom.

He's just so cute!

"What'sh your name?" I asked.

"My name is Ghizel, human child."

The voice I heard in my head was that of a human male. But with my ears, I heard the rumble of the lindbloom growling.

"My name's Neema."

"You exude the aura of the fire dragon."

Wow, they can sense it? I wonder if they know him.

"Sol gave me his dragon orb."

"And yet, you are not bonded with him... Well, no matter. Our flock welcomes you, dragon's maiden."

Somehow I'd leveled up from "human child" to "dragon's maiden" in moments, but what did that mean?

Well, putting aside troublesome things I don't understand, they'll play with me now, right? In that case, there's one thing I have to do...

"Ghizel, let me pet you!"

"I suppose that's fine..."

Hm? He seems bashful... It's super-duper adorable! All right then, I won't hold back! Well, I've never once in my life held back when petting any creature, but yeah, I won't start now, either.

His protruding snout was rough and dimpled.

Crocodiles are like this, too, right?

Oh? When he blinks, his eyelids close up from the bottom. That's the same as a lizard, isn't it? And his stomach is a little bit soft. Yeah, he's a lot like a lizard, after all.

When I stopped stroking, Ghizel demanded more pets.

What?! Are you a tsundere or something?! You are, aren't you?

When, without thinking much about it, I impulsively hugged Ghizel, growls of complaint sounded from the other side of the fence...

"No fair!"

"Pet me too!"

“Don’t hog her all to yourself, Ghizel!”

I am SO glad I got this gift from God. This is heaven! Don’t worry, I’ll hug each and every one of you! Just wait!

Still clinging to Ghizel, I asked Dan, “Ish it okay if I go play wif them?”

“Uh... Umm...”

The guards all seem kind of out of it, are they okay? Dan, your mouth is hanging open... A bug’s going to fly in if you don’t close it!

“Awesome!”

“What game should we play together?”

“Let’s go to the lake!”

The dragons on the other side of the fence spoke over one another in their excitement.

I climbed up on Ghizel’s back, and we flew off into the sky.

The feeling of my feet being unable to touch the ground, the wind on my face, and being able to see forever in all directions was so impactful that I couldn’t accurately put it into words.

I was incredibly jealous of all winged creatures for being able to indulge in this sense of freedom to their heart’s content.

Lars still wouldn’t fly with me, claiming it was too dangerous at my age.

I can’t believe I’ve been missing out on this all this time!

I was lying down, clutching the dragon’s neck so I wouldn’t get in the way of him flapping his wings.

Is this what hang-gliding feels like?

Oh, I should probably mention I got Ghizel’s permission before touching his neck.

The other dragons all followed after Ghizel and me. The lindrakes ran across the ground below us at an incredible speed.

I can’t believe how much dust they’re kicking up in their wake! You don’t have

to rush; we have plenty of time!

Ghizel brought me to a small hill covered in white flowers.

They told me these flowers were called senna and were like catnip to dragons! According to them, the petals were sweet, and the leaves were refreshing, almost minty. I tried them, but to me, they just tasted like leaves.

Senna lived for many years and was believed to promote a long life. I picked some and made bouquets to bring home as presents for Mama and Karna, and when I later gave them the flowers, they told me you can brew senna into a medicinal tea.

I made flower crowns for many dragons, but they all got eaten...

Just heartless, I tell you!

When I shouted, "Stop that! Bad!" the dragons ran off, so I chased after them. At some point, it morphed into a game of tag.

"Wait for me!"

"Here she comes!"

"Run away!"

Of course, I had no hope of catching them with my short little legs.

They went easy on me, but even so, the total ease with which they evaded me was super annoying!

I got tired from running around, so we moved to the lake in the woods.

Some dragons lounged or even napped on the shore, and others played in the shallow water.

I was surprised to see the lindrakes swimming.

I knew the lindblossoms couldn't swim because of their wings, but seeing the lindrakes swim made them seem even more like crocodiles. Except for the fact that they looked more like logs in the water than crocodiles...

Oh, that's right! Maybe one of them will let me ride on their back!

With that thought in mind, I asked a female lindrake named Eria, whom I'd

become friendly with, to give me a ride.

“Fine with me, but don’t blame me if you fall off!”

Nooo, don’t drop me!

“Guys, pwease save me if Eria dwops me!” I announced, preparing a backup plan.

“Okay!”

“We’ll save you!”

They’re so kind! I’m counting on you guys to be my life buoy!

I climbed on Eria’s back, and together we explored the lake.

The lake was deepest in the center and filled with clean water that fed up from a natural spring. The water level never changed, so I guessed the water must be connected underground to the river running through the grassy plain. I made a mental note to check it out next time.

I used my legs to splash water on the dragons swimming past us. They doused me with water in return.

Hold on a minute, you guys! That’s way more water than I splashed on you!

Eria got soaked, too, so I convinced her to join me in getting revenge.

Before I knew it, our playful splashing had snowballed into an all-out lindblooms versus lindrakes water fight.

A water fight is all well and good, but... In a battle situation, lindblooms have an overwhelming advantage. Using your wings is cheating!

The lindblooms couldn’t swim, so they were confined to the shallows, but the water they threw with their powerful wings was a mighty weapon.

Undaunted, the lindrakes gave it their best.

I wasn’t sure how they did it, but the lindrakes jumped out of the water like dolphins, soaking their opponents with the spray created when they landed in a full-on belly flop.

Incredible power! But now I’m soaked! My hair and clothes are soaking wet!

I fretted about what to do when Ghizel came to the rescue.

“You can use the fire dragon’s power.”

Oh, that’s right! Sol is a fire dragon. I can evaporate the water to dry myself off.

I wasted no time calling out to Sol telepathically.

To communicate telepathically, all you needed to do was picture the other person and form the words in your mind. Once they noticed you calling out to them, their image in your mind would become clearer; it was as if a string pulled taut inside your mind, connecting you together.

“Sol, I want to dry off my clothes!”

I wasn’t using my voice, so when speaking telepathically, I could speak normally. When speaking out loud, I still butchered S’s and R’s most of the time.

“Indeed, if you don’t clean yourself up, your mother will scold you.”

Mama’s scoldings were the worst, so I wanted to avoid them at all costs. I couldn’t bear the emotional sucker punch.

“Let’s keep it a secret from Mama!”

“You naughty child.”

Chuckling, Sol sent me his power.

The bunny backpack on my back glowed faintly, and warmth enveloped my entire body. My chilled body instantly warmed to the tips of my toes, and my hair and clothes dried completely. *Incredible! Sol and the dragon orb are like the ultimate cheat code!*

“Thanks!”

Time flew by in the blink of an eye while I played with the dragons. Just as the sun started to set, Lars came to retrieve me.

“Larsh!”

“Growl!”

It’s time to go home already? Can’t I play just a little longer?

While I was stalling to avoid going home, the dragons jumped on board and protested.

“We want to play more!”

“It’s still light out; we can play for a little while longer!”

“I wanna play with Neema!”

In response, Lars suddenly let out a great...

“ROAR!”

His echoing roar silenced the needling dragons.

Scary! I thought my heart was gonna stop! I’m sorry, I’ll be a good girl and go home now...

Even so, this was a side of Lars I’d never seen before.

Until this point, he’d always seemed like a kind, dependable older brother, but the way he fiercely scolded the dragons on my behalf was also very older-brother-like, in a different sense.

I’m going to do my best not to make Lars angry. If he growls at me like that, I might lose a few years off my lifespan!

Small Talk: The Case of Dan Yates

I'VE loved dragons ever since I was little. The dragon knights appeared in the royal parade held every year on the anniversary of the founding of our kingdom.

It was surreal to see the dragon knights ride atop one of the lindrake earth dragons and control it as if moving their own arms and legs or flying in formation through the sky on the back of a lindbloom winged dragon.

I was enchanted. Every time I saw them, my determination to become a dragon knight only increased.

Fortunately, my family were successful merchants, and I was able to attend the royal academy.

The academy had a scholarship system, but I wasn't smart enough to qualify, so I applied as a self-sponsored student. Self-sponsored students could be from any social class, but because they didn't get any financial assistance, their parents would need to be able to pay the tuition fees.

Dragon knights were selected from among the most distinguished members of the royal knighthood, so there was no "dragon knight class" at the academy. I joined the beast knight class, trained in swordsmanship and long weapons, and learned about the different types of animals and how to care for them. I figured that, although the animals the beast knights worked with were probably completely different from dragons, it wouldn't hurt to have that base knowledge.

After graduating from the royal academy, I spent some time in the Beast Knights Legion, one of the special divisions of the royal knighthood, and now I was the commander of the Dragon Knights Legion.

One day I received the news that a fire dragon had appeared at my alma mater, the royal academy.

Why wouldn't they call for us at a time like this?!

Standing around watching from the royal palace had been painful as the dragon flew off toward the mountain range to the north.

Afterward, a council meeting was held about the incident, and a rumor spread that a young girl had become the dragon's master.

To be perfectly honest... I'm insanely jealous!

I'd been swamped with work day in and day out, and just when the uproar surrounding the fire dragon incident started to die down among the men in my legion, we received an unexpected visitor.

It was the brigade leader of the second brigade of the royal guard, Gwynn Fields. We'd been in the same year at the royal academy, but I couldn't stand him because he always complained.

According to him, I didn't take enough care of my appearance, was not sufficiently aware of my position as a knight, and spent too much time playing with dragons and not enough time practicing sword fighting. As you can probably imagine, I wasn't interested in his opinion.

I reluctantly headed out to meet Gwynn, and as expected, he immediately set into me.

"As usual, your men are sloppily dressed. This is the royal palace—you never know when you might encounter a noble personage! Your lack of propriety makes us all look bad!"

"Of course, we clean up when we go into the palace," I said. "But unlike you guys, my legion rarely leaves the dragon stables."

During times of peace, the Dragon Knight Legion's work solely consisted of patrolling, caring for the dragons, training, and being on call.

While looking after the dragons, we wore standard-issue coveralls for manual labor. These clothes were easy to move in, and we didn't need to worry about getting them dirty. They were similar to the work clothes worn by the lower classes, only a bit higher quality.

"You may call it 'caring for the dragons,' but in reality, aren't you just playing around?"

“It’s part of our job to play with them,” I stressed. “If the dragons don’t like us, they won’t let us ride on their backs. Even you should be aware of that much.”

Nothing was more important to us than being accepted by the dragons. We would do anything to get them to accept us. Anyone who didn’t have that mindset wouldn’t make it in this legion.

“Speaking of doing your jobs, can’t you keep this place cleaner?” he continued to nitpick. “The beast stables aren’t any better, but this place reeks of animals.”

You didn’t have to come if you hate it here that much.

The two royal guards standing beside Gwynn also seemed troubled.

Well, I was just changing the hay in the dragons’ sleeping area, so I probably smell pretty sweaty.

“Excuse me! Can I go see the dragons now?”

I felt a tug on my pants and heard a voice coming from near my feet.

A young girl was wearing a finely tailored pink dress that I could tell with a single glance was very high quality and probably expensive.

Maybe it would be more accurate to call her a toddler?

She wore a red stuffed rabbit on her back, and the way she was looking up at me beseechingly was precious.

I squatted down so we were at eye level. A smile spread across her face at this, and she introduced herself with shaky pronunciation.

“I’m Dayland Osphe’s youngesht daughter, Nefertima.”

This surprised me. The patriarch of the Osphe family was a duke, who also served as prime minister generation after generation. Even at her young age, she should know it was customary for the person of lower social status to introduce themselves first.

...Is she intentionally flattering me because I’m the legion commander, and she wants to tour the dragon stables?

...I'm probably overthinking it; she must've just forgotten.

Even so, the lisping way little kids spoke and their innocent smiles were unconditionally adorable. I couldn't help myself; before I knew it, I was affectionately patting her small head.

Lady Nefertima says she wants to meet the dragons, but I wonder if she'll cry when she sees them?

To our legion, the dragons were cool and adorable, but I imagined a little girl would probably see them as frightening creatures...

In any case, I got her to promise not to touch the dragons, then agreed to show her around the dragon stables.

Lady Nefertima took my hand and walked briskly, urging me to hurry.

Following behind us, Gwynn continued to complain.

"Hmph! Letting a child near those vicious dragons..."

Hey, hey! The dragons here would never attack anyone unprovoked.

He should just leave if he hated this place so much, but apparently, His Highness the Crown Prince had ordered Gwynn to escort Lady Nefertima.

I suppose he can't abandon his charge simply because he hates dragons.

"You don't haf to come in if you don't want to, Gwynn," Lady Nefertima said, perhaps pitying Gwynn after all his grumbling.

"No! We will accompany you as long as you are in the royal palace, Lady Nefertima!"

"Don't pay the brigade leader any mind!"

Gwynn's subordinates blanched but recovered quickly.

Oh, I like their spirit! Gwynn's a jerk, but he's lucky to have such dedicated men working for him.

Although this was called the dragon "stables," magic had been used to make it so the dragons could roam freely. In one corner of the grounds were three buildings for the dragons to sleep in, and a short distance away was a building that contained the barracks where the dragon knights and apprentices lived, a

large cafeteria, and a meeting room. This building also had rooms for the live-in cook and maid, and the commander and assistant commander's private rooms were on the first floor as a security measure.

The three buildings where the dragons slept were called the hay nest, the sand nest, and the stone nest. At some point, the knights had arranged them like this to suit the dragons' different preferences, and the arrangement had stuck.

I showed Lady Nefertima the inside of the nests and explained the environment the dragons lived in. I'd figured she wouldn't be interested in such things, but she listened attentively. She even revealed her tomboy side by diving into the freshly changed hay in the hay nest.

Gwynn was scowling, as usual.

Do you hate not only animals but kids, too? No, he seems to be the type to view everything and everyone he hasn't personally approved of like dirt on his boots.

We were walking along the tall fence that stretched on seemingly forever from the nests when the figures of several dragons lying around here and there came into view.

Lady Nefertima's eyes sparkled when she caught sight of the dragons and called them cute.

Yeah! Wild dragons are fierce and regal, but the ones here also have an element of cuteness to them!

That didn't mean their fighting instincts were suppressed, but having a safe place to lay their heads at night somehow made a difference.

All of a sudden, the dragons began acting strangely.

They became restless and started shrieking frequently. The dragons close enough to notice us dashed toward us with great urgency, and the others followed close on their tails, rushing to converge in a large group.

Lady Nefertima seemed surprised by the dragons' behavior.

Gwynn and his men also noticed something was up because they drew their

swords and took up fighting positions.

A fence was between us, but even so, the sight of so many dragons shrieking and shoving one another in an attempt to get closer to us was unnerving, to say the least.

I chided myself for letting my own fearful instincts get the better of me despite my position as legion commander and was about to order the dragons to stand down when...

A lindbloom flew over the fence.

I stepped in front of Lady Nefertima before I had the chance to think.

As if anticipating my action, the dragon roared. It was a challenge against a weaker creature. I knew this intellectually, but my instincts refused to permit my body to move.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gwynn and his men also rendered motionless.

What should I do? How can I hold out until my men notice something's up and run over here?

My mind ran a mile a minute.

"What's your name?"

For a moment, I had no idea what was happening. I didn't expect Lady Nefertima, of all people, to be able to move in a situation like this.

If you're able to move, run away!

Oblivious to my thoughts, she approached the lindbloom.

The dragon's growl cut through the air, and the image of Lady Nefertima being torn to shreds flashed across my mind.

"My name's Neema."

But the sound that greeted my ears was neither a scream nor the rending of flesh, but instead a carefree young voice.

The lindbloom growled again in response.

“Sol gave me his dragon orb.”

Is she...having a conversation with him?

What am I thinking? That's not possible!

There were cases in the legendary heroic tales passed down through the ages where a person possessing a dragon orb could communicate with dragons, but...

Only primordial dragons could create dragon orbs, and they were so rare that most people considered them mere legendary magical items...

Wait, primordial dragons?! Could it be that Lady Nefertima is the one who bonded with the fire dragon?!

“Ghizel, let me pet you!”

That left no room for doubt.

She had no way of knowing, but we'd taken to calling the leader of the dragons, who lived at the dragon stables, Ghizel.

Furthermore, Ghizel's growl changed from a threatening noise to something that sounded more like an attempt at conveying his thoughts.

Frankly, I couldn't believe my eyes.

The prideful leader of the dragons and the only dragon at the stables who had never allowed anyone to ride him was obediently allowing Lady Nefertima to pet him like a dog!

“Ish it okay if I go play wif them?”

Lady Nefertima clung to Ghizel in exceptionally high spirits. The sight of Ghizel letting her have her way with him was so shocking I'd lost the ability to think.

I must've made some attempt at answering, but due in part to the effects of the dragon's earlier roar of challenge, the only thing that came out of my mouth was unintelligible gibberish.

Lady Nefertima took this as an affirmative response because, with Ghizel's assistance, she climbed onto his back, and they flew off into the sky.

I wish I'd fainted in fright from the dragon's roar.

If I had, I wouldn't have to feel this uncomfortably jealous toward that sweet child.

I wonder if she'll still smile at me once she returns?

9 - Safari Park: Part 1

TODAY I would be playing at the beast stables, where the animals who worked with the Beast Knights Legion, one of the special divisions of the royal knighthood, lived!

A dragon knight, whom I'd become friendly with, had told me lots of rare animals were also in the beast stables.

I'd begged Papa to take me, but somehow the request had been forwarded to Will. Will tried to assign Gwynn to accompany me again, but I refused and requested that Dan escort me instead.

Of course, I was just being considerate! Gwynn didn't seem terribly fond of animals, after all. Come to think of it—when I refused to go with Gwynn, his subordinates collapsed on the ground. What was up with that? Was it that much of a shock to them that Gwynn might not be a perfect human being?

But sometimes, people have weaknesses they just can't overcome, right? Thinking of it that way, I can somewhat sympathize with that ice beauty.

Dan held my hand and led me in the opposite direction from the dragon stables.

"Animals are afraid of dragons, so we put as much distance between them as possible."

That made sense. After all, dragons are at the top of the food chain. That's enough to make anyone nervous.

Anyway, we've been walking beside a tall wall for a long time now, but when on earth will we get there?

"Awe we almost der?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's on the other side of this wall. The entrance is... Look, there it is!"

Say what?!

The wall is at least fifteen feet tall. Are you sure this isn't a prison?! And we've been walking along this wall for a really long time—just how big is the royal palace, to have a place like this inside it?!

Once we passed through the gate, the commander of the Beast Knights Legion came out to meet us. This legion commander also crouched down so he was at eye level with me and immediately introduced himself.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady. I'm Legion Commander of the Royal Knighthood's Special Division Beast Knights Legion, Lestin Ogma. Please call me Les.”

Lestin seemed like an easygoing person. His smile never faltered, and he escorted me chivalrously, like a knight from a picture book or a novel.

He wasn't exceptionally handsome, which set me at ease. His dark brown hair was cut short in a style that looked like it would keep him cool in the summer, and his eyes were a bit darker than the color of his hair, reminding me nostalgically of a Japanese person's eyes.

I think he receives the best marks out of all the knights I've met so far! Dan's really great, too. He's very attentive. But he seems a little down lately. I often see him spacing out while watching the dragons. Dan's problem might be that he loves the dragons too much.

Once he found out I could communicate with the dragons, he asked me to interpret for him and set out to interview every single one of them. He asked about their favorite and least favorite foods, followed by their exact ages and physical conditions and the names of their favorite knights. It had taken me a whopping fifteen visits to the dragon stables to get through all the interviews.

During this time, Dan asked me a lot of questions, and I realized that an untrue rumor had been circulating about me. People believed that I had officially bonded with the fire dragon. The cause of this misunderstanding was the fact that I'd received the dragon orb. According to Dan, giant primordial dragons created dragon orbs to connect with their master.

But I guess you decided it was all right to give yours to any old human you fancied, bond or no bond, eh, Sol?

Of course, I set Dan straight right away!

Sol told me that if I feel I need him once I'm grown, he will bond with me. It's a little hard to know if he was referring to me being in a position where I need his power or if it's enough to just want to be with him.

During this conversation, I finally got the chance to ask what the holy beast's blessing is. Unfortunately, the only answer I received was "No clue."

Tch, so Dan doesn't know either, huh? My family won't tell me, and Sol only says I'll understand once we've bonded. Nobody will give me a straight answer!

Enough about human matters already! Let's get on to the main event, shall we?!

Lestin led us through a setting similar to the dragon stables. However, instead of a ranch, it was a safari park.

It's flat land for as far as the eye can see...

All the terrain I could see was grassland, but I got the impression that different areas were controlled by magic.

The first animals we encountered were a herd of horses. The war horses were a little beefier than the horses in my world, with long and heavily muscled legs. They were probably incredibly strong. The color variations—black horses, chestnut horses, gray and white roan horses, and white horses—were no different than in my world.

"Lady Nefertima, since this is a rare chance, would you like to ride on one of these horses while we look around the beast stables?" Lestin proposed an excellent plan.

Yay!

The only horseback-riding experience I'd ever had was the one time I got to ride a pony when I was a kid in my past life, so I was overjoyed.

"Yeah, I wanna ride da horsie!"

I raised my hands excitedly, and Lestin stuck two fingers into his mouth to whistle to the horses.

Wow! Using your fingers to whistle produces a much louder noise than just whistling with your lips!

A horse responded to the whistle and galloped over to us. He was the largest horse out of the herd of exceptionally beefy horses.

“This is the leader of the herd. His name is Uwaz.”

Uh-huh. I thought he had a kind of haughty aura. So he’s the boss of the herd, huh?

The horse came when called, but he was eyeing me suspiciously as if thinking, *Who’s this pipsqueak?*

“I’m Neema! Naish to meet you!”

“Snort!”

Impressive snorting power.

...Hm? Was that snort his way of laughing at me? I get the feeling he’s looking down his nose at me. So that’s how you wanna be, huh?

I smiled charmingly at Uwaz.

The horse stared straight back at me. It would probably be more accurate to say he glared at me, but I didn’t let it bother me. I’d always heard horses were very obedient once they’d accepted a person as their friend, but Uwaz seemed wary of me.

Looks like this is going to be a battle of wills.

“Uwaj, let’s play!”

My smile never faltered as I called his name, “Uwaj!” over and over.

Uwaz turned from me to look at Lestin. He seemed to be saying, *Can’t you do something about this pipsqueak?* But Lestin merely watched things unfold between the horse and me with an amused expression.

“Looks like Uwaj doesn’t want to play wif me... Leshtin, let’s keep going.”

“Neigh!”

Uwaz scratched the ground with his front legs in protest.

Thought so. You finally got to see your master, so of course, you don't want him to leave so soon. If you accept me as a friend, Lestin will stay too, you know?

"Do you wanna play?" I asked again, and Uwaz looked back and forth between Lestin and the herd behind him uneasily.

As the boss, is he conflicted about abandoning the herd to spend time with his master?

"I'm sorry, Lady Nefertima. Uwaz can be a little selfish..."

Uwaz deflated as soon as Lestin said this.

He looks so depressed! I could practically hear the BOOM as that blow hit him...

He's so adorable! Could this possibly be his true personality peeking through? I bet he's putting on an act and pretending to be haughty because he's conscious of his role as herd boss. Personally, I prefer him much better this way; he's just so cute!

In any case, I'd bet clear up this misunderstanding.

"Dat's not twue, Leshtin! Uwaj isn't selfish! He just doesn't want to let a stwanger near the herd shince he's the boss. Wight, Uwaj?"

In response to my question, Uwaz pushed his muzzle toward me.

I think he's saying, "Wow, you understand pretty well for such a little pipsqueak! But thanks!"

He's so damn cuuuute!

I stroked the horse's muzzle and patted the side of his neck.

In any case, it looks like I've won Uwaz over?

"Huh?!" Lestin all but shouted, finally registering the meaning of my words.

Sorry for my terrible pronunciation...

"Umm... You mean that Uwaz is just acting selfishly to keep people away from his herd?"

“Dat’s wight!”

What, don’t you believe me? Well, I suppose that toward Lestin, Uwaz always acts spoiled, right?

“I’m not sure horses do things like that...”

“Uwaj is weally smart!” I insisted.

Dan was also wearing a decidedly doubtful expression.

Don’t you know that plenty of animals play dead to fool predators into leaving them alone and that especially clingy dogs will try just about anything to get their owner’s attention?!

I did my best to explain, and in the end, both seemed at least somewhat convinced.

Lestin apologized to Uwaz for not noticing on his own. In response, Uwaz happily rubbed his muzzle against Lestin’s face.

See, he really is gentle and sweet deep down.

Now that we were all friends, I urged the two to get going.

“Could you call one of your friends to help us? Someone that you think would get along with Lady Nefertima and who even Dan could ride?”

At Lestin’s request, Uwaz let out a high-pitched “*Neigh!*” toward the herd. In response, one of the horses separated from the group and galloped toward us.

Before the horse gets to us, I’ve got a question!

“What you mean about a horsh dat even Dan can wide?”

Sorry for not paying closer attention.

“I’m not very good with horses,” Dan admitted. “When I worked for the beast knights, my partner was a wild bear.”

He seems a little embarrassed to admit it, but how can a knight possibly be afraid of horses? What is a knight without his trusty steed?!

And of all things, a bear? Does he think he’s the main character from the Japanese legend of Kintaro or something? Don’t tell me his weapon of choice is

an axe—then he'd be an undeniable Kintaro copycat!

Let me think: he told me he trained to use a... halberd? That's practically an axe, isn't it?!

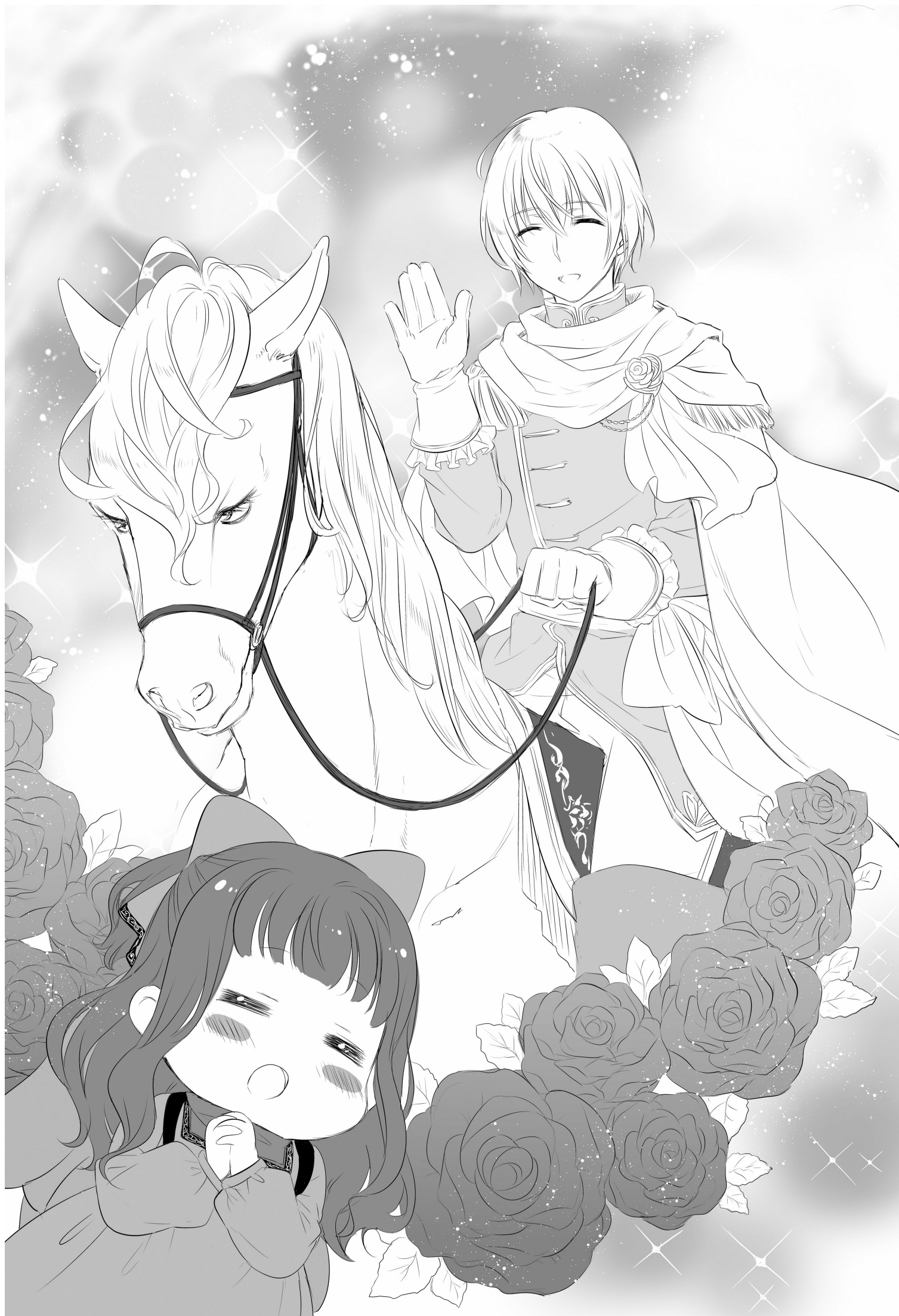
I tried to picture it, but I couldn't help but scoff at the image of such a Western-looking Kintaro. Dan had reddish-brown hair a shade darker than mine and pale green eyes. He reminded me of an especially muscular Italian hottie.

The horse had made it to us in the time it took me to wade through all those thoughts.

You know what? Forget about it! I'm done with this train of thought! Goodbye!

The horse that Uwaz had called for us had a beautiful all-white coat.

He's absolutely gorgeous, but more than anything, I wish I could see my brother ride him. If he rode this horse, he'd look just like the stereotypical blond-haired, blue-eyed prince charming on a white horse!



“This horse’s name is Hugh. He’s very docile and will go in the right direction even without orders from his rider, so he’s the perfect mount for you, Dan.”

Whoa! This horse runs on autopilot! And don’t think I missed that casual sarcasm! It looks like Lestin might have an unexpectedly dark side to his character?

In any case, we quickly saddled the two horses and, at long last, were on our way!



WE left the herd of warhorses behind and raced across the grassy plain.

Horseback riding is really...bouncy. What will I do if I pull a muscle in my butt?

While I was pondering this, we spotted our first target!

...A herd of cows?

Yeah, one of those species is definitely some kind of cow. Based on the horns, I think they might be water buffaloes? But what is the other species?

“Wat’s dat?” I asked.

“The smaller ones are land bulls. They’re a type of cow that only exists on this continent. The larger ones are horn heads. They have violent temperaments, so they’re suited for war.”

Land bulls were used like pack mules to carry things. They had mild temperaments and were easy to take care of, so farming villages also used them to plow the fields.

So I was right; they are just like water buffaloes.

The horn heads had unique horns. They were shaped like the letter T and decorated with horizontal lines that looked engraved. But the markings might also have been naturally occurring indications of growth because the same material that their horns were made of also covered their faces from the base of the horns down to their upper lips, with holes on both sides for their eyes, ears, and nostrils.

Including their horns, the horn heads were about ten feet long. Not including

their horns, they were roughly the same size as Lars.

“I wanna get a closer look!”

“Okay, but make sure not to startle them, got it?”

Heh, I’ve got this all figured out. I just need to call them to me. Then I’ll be able to touch them.

The land bulls all had kind eyes.

Kind and strong—no wonder they’re so popular!

Perhaps due to the quality of their feed, their coats were glossy and looked like a thick, soft blanket. I was admiring the luster of the land bulls’ coats when one came over to me and licked my face.

Slobber attack! Gak, there’s so much spit! My face is covered!

Lestin took pity on me and wiped my face with his handkerchief.

Seeing me sulking, the cow who’d licked me let out a “Moo!”

What’s that? You licked me as a sign of affection? In that case, I suppose I’ll accept it.

It seemed that I’d caught the horn heads’ attention while I was playing with the land bull because they also gathered around us.

Oh my, what a lovely coat you have, sir!

I buried my entire face in one of the horn heads’ hair.

It doesn’t smell bad. He smells like hay or a freshly cut field. And his hair feels so nice! It’s like a ball of yarn. Oh, but not wool yarn, more like acrylic. I want to touch his horns, too, but I can’t reach them!

Am I to be left hanging, then, after coming this far?!

I could try and get the horn head to kneel, but given their weight, I thought that might be quite a burden on their knees.

Hmm, now I’m in a pickle...

As if he’d understood my predicament, the horn head lowered his head.

Oh, right! Cows eat grass, so of course, their necks are long enough to reach

all the way to the ground, duh!

At this distance, I could see that the horizontal lines, which I'd thought might've been an engraved pattern, were just growth lines. The horns themselves were smooth.

The horn's texture reminds me of something I've touched before... What is it?

Oh man, it's right on the tip of my tongue, but I can't remember! I'll keep petting until I remember.

Hmm...

Pet, Pet.

Nope, not yet...

Pet, Pet.

...I've got it!

His horns feel like the trunk of a crepe myrtle tree! Phew, what a relief!

"MOO!"

The cow I'd been petting bellowed out a deep-pitched roar.

"Huh?"

"Look out!"

Taken off guard by the flip in temperament, I froze in front of the now aggressive horn head. As the horn bull reared back on its hind legs, I was snatched and thrown backward through the air.

Whoa?!

For a moment, I was sure the horns would skewer me, but somehow I landed safely in Dan's arms. I watched, wide-eyed with shock, as the horn bull I'd been petting turned and charged toward another horn head.

Crash!

A sound like two trees colliding into one another rang through the air as they locked horns.

"That's why I told you not to get them too riled up."

Umm... What does he mean?

Lestin responded with incredulity to the baffled look on my face.

“You didn’t know, did you? Horn heads get... *excited*... if you touch their horns. Apparently, rubbing horns with their partner is part of their mating behavior.”

“And when they get too excited or want to settle a challenge with another horn head, they’ll charge at each other and clash horns, as you just saw. Theirs is a power-based society, for both the males and the females.”

Hmm, what an unusual way of life! There are many species where the males are competitive, but for the females to be the same is pretty amazing! Okay, I get the horn heads, but...

“Leshtin! You thwew me!”

Lestin was the criminal who’d picked me up and chucked me.

“Sorry for being so violent. If I hadn’t made it in time, you would’ve been trampled.”

It’s hard to believe you’re sorry when you say it with a smile like that! Are you a scoundrel, after all? I’m starting to believe you’re the villain in this story!

Seeing me pouting, Hugh rubbed his muzzle against my cheek.

Are you trying to comfort me? You really are a prince’s white steed, aren’t you?! I’m usually the aggressor in cuddling and petting, but I don’t mind switching roles sometimes.

Once the noble steed Hugh calmed me down, we set off in search of our next target. We waved goodbye to the land bulls and horn heads before we left.

In response, we were serenaded with a cacophony of *Moos*. At least three of the cows’ parting greetings overlapped at any one time, creating tremendous noise. But I was cheered by the sense that they seemed to be saying they wanted us to visit again sometime.

Next time, I’ll come up with a plan so I can touch the horn heads’ horns again, safely this time. I could really get addicted to the sensation of their smooth horns.

We let our horses plod along at a leisurely gait for a short while until we located our next target.

Two rhinoceroses were hanging out, eating grass. They looked almost identical to the rhinoceroses in my world, except their horns were a little bigger.

“It’s a whino!”

“They’re skittish and fearful creatures, so let’s just observe them from afar.”

Thunk! Arrow to the heart! I’m not allowed to pet them?! In that case, I’ll call them over... No, I mean, I’ll leave them alone. Commander Lestin’s eyes are incredibly frightening right now.

“There’s a good girl. Instead, why don’t I tell you a story that involves rhinoceroses, Lady Nefertima?”

In this world, rhinoceroses were called living legends.

Since a rhinoceros horn could be processed in various ways and used to make a cure-all medicine, weapons, or even decorative items, it was very valuable. Hunters targeted them, hoping to catch one and get rich quickly.

However, although there were many sightings and reported encounters, there had only been three cases of successful rhinoceros captures or kills in the past few decades.

The theory was this was partly due to the rhinoceroses’ cowardly nature and tendency to flee whenever anyone approached, but also because their natural habitat was in “the dwelling of elemental spirits,” a place where magic didn’t work.

By the way, I was told that the rhinoceroses living in the beast stables were all born and raised here. I asked if they were all parents, children, or siblings, but that wasn’t the case.

How can that be?

The first king of this country’s beast mount was a rhinoceros. While on a campaign, the king’s mount mated with a wild female rhinoceros. Through trial and error, he slowly increased the size of the herd by breeding the children of

these two.

At this stage, the herd consisted only of parents, children, and siblings, but the king noticed that, either because the rhinoceroses somehow knew that their bloodline was becoming too concentrated or perhaps because they'd all been raised together, they began to refuse to mate, so he had to come up with another method.

It was a slightly unusual method.

Only when someone related to the royal palace was bonded with a holy beast would rhinoceroses in their mating phase be released into the dwelling of elemental spirits.

No magic could be used in the dwelling of elemental spirits, so they would get the holy beast to ask the elemental spirits to watch over the rhinoceros while it was there. The rhinoceros would be able to mate, and when the signs of pregnancy appeared, the rhinoceros would be taken back to the herd. Since this breeding strategy was adopted, the rhinoceroses have unfailingly gone along with the plan and reproduced.

Over the past few years, the number of baby rhinoceroses increased thanks to Lars' assistance.

Is it really okay to use a holy beast like this?

...I wouldn't be opposed to gathering them all together to form a petting zoo, though... No! Bad self! Enough of those kinds of thoughts!

But, anyway, what kind of king rides into battle on a rhino?

The first king of this country must've been a very unusual person.

I was reluctant to leave without petting the rhinoceroses, but we moved on in search of other animals.

Is that Lord Okkoto?! Oh, no, of course not. Silly me. It does look like the boar god from a certain copyrighted anime digging in the ground over there, though. Why is it digging a hole, anyway? Is it trying to make a booby trap?!

"Whatsh he dooing?"

The shock of seeing the boar dig what looked like a drop-pit made my

pronunciation extra shaky.

“Hm? Oh, a giant boar... She’s probably looking for food.”

No, no. That doesn’t answer my question at all; try again!

“That’s how they search for bugs to eat: by digging in the dirt.”

That’s much better. Thank you, Dan. However, that’s quite the dining experience... Oh, but she’s in the middle of eating, huh... I probably shouldn’t bother her while she’s eating...

While I debated what to do, the boar noticed us and started oinking.

Oh wow, she makes the same noise as a pig! The pitch is deeper because she’s so big, but the sound is the same.

“Oh no, looks like we’ve been caught,” Lestin muttered wryly.

Is it a bad thing that the boar noticed us?

The giant boar gave no indication of moving.

She stood there, staring at us. Suddenly, something leapt out from behind her and charged at us.

Through the thundering of racing footsteps, I finally made out the image of... Are those wild boar piglets?

Their eyes were bloodshot, their faces looked wild, and they were each about the size of an adult farm pig. But there was no doubt about it; they were definitely wild boar piglets.

“Wait, wait, wait! STOP!” I shouted in my mind.

The wild boar piglets attempted to stop, but due to the law of inertia, they slid forward for a short distance.

What are you guys, that you can act out a scene that seems like it would only ever occur in a manga?

There were five enormous wild boar piglets... If they’d slid into me, I’d be a goner. Well, if it were a manga, I’d probably fly comically through the air but survive unharmed.

“Oink, oink! Oink, oink!” the wild boar piglets cried, begging me to play with them.

You’ve crowded around so close that I can’t even move, never mind play!

And it wasn’t just me—Dan and Lestin were facing the same predicament.

H-Help me! Excuse me, mama pig?!

The piglets’ eagerly wagging tails whipped me, and they were staining my dress with their muddy, wet noses. Their bristly hair tickled my cheeks, and I was in no state to cuddle or pet any of them.

The wild boar piglets pressed in around me, leaving me gasping to breathe when a powerful *“Neigh!”* trumpeted through the air.

The startled wild boar piglets fled with as much energy as when they arrived, back toward where their mother waited a short distance away.

...What was that...?!

“Thanks, Uwaz. You saved the day,” Lestin praised.

Oh, I see. Uwaz came to our rescue.

Hugh approached me, concerned as well.

Yikes, that was intense. Those wild boar piglets swept in here like a typhoon.

“How unlucky for us that they found us.”

“Adolescent wild boars are extremely curious. Because they know humans will play with them, once they spot a human, they won’t stop until they get their way. There are many cases of beast knights suffering grievous injuries due to this every year.”

What a wild place to work, where you’ll probably get injured playing with the animals!

In any case, Lestin cleaned my dress with magic, and we moved to an area of higher ground a short distance away to take a break. While resting, we filled our bellies with sandwiches the cook from the beast knights’ cafeteria had packed for us.

In this world, they called any food that consisted of bread with some kind of

filling inside it a palas. Sandwiches and hotdogs were both types of palas.

These palas came in several varieties: some were stuffed with spiced chicken and mashed potatoes, others with cheese and fresh vegetables, and one type even contained seasonal fruits.

I was happy some sandwiches were cut into bite-sized pieces for me.

I'll have to thank the cook when we get back. I'm grateful for how considerate they were in making these sandwiches easy for me to eat.

All right! We're full and have recouped our energy; let's find more animals!

10 - Safari Park: Part 2

WE'D finished our break and set off on our horses when we heard footsteps behind us. We stopped the horses and a group of bipedal creatures that looked like dinosaurs came into view.

"That's a pack of wakkas," Lestin explained.

Oooh.

The wakkas had long faces and even longer necks, slender legs, and long, thin tails.

Just look at those jolly round torsos—how cute!

Their base color was yellow, but their torsos had brown spots, and the rest had stripes. When they ran, perhaps to maintain their balance, they leaned forward and moved with their heads and tails parallel to the ground. If they once had front legs, they must've disappeared with evolution because I didn't see any.

I think these guys are built for speed. They're insanely fast!

"Wakkas are the fastest land animals in the world. Here at the beast stables, we use them as messengers and in emergencies."

I see. But I wonder just how fast they are...

And so...

"I wanna *wide* one!"

...Yup. This smooth tongue of mine is unparalleled when it comes to talking my way into disastrous situations.

"Sigh. I thought you'd say that."

Hmph! Don't look at me with that expression, like I'm a troublesome naughty child! What's the big deal, anyway? I didn't insist on riding alone. Dan or Lestin,

one of you is welcome to ride tandem with me!

“Given how fast wakkas are, you need considerable training to ride one safely...”

“Nooooo! I wanna wide!”

We don't have to run at full speed; I'll make do with 50 percent speed. Just let me ride a wakka!

I gazed up at Lestin with hopeful eyes.

I did good holding back earlier with the rhinoceroses, but I won't back down this time!

We stared at each other unblinkingly for a full minute. In the end, Lestin broke first.

“...To prevent you from falling off, I'll attach a lifeline to you, Lady Nefertima. I assume that's okay with you?”

If it means I can ride, I don't care!

Lestin put two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly.

Phew-whee-phew!

The pitch and duration of the bursts were different from when he'd called Uwaz earlier.

Once they heard Lestin's whistle, the pack of wakkas changed direction and headed toward us.

“If we're going to ride together, it will need to be on Yoshu. He's got the stamina to carry us both.”

Does Lestin know the names of every single animal that lives here?

While I'd been cuddling and petting, Lestin had been giving health checks to the other animals, and I'd heard him call the ones who acted especially affectionately toward him by name. Come to think of it, Dan, too, could identify all of the dragons who lived in the dragon stables without mixing them up.

But by my estimate, the number of animals living in the beast stables was in the thousands, if not higher.

“Leshtin, how many of their names do you know?” I asked.

“Not their species, but their individual names, you mean?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, if I had the time to observe them and determine their identities based on their personal characteristics, I could probably name them all.”

Go figure!

In Dan’s case, I see it as a sign of his incredible love for his job. But with Lestin, I’m a little intimidated by his superhuman brainpower. Is that bad of me?

Oblivious to and probably not caring about my current train of thought, Lestin lightly hopped onto Yoshu’s back.

“Dan, if you’ll pass me Lady Nefertima, please?”

Dan lifted me and handed me over to Lestin, who helped me mount properly.

Hmm, I can’t find a comfortable position.

I wiggled around until I finally found a position that felt stable.

Okay, that’s good!

“Now I’ll attach the lifeline.”

Lestin reached around my hips and, working quickly and efficiently, wrapped a rope around me. He tied it in a perfect bowline knot.

“Lean forward and hold onto Yoshu. Don’t hold his neck; try to put your hands a bit lower... Good, just like that. If you squeeze too tightly, he’ll stop. So be careful.”

As he said this, Lestin placed his hands over mine and...leaned forward to cover my body with his?!

Eek, pervert! Oh my, don’t tell me this is a romance scene?! My heart’s beating so fast... Wait, what?! No way, I’m being ridiculous; that’s not it at all!

Romance, for a spinster like me? What card is that? Oh, it’s an Old Maid! She might have some cats to pet, but that’s all. And, anyway, my bunny backpack is between us, so it’s not as if he’s directly touching me. Besides, I’m much more

excited by the feel of this wakka fur! It's short and stiff, but it feels nice to rub.

"If you don't pay attention, you'll fall off."

"Yesh shir, Commander!"

Lestin must've given some kind of signal because Yoshu set off running.

In this position, I don't have the luxury of worrying about the scenery. I can't even raise my head!

In contrast to the light tapping of the wakka's footsteps, the roar of the wind and the speed of the ground passing by beneath us were incredible.

The wind was so intense I could hardly breathe, and my eyes were painfully dry.

Where... Where's my helmet?!

Perhaps I was shaking from the unexpected strain on my body because somehow Lestin noticed something was wrong.

I heard him chant the words of a spell close to my ear, and immediately I could breathe easier and no longer felt the force of the wind, either.

"I completely forgot. Are you okay now?" he asked.

Forgot? ...There's no way that wasn't intentional! He sounds amused! Did I push this guy's weirdo switch at some point and not realize it?!

"Would you like to go a bit faster?"

Without waiting for my response, he urged Yoshu to increase his speed.

Yoshu ran with a plodding gait that reminded me of a certain fast-running desert bird from a Western cartoon. If he started saying, "*Meep-meep!*" like a car horn, it would complete the image.

I only had moments to think before I lost the ability to think entirely.

Ahhhh!

It was like riding on a roller coaster without a seatbelt.

I feel like I'm going to fall off at any moment! I admit defeat! Yoshu, please slow down!

Yoshu obediently slowed until he came to a stop.

“We were just about to reach 50 percent of full speed. What’s wrong?” Lestin asked.

“I hab a lot of wespect fow anyone who can wide a wakka...”

Sure, there was a saddle and bridle like a horse, but even so, I shuddered to think how many miles per hour the wakka would clock in at if someone measured it. And to think they typically rode without any protective gear at all!

The visceral experience of unholy speed was even greater than riding a motorcycle.

When we returned to where Dan waited, he took one look at my limp body and laughed so hard he had to clutch his belly.

There’s nothing funny about this!

“Screech!”

A bird screech rang through the air. Lestin and Dan looked up at the sky in tandem. They pointed as if they’d caught sight of the bird.

Huh? Where is it? I don’t see it...

Lestin used his fingers to blow a series of intonated whistles resembling bird calls, signaling to the bird.

Oh, there it is!

A brown bird flew toward us. At some point, Lestin had taken what looked like a leather glove out of his saddlebag. It was a combination glove and arm cover for one arm.

What do they call those...a gauntlet?

Lestin put on the gauntlet and waited until the bird swooped down and landed on his arm.

Th-This is...!

Those beautiful round eyes, curved black beak, and impressive flight feathers... It’s a hawk! They’re birds of prey—so cool!

Apparently, Lestin was a trained hawker.

I'm so jealous! I want the hawk to sit on my arm, too! ...But that's not possible with this wimpy little kid arm of mine. What a bummer.

Lestin sighed. "Looks like my men got into trouble again. They need me to come back right away."

Oh, the hawk was carrying a letter? When I looked closer, a pipe was attached to the hawk's leg. Even better than a carrier pigeon; she's a messenger hawk!

"She cawwies lettersh?"

Lestin seemed irritated, so I asked Dan.

"That's right. During the daytime, we use gleyhawks like this one, and at night, we use night owls to carry letters for us."

Owl post, huh? That sounds strangely familiar... But wonderful all the same! I'm so jealous—I want a bird of prey as a pet!

"Leshtin, Leshtin! Let me have her!"

Oh crap. I blurted out my selfish desires without thinking.

Lestin misunderstood and assumed I was asking to pet the hawk because he slowly crouched with her on his arm.

The feathers on her back were smooth and streamlined, but the feathers on her stomach were soft and fluffy. When I stuck my finger under one of her folded wings, it was very warm.

When her winter feathers grow in, will she be even fluffier? I can't wait to find out!

"In any case, we'll have to finish here for today."

Aw, that's too bad. I wanted to see more mysterious animals. I was looking forward to seeing a wild bear and maybe one of the large felines they call rye panthers here, but I guess it can't be helped since Lestin has to get back to work. I promised the king I wouldn't enter places where animals live, like the dragon stables and the beast stables, or where weapons or magic are used, without a member of staff escorting me.

“Next time, can I pway wif a wild bear?” I asked.

“Sure. As long as I’m free, I’d be happy to show you around any time.”

I got him to agree to a “next time,” but considering his position as the legion commander, I doubted he had much free time... *Maybe I should ask Will again and have him make an appointment?*

When the buildings were in sight again, two beast knights came out to meet us.

“Commander Les! I’m so sorry!” one of the men said forcefully, falling to one knee.

“There’s nothing we can do about it now but take care of the problem. Let’s get to it, shall we?” Lestin said.

Very good. He’s remorseful for his mistake, so it’s better to focus on how you can fix the problem rather than merely scolding him. What a good boss you are — Lestin?!

His eyes are scary right now! He must be furious on the inside! Just what did these guys do while we were gone?!

“What happened?” I asked Dan in a whisper.

“Apparently, a white moose escaped.”

White mousse? That sounds delicious!

No, no, wait. It’s a white moose, not a white mousse. Moose are like giant deer, right? It must be a huge deal when an animal escapes. My condolences! Anyway, now that I have some unexpected time freed up, I think I’ll play with Ghizel!

Small Talk: The Case of Lestin Ogma

“DOUG, you’re falling behind. If you can’t learn to control a wild bear, you won’t be able to move on to the next animal.”

Today was a training day for the new recruits assigned to the Beast Knights Legion, and we’d been at it nonstop since this morning. I knew it was an important part of my job as the legion commander, but I couldn’t deny that it was exhausting.

The recruits had already finished their training with the most generic mount, horses, and this was their first day since moving on to wild bears.

All the animals living here were tame, so once you got the hang of each species’ particular traits, they were pretty easy to control, but...

“Yo, Les!”

Looks like we have an uninvited guest. Good grief... Maybe I don’t look it, but I’m very busy...

“What do you want?”

Well, I suppose he’s easy to deal with since at least I don’t have to stand at attention around him.

“I was hoping I could get you to let me go for a ride on Bae...”

“You left saying you wanted to ride dragons, and now you’re back wanting to ride your old partner...? What happened? Do the dragons hate you now or something?”

This guy used to be a member of the Beast Knights Legion but transferred to the Dragon Knights Legion just like he’d always dreamed of doing and worked his way up to become legion commander. He was ga-ga over dragons.

“I almost wish that were the case...”

Wow, it’s rare to see him this depressed over anything.

Although we were both commanding officers, I had a higher rank as a lieutenant commander, whereas he was just a legion commander. But when we'd worked together in the beast knights, I'd looked after him as my junior colleague, despite riding different animals.

He had a dauntless personality, was bad at giving up, and always seemed to have an optimistic way of thinking.

"I'll have to listen to the details of what promises to be a very amusing story later. For now, as long as Bae agrees, you're welcome to ride him."

"An amusing story...?"

Amusing for me, at least.

"While you're at it, why don't you give the new recruits a demonstration?"

Although he'd made quite a name for himself as a dragon knight in recent years, he'd been so skilled with the wild bears (and *only* the wild bears) back in the day that he was still a legend among the veteran beast knights.

"Sure, I suppose that's fine."

Strangely, whenever he was around, the bears seemed to be in a good mood and were more likely to be obedient. I was not above using any weapon that came my way.

Bae, the boss of the wild bears and Dan's former partner back when he was a beast knight roared in delight when he spoke to him.

He'd raised the bear and cared for him since he was a cub. That cub grew up to become the leader of the pack. It's no surprise that they'd become attached to one another.

He leapt up on Bae's back and checked the reins to see if they needed adjusting.

He used his legs to signal to the bear, and Bae showed off his impressive leg strength, bursting into a full-out run. From his position mounted on the charging bear, Dan twirled his signature weapon, a halberd, with careless grace. As usual, his arm strength was astounding to witness.

Wielding a heavy and high-impact weapon like a halberd with such speed

should be impossible for anyone other than a beastperson unless they used magic to cast a strength spell on themselves. Furthermore, he was simultaneously directing the wild bear to perform sudden turns and stops.

Bae was more powerfully built than the other wild bears and ran at least 20 percent faster than them, too. Well aware of this, Dan was reading the movements of his mount's muscles, and, at just the right moment, when it would put the least burden on the bear, he would signal to turn. It was an almost miraculous performance.

The recruits watched with wide eyes and open mouths.

I suppose I promised to listen to his troubles, so I'd better follow through.

After all, he'd given a wonderful demonstration, Bae's mood had improved considerably, and it had been a valuable contribution to the recruits' training.

However, his story was a bunch of whiny complaining, mostly focused on repenting for harboring bad thoughts toward a young girl...? Although "bad thoughts" sounds alarming when the subject is a young girl, it was mostly feelings of resentment and self-loathing—in short, jealousy.

I suppose it wasn't an interesting story, but I was amused nonetheless. I hadn't laughed out loud in quite some time.

"Laugh while you can. At some point, this will stop being somebody else's problem," he warned.

I can't just pretend I didn't hear that. Are you suggesting I'll end up in the same sorry predicament as you?

"I'm sure it's only a matter of time before either His Highness Prince Wilhelt or Duke Osphe sends a request for Lady Nefertima to visit the beast stables," Dan said.

A little devil, visiting us here? Very well; we accept the challenge.



I can see now that I gravely underestimated her.

I'd heard the rumors, but Lady Nefertima really didn't look anything like Duke Osphe. She was, how should I say... A bit plain? That was my first impression of

her.

I would never have guessed that Uwaz would take to her like he did.

Uwaz had left countless beast knights in tears, but it turned out he was actually a weak... or, rather, *delicate*, soul the whole time. I suppose he did occasionally cuddle up to me, but it turned out *that* was his true character. His normal prickly behavior was a façade he put up because he was conscious of his position as leader of the herd.

It's not amusing after all.

It's really not amusing at all.

What is up with all of you?!

No matter how much we trained, the animals never behaved like this toward any of us beast knights.

Why had Yoshu stopped without my telling him to? He sometimes tried to buck me off his back, yet he was so considerate toward a little girl... Maybe he wasn't so hard-headed after all?

And to top it all off, I got the news that a white moose had escaped! "Due to unavoidable circumstances," those numbskulls let a member of a rare species slip right through their hands...

White moose were valuable because they could be used in the woods and mountainous terrain, and very few lived here!

"Use a fergie to track the white moose," I ordered. "Once you find its trail, switch over to a flarehog."

Wild bears had some of the sharpest noses of any animal, so we could've used one of them to find the white moose immediately, but there was a high likelihood that if we did, the moose would be alerted to the presence of the bear and flee long before we could capture it.

Instead, we'd use a fergie, a type of bloodhound with an especially keen sense of smell, and then switch over to a flarehog (a type of miniature pig known to have an even better sense of smell than fergies) to avoid scaring the white moose off. This was the best we could do at this point.



SO why did things turn out like this?!

“She was losht!”

She wasn’t lost; she just couldn’t get back into the palace compound, right? If she was hanging around in the forest right outside the royal palace, she must’ve known which direction home was in.

“And you found her for us, Lady Nefertima?”

Before anything, I first needed to find out the full story.

“No! Da ewamental spiwits notished she was losht and was pwotecting her!”

...Umm, I think she just said that elemental spirits were watching over the lost white moose?

“Dey towd Lawsh, and he went to find her.”

The elemental spirits notified the holy beast, and he brought her back?

“Okay, I understand now. However, if something like this ever happens again, next time, will you please notify us first?” I instructed.

I’d been shocked to see Lady Nefertima, who I’d assumed had already gone home, return with His Highness’ holy beast and the missing white moose in tow. And I’d been a little irritated to see her riding on the moose, looking pleased as pie.

All animals seem to adore her, almost like magic... If that kind of ability exists, as a beast rider, I want to have it too!

I don’t hate Lady Nefertima or anything. She’s so cute, it makes my teeth hurt, if you get what I mean. As a fellow animal lover, I understand her desire to touch and play with animals very well.

The problem is your complete and utter lack of restraint, Lady Nefertima!

Moderation is the key, moderation! All things are best in moderation, don’t you know?

11 - Let's Go Shopping

"HAPPY birthday, Neema."

"Tank you, papa."

That's right, I, Nefertima Osphe, am now four years old! Four years old already... No, I should be saying, "Still only four years old?!"

As a child, there were many things I couldn't do or wasn't allowed to do. Just thinking about it made me salty.

"For your present this year, I'll grant you one wish. What would you like?"

Hmph, only one present? You're stingier than expected, Papa. Hmm, well... Since it's a special occasion, instead of having him buy me something, I'd rather go somewhere and have a memorable experience.

Oh, I've got it!

"I want to go into town!" I exclaimed.

Come to think of it, the only places I've ever been are our family's home and the royal palace. I'm practically a shut-in! What a waste.

In any case, my first goal needs to be learning the currency of this world and getting a feel for the cost of things. It's about time for me to make my solo shopping debut!

"Oh no, Neema. It's dangerous in the city!" Papa said.

What?! Didn't you just promise to grant any wish my heart desired?!

"I think it's fine, as long as she doesn't go alone."

Oh! Mama's on my side! If I'm not allowed to go alone, then I'll go with my sister. Shopping is more fun when you go with a group of girls, after all!

"Den I'll go with Kawna!" I said.

"That would be twice as dangerous!" Papa asserted. "You girls can't go into town on your own!"

Umm, did you forget that Karna knows how to kick butt with her magic? Well, she doesn't have any actual combat experience yet, but still!

“We’ll bwing Dee wif us!”

“What if they also have Paul or Josh come along to carry their bags?” Mama suggested.

Paul and Josh were apprentice butlers. I suppose you could call them footmen?

In our home, a steward oversaw the operation of the entire manor. Mama and Papa each had a butler, and each butler had an apprentice. There were also eight maids, three cooks, three stable keepers, and two gardeners.

Come to think of it, we have a pretty big household!

We employed significantly fewer servants than other noble families. In other manors, the servants’ jobs were divided by specialization, so they had to hire more people.

In comparison, all of our servants were highly skilled and multitalented.

It’s just like medieval Europe, right?! I wish I could have someone like Sebastian as my butler, though... Too bad.

In any case, it looks like Papa lost this time. He can never win a debate against Mama.

“Very well. Neema, get ready to leave. I will speak with Karna.”

“Okay!”

Awesome! I wonder what kind of shops we’ll see. It’s always exciting to go to a new place for the first time!



THE royal city was in the shape of a donut, with the royal palace at the highest point in the center, the private residences of the nobility and middle class, the educational and manufacturing district containing schools and workshops, the commercial district full of all kinds of shops, and the lower-class residential district where commoners lived positioned in concentric circles.

The districts were divided with streets running between them, delineating four individual rings. Eight thoroughfares radiated out from the royal palace in the center, cutting through all four districts. If you looked down at the city from above, it probably looked like a layered Baumkuchen cake cut into eight servings.

I'd learned about the layout of the royal city by looking at a simple map, but there was one thing I couldn't help but wonder about.

The fact that there is only a certain amount of land in each of the districts means they can't increase the number of buildings, right? If so, the city can't continue to grow and develop...

When I asked, Mama explained it to me proudly.

She said that once every two years, they used massive-scale magic to move the earth to add space to districts that needed room to expand. They used huge amounts of earth magic and non-attributed magic to push the buildings and streets out of the way without damaging them. Then, new homes and shops could be built in the new space.

Why'd they build the city in such a troublesome way in the first place?!

Oh, what's that? Mama says the first king wanted to look down from his castle on the hill and see a beautiful cityscape? What's so beautiful about a Baumkuchen city?!

The first king was a strange guy...

It would be impossible to see the entire commerce district in one day, so we focused on the section of the commerce district my sister was most familiar with, given that this area was close to the royal academy.

The carriage rattled and swayed as we traveled. It wasn't that the roads were shoddy or anything. The thoroughfares were cobblestone and wide enough to have about three lanes. There were even sidewalks.

After leaving our house, the first thing we saw were dozens of huge and lavish mansions. Grandpa Gouche's place was more like a miniature fortress than a house.

Next, we came to an area populated with ostentatious houses of varying sizes.

We traveled straight up a road lined with what looked like martial arts studios until we arrived at the royal academy looming directly in front of us.

We got out of the carriage at the royal academy. The plan was to wander around on foot from here, window shopping.

I held my sister's hand, and Dee was on my other side. Paul hovered silently behind us.

When we came out to another thoroughfare, different from the one we'd driven down in the carriage, it looked like an event was happening! So many people were there, it was almost impossible to move! If I wasn't careful, I'd get separated from my group and lost in the blink of an eye.

I know one way to prevent that from happening.

"I want to ride on Dee!" I said to Paul imploringly, and he obligingly set me on the dog's back.

Now people are actively avoiding us... Do I really stand out that much?!

A stunningly beautiful young girl, her dutiful butler, and a little kid riding on a giant dog... I suppose we do make for an unusual sight? In any case, it's better than getting lost!

"I'm so happy we're getting the chance to go shopping together, Neema!"

My sister was excited today. Her face almost sparkled, which gave a 20 percent boost to her already stunning looks. I hoped we didn't run into any trouble because of it.

"Kawna, teach me how to use money!" I implored.

I need to figure out how money works in this world, or I'll never be able to do anything on my own.

My sister took some money out of her wallet and explained the different types.

"Okay. The smallest unit of currency is called a rye. Ten ryes equal one copper

ingot. Ten copper ingots equal one copper coin. There are also silver ingots and silver coins that add up the same way. What do you think comes after a silver coin?”

Well, based on that pattern, I’m assuming it’s a gold ingot? Or maybe it suddenly switches over to bills?

“A gowd ingot?”

“Good guess, but no. Ten silver coins equal one gold coin. And ten gold coins equal one platinum coin, but those are incredibly rare. The royal palace is the only place that can break a platinum coin, so some people collect them as a form of financial investment.”

Wow, it’s so complicated!

So it sounds like this country doesn’t have any paper money. I wonder if any of the other countries use it.

“That stall over there is selling drinks for eight rye. But at a sit-down restaurant, a drink usually costs around three copper ingots.”

Okay, I think I’ve got it! One rye is like ten cents, and then there’s one dollar, ten dollars, and 100 dollars... In which case, a platinum coin is worth 100,000 dollars?!

But the currency here seems easier to carry than the yen back in Japan. It’s all coins, so you don’t have to worry about it flying away in a strong wind or anything.

Our campaign funds for the day consisted of ten copper ingots, ten copper coins, and two silver ingots. I was impressed with our mother’s foresight in preparing some smaller coins so the shops we visited wouldn’t have a hard time making change.

All right! Let’s waste no time launching a full-frontal attack on those market stalls! They look like what you’d see at a festival or something—I can’t wait to check them out!

“Dee, let’s go over der!”

I pointed to the shop I’d set my sights on and got Dee to bring me to it.

This is awesome! Thanks, Dee! People are avoiding us so hard that it's almost funny. This reminds me of a scene from an anime or something.

The first stall we looked at was selling grilled meat on skewers.

What's this? Smoked wild turkey? One copper ingot per skewer? Wait a minute, isn't "wild turkey" a type of whiskey?!

No, that's not what they're talking about. It's clearly the poultry variety that they're selling here.

In any case, the meat is huge!

They'd skewered several pieces of smoked turkey on each stick, then grilled it on a sizzling hot griddle to add enticing char marks. You were supposed to spread cream cheese on the skewer or dip it in one of the several sauces they sold for an additional charge.

"Excuse me, mishta! Thwee skewers, pwease!" I ordered.

He was more of a "grampa" than a "mister," but the festive atmosphere of the market had me in an especially generous mood.

"Welcome, welcome! You've got good taste, little lady. We sell the most delicious turkey in the world!"

See, this is what I'm talking about! This enthusiasm is contagious! Who am I to disrespect the maker of the most delicious turkey in the world?!

"For three skewers, it'll be three copper ingots. They're hot, so be careful when you eat them!"

I took the skewers and passed him the money.

Oh my god, they smell heavenly! Oh no, I think I'm drooling...

"Here you go, Kawna!"

The first skewer was for my sister.

"Thanks!"

Now that I think about it, I don't know Karna's food preferences. But if she accepted the smoked turkey, that probably means she doesn't mind it?

“And dis one’s yours, Paul.”

He seemed surprised when I held the skewer out to him, but he quickly schooled his emotions and told me not to worry about him.

Ugh...

“It’s a bwibe to get you to cawwy our bags!”

“A bribe...?”

Paul smiled wryly, looking troubled, but eventually relented and accepted the skewer along with my explanation.

Time to eat! Mmm, it’s delicious!

The meat was softer than I’d imagined, and the more I chewed, the more the richness of the meat intensified. I took my time enjoying two pieces, then gave the rest to Dee.

“Is it yummy, Dee?”

“Woof!”

I knew human food wasn’t good for dogs since it usually contained a lot of salt, but I promised myself that it would be just this once. It seemed cruel to leave her out when we were all enjoying a tasty treat.

“Kawna, Paul, was it yummy?”

“Yes, very. But I’d enjoy just about anything I got to eat with you, Neema. Right, Paul?”

“Certainly. Thank you very much, my lady.”

Your face doesn’t look very grateful, Paul! It’s okay to show some glimpses of emotion from time to time, you know! Oh, maybe he’s stunned by Karna’s excessively sappy words? That’s called affection, Paul! Affection!

We left the skewer stall and passed a palas stall without buying anything. Next to it was a shake shop. I was interested, but something else caught my attention, so I made a mental note to return later.

The stall that caught my eye sold inflated, yellow baked goods. They gave off an enticingly sweet smell.

“Kawna, what’s dat?”

“Those are a type of sweet treat called pepes.”

Pepe? That means “lump” in the language here, but...

“They mix powder made from dried and ground fruits of the jeux tree with flour and a few other ingredients, then boil the dough before frying it on a griddle. That’s how they get it to puff up like that.”

I peeked into the stall. A young woman boiled little balls of dough, and an older woman grilled the boiled dough balls on a large griddle. When they were done, the older woman removed them to a tray beside the griddle, and the moment they were removed from the heat, they naturally inflated with air.

Wow, that’s interesting! But why are they called lumps?

“Why are dey called pepe?” I asked.

“I’ve heard various explanations, but the most common is that they look like the humps of a desert camel.”

A desert camel? Assuming they’re not too different from the camels in my world, their humps do look like lumps.

“Thwee, pwease!” I ordered.

“Oh, what a charming young lady! Only three?”

When she puts it like that, I’m not sure! Is three enough?

Seeing me hesitate, the older woman added, “If you buy twenty, I’ll add three more for free.”

Twenty?! What do you think I’m gonna do with twenty of these things, lady?! Should I bring them back as souvenirs for everyone at home? If you don’t count Paul, there are twenty people.

“Hmm... How about four fwee instead of thwee?”

“If you’ll buy twenty, sure, I’ll make it four free. But who’s the fourth one for?”

I suppose it makes sense that it wouldn’t occur to her that I want it to feed to a dog.

“It’s for her!” I said, pointing to Dee.

“What a sweet girl you are! All right, for twenty pepe and four free, it comes to one copper coin.”

That’s cheap!

Are pepe notoriously super cheap or something? Do people usually make them at home? If so, maybe it wasn’t a good idea to buy them as a present for everyone...

In any case, I had her wrap the twenty pepes and took the extra four as-is.

“Thank you bewy much!”

“If you buy from us again, I’ll give you a few extra for free next time too!”

Wow, this lady is a fierce seller!

“I’ll be back for sure!”

I smiled widely and waved to the older woman before leaving the stall.

We stopped once we’d gotten away from the crowds a bit, and before anything else, I handed Paul the bag of pepes so he could carry it for me.

“Neema, what do you need so many for?” my sister asked as I handed her and Paul each a pepe.

“They’re for everyone at home.”

At this, Karna grabbed me in a crushing hug.

“You are just *too* cute!”

Karna, your hug is painful! And the pepes are going to get crushed! Ack, nooo, don’t squeeze even harder!



“Lady Karna...” Paul warned.

This brought Karna to her senses because she apologized and patted my head consolingly.

Well, at least the pepes weren't crushed. No harm, no foul!

Now, back to the main event... Let's eat! I took a big bite. *It's so sweet! And delicious!*

But it seemed different from the sweetness of sugar... More like a natural sweet potato, maybe? The dough was somewhere between a pancake and a steamed bun. And the texture was similar to that of a castella.

I could get addicted to these. It won't be hard to make good on my promise to buy their pepes again.

We browsed through the wares at a stall selling accessories and purchased matching pendants for Karna and me. The charms were leaping rabbits—super cute, right?! Mine was pink, and Karna's was green.

At another shop, I found a beautiful barrette with a bird motif that I bought for Mama. For my brother, I selected a copper bookmark. It was a thin sheet of copper engraved with a dragon design and looked like something you might find at a souvenir shop in Little China. My brother had a bad habit of leaving his partially read books open and turned upside down to hold the page. It was bad for the books, so I wished he'd stop doing it.

Nothing leapt out at me as being perfect for Papa, so after much debating, I finally settled on a paperknife. I figured he could use it at work, so at least it wouldn't go to waste.

By this point, we were exhausted from looking in so many shops, so we took a break to have some tea before heading home.

We'd have our tea at my sister's favorite café.

It was close to the royal academy and a bit off of the main street, so I assumed it would be a nice, quiet place. I say “assumed” because, contrary to expectation, once we arrived, my sister got entangled with a group of incredibly loudmouth girls.

As soon as we entered the café, I could hear the shrill laughter of young girls. In my past life, I'd often seen groups of schoolgirls like these hanging out at fast-food restaurants. Things weren't much different here.

"Ugh!"

...K-Karna?!

I was surprised to hear such an indelicate noise coming from my sister, but Paul was frowning too, so there was no doubt that it had been her...

The loudmouth girls noticed us because two rose from their seats and headed toward us.

"Oh, if it isn't Lady Karnadia. Good day."

"A pleasure to see you here, Ultina and Shayla."

You don't look pleased, Karna...

"What a surprise to run into you in a place like this."

This conversation sounded like they were reading from a textbook of polite greetings.

They do know this is her favorite café, right?

"A coincidence indeed. I was out shopping with my little sister," Karna said.

"Your sister? The one we've heard all those rumors about?"

Oh? Have I done anything worthy of gossiping about lately? Hmm, nothing springs to mind...

I get the distinct feeling they're laughing down their noses at me...

And, anyway, this is our first time meeting. Where are your manners, not even bothering to introduce yourselves properly? They may be older than me, but because Karna isn't referring to them as "lady," they aren't of a social station that requires me to greet them first. So I'll watch and see how things go.

"It must be difficult for you, Lady Karnadia, having such a dud for a little sister. I consider myself fortunate that my dear Shayla brings me great pride; the instructors all hold her in high esteem."

Oh, so these two are sisters, are they? I suppose I can see the resemblance now that she mentions it...

“Oh, sister! I’m the one who’s proud to call you my sister. You’re blessed with both wits and beauty!”

Let’s keep that kind of thing to the privacy of our own homes, shall we? Praising each other lavishly like that out in public makes you look like idiots.

“Heh. I’m so relieved you are both blissfully unaware of how incredible my sister is. Anyone with two brain cells to rub together would be able to see it right away, of course,” Karna said.

“Whatever do you mean?”

Huh?! Isn’t it obvious?!

In an incredibly roundabout manner, my sister had called these girls idiots straight to their faces.

Or else maybe they’re daring her to say it again?

“You won’t understand unless I spell it out for you, will you?” Karna continued. “Very well. You know your father, Duke Razul, is ranked lower than my father, Duke Osphe, correct? And yet, you did not even bother to greet my sister and went so far as to insult someone you’ve only just met. Is that how noble young ladies behave? That goes for the girls with you, as well. No matter how highly ranked someone is, if they behave in such a deplorable and tactless manner, associating with them will only dirty your family’s name.”

...There she is, our mother’s daughter!

There was no room for argument against the truth. That phrase was coined exactly for times like this.

“My sister only spoke the truth. Your sister isn’t beautiful and can’t even use magic. And she’s got those creepy black eyes, to boot! What qualifies such a child to hold a position of esteem among the aristocracy?”

Oh, the younger sister’s got some balls!

But even if I was impressed with her nerve, I couldn’t cheer her on when she was talking crap about me.

Come to think of it, that might be the worst I've ever been trashed before!

"Indeed. Then do you presume to challenge the authority of the God of Creation?" Karna challenged.

"What?! No one has said anything like that!"

She's telling the truth, she didn't say that... What are you up to, Karna?

"Rebuking the existence of a person is the same as rebuking the God of Creation himself, for he created that person. My sister was born because the God of Creation deemed her existence necessary in this world at this time."

Hold on, Karna! Isn't that a bit of a reach? And, besides, you aren't devoutly religious by any means!

However, it was a little frightening how close her words were to the truth. I hadn't told anyone about my reincarnation and had no intention of telling anyone in the future. Had my sister somehow figured it out on her own?

"Those who are able to comprehend this are very fond of my sister. The royal family, for example."

And there she goes, pulling out the big guns. Well, I suppose they are fond of me... In the same way, a person might be fond of a favorite toy or porcelain doll.

For this reason, grown adults all but trembled in fear, worried that if they misaligned me, they would earn the king's displeasure.

Indeed, the sisters blanched at the mention of the royal family. They were so pale they almost looked green. I felt a little sorry for them.

I suppose it can't be helped; I'll throw them a life preserver.

"Kawna, let's go home."

I tugged on her skirt and did my best to look tired.

"You're right. There's no way we could enjoy our tea in the present company. Let's head home and give Mother and Father their souvenirs."

Phew. Crisis avoided?

I wonder what we're having for dinner. It's my birthday, so I hope they made all my favorite foods!

Okay, let's go home!

12 - A Wonderful Gift

IT was a little iffy there at the end, but all-in-all, the shopping trip with my sister was a lot of fun! We promised to go shopping together again sometime, but next time we'd invite our brother as well.

Perhaps I'd overdone it because I was exhausted in the carriage on the way home.

I'm not sure I can stay awake...

Dee noticed me drifting off, and maybe she was a little worried because she leapt onto the seat beside me. With Dee beside me, I didn't need to worry about falling off if I fell asleep.

With that in mind, I used Dee as a pillow and quickly fell deep asleep.

I didn't notice when we reached the house, but I was later told that Paul had difficulty waking me up. Usually, he would've just carried me into the house asleep, but since I'd been saying I wanted to hand out my souvenirs, he decided he'd better wake me up.

Sorry for being so difficult to wake up.

Bang!

A loud crashing sound rang out through the air.

Was that a gunshot?!

I jolted awake from the shock and clung to Paul in near terror.

"Happy birthday!"

Gathered in the foyer of our home were my family and the servants, Dan and Lestin, and, for some reason, Gwynn was there, too. The three cabinet ministers, who were my father's close friends as well as his colleagues, were there, as was the general, Grandpa Gouche.

Additionally, the entire royal family was in attendance.

Oh, I see Gwynn came to guard the king and his family.

It was such an unexpected sight that my eyes were probably as wide as saucers. Paul gently set me down on my feet, but I had no idea how I should react.

“Looks like it was a success. Our precious angel certainly looks surprised,” Papa said.

Yes, I’m so surprised that my brain has turned to mush. Will you please enlighten me as to what the heck is going on here?!

“We’ve all come together to celebrate your birthday, Neema.”

“We wanted to surprise you, so we kept it a secret. You’re surprised, right?”

My mother hugged me, and finally, the tension left my body.

Still, what was that crashing sound? It was too loud to be a party cracker...

Hmm, that cylinder my brother is holding seems to be the source of the noise... I guess it was some kind of cracker, after all?

I looked around at everyone’s faces again.

They were all important people. They must’ve been busy, yet they’d all made the time to gather together for a little kid like me.

Don’t get me wrong, I was happy. I was so happy I thought I’d burst into a flood of tears at any moment. I tried distracting myself by thinking of something else, but in the end, it proved unsuccessful.

My voice stuck in my throat, and I couldn’t choke out a single coherent thought past the sobs that wracked my small body.

“Oh no! Did we surprise her so badly that we scared her to tears?!”

My mother frantically tried to comfort me, but I shook my head insistently.

“I’m...*sniff*...happy! ...*sob*...”

I couldn’t stop the tears that rolled down my cheeks, and I was even finding it hard to breathe.

I must look hideous right now! I have a feeling my face will hurt tomorrow from all this crying...

“You’re crying tears of joy?”

I nodded emphatically.

Relieved, Papa picked me up for a hug and he patted my head affectionately.

I was passed around to my brother, then my sister, then the king and queen, and even to Will, like a bizarre game of hot potato.

Will had the nerve to come out and tell me I looked terrible.

Nobody asked for your opinion, thanks!

Next, I greeted Olive, Sanrus, and the elusive Eugene, who hardly showed his face at the royal palace. These three cabinet ministers had become like an aunt and uncles to me. They were the kind of good friends who might as well be family.

“Uncle Gene!”

“You’ve gotten big, Neema.”

“Tell me anotha stowwy!” I requested.

Uncle Gene was dedicated to his work as the minister of external affairs and spent his time traveling to all corners of the continent of Larshia, visiting neighboring countries. He was a bit older than my father but was still unmarried. Perhaps due to the unusual coloring of his gray hair and red-tinted orange eyes, he also looked younger than Papa. His ancestors had held the minister of external affairs position for generations, so it made sense that the blood of various countries was mixed in their lineage, producing such a unique appearance.

When he was younger, Uncle Gene even traveled to other continents. I loved hearing him tell those stories the most.

I want to travel someday, too... Then I can meet lots of different kinds of animals to cuddle and pet!

Once I’d gotten plenty of attention from Uncle Gene, I was passed over to

Grandpa Gouche.

Grandpa Gouche was so hearty and gumptious that sometimes I couldn't keep up with him. Despite his age, Grandpa Gouche was still working full-time with no sign of slowing down. Honestly, it hurt how tightly his heavily muscled arms held me. His hair had lost most of its original golden hue to old age and was cut short. And he had a frightening face that was only softened somewhat by his kind blue eyes.

"Neema, dear, when are you going to let me adopt you as my daughter?"

Huuuh?! This is the first I'm hearing of this!

Besides, Grandpa Gouche had a son to be his heir and a daughter, not to mention five grandchildren between them. His lineage was well and truly secured.

"Neber?" I responded. *Darn those Vs!*

"Gouche! Stop trying to infect my darling Neema with your strange ideas!" Papa snatched me away from Grandpa Gouche.

But the look on Grandpa Gouche's face makes me think he's planning something... He's an incredible strategist. I'd better watch out so I don't get snared in his trap.

"Thank you all for gathering here today to celebrate Nefertima's birthday," Papa announced in a loud voice. "Food has been prepared in the dining room, so let us move inside to begin the birthday feast!"

Awesome! Time for food!

I bet they'll have grilled meat on the bone seasoned with herbs, that dish that's popular here—the one that's similar to curry except it contains beans—and maybe a variety of fruits?

At Papa's urging, everyone headed into the dining room. It might've been more accurate to call it a ballroom to convey how large and ornate the space was. Colorful flowers decorated the dining room, making it look even more opulent than usual.

When did they find the time to prepare all this? If they pulled this off in the

short time Karna and I were out shopping, I'm impressed with our servants' near-superhuman abilities.

Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd ever seen this room in use other than for Papa's birthday party. The rest of the family usually had smaller, low-key parties in the garden on their birthdays.

"Tank you, evewyone!"

Before the guests toasted their drinks, I took the opportunity to thank them all again. The delicious-looking party foods were calling my name, but good manners came before all else.

"Now then, let us toast to Nefertima! May she continue to grow up healthy and strong! Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Hm? Auntie Olive led the toast... Wasn't that supposed to be Papa's job? Oh well. I know how much Auntie Olive loves to drink; she was probably eager to get it over with and get to the main event.

Auntie! That's wine, not beer; you aren't supposed to chug it like that!

In any case, time for me to find some food!

I helped myself to small servings of each of my favorite foods. Regrettably, I was still too small to be able to eat much at once. There wasn't much I could do about it except wait for my body to grow.

I was about to attack a pasta dish when the king and queen called for me.

I wonder what they want.

"This is a present from His Majesty and myself," Queen Relena told me.

I was handed a fairly thick, rectangular box. A detailed design done in mother-of-pearl inlay decorated the lid of the box. The box alone seemed quite valuable.

Uh-oh, now I'm stuck... If my parents were here, they'd know how to politely refuse such a costly gift without giving offense, but...

The two eager sets of eyes urged me to quickly open the box, leaving no room

for argument.

I need to tread carefully.

“Is it weally okay to open it?” I asked.

“Yes, of course!”

I apprehensively opened the box and peered inside to find that the box contained two layered compartments. Jewels filled the upper compartment, and a pendant was nestled in the lower compartment.

No matter how you look at it, this isn't the kind of present you usually give a child, right?

The jewels were all cut into the shapes of different animals, and they were gorgeous. The pendant was shaped like a miniature birdcage and designed so that the jewels could be put inside.

“Those are magical stones; I had them enchanted with powerful magic.”

Whaaat?! That's kinda terrifying!

Don't smile sweetly and speak in such a kind voice while saying such alarming things, Queen Relena!

“You need to say the magic words to activate the spell...”

You too, King Gauldi... What are you making that “mischievous little boy” face for?

“Magik wordsh?”

“That's right. The magic words are, ‘Help me, Uncle Gauldi.’”

Huh? Did he say the magic words are “Help me, Doraemon?” What, is Doraemon's 4D pocket memo pad going to appear or something?

“What nonsense are you speaking, Father?”

Thank you! Finally, someone is speaking some common sense here!

It wasn't as if I could come out and say what I was thinking. Will was the only one who could freely talk back to the king and queen.

“How rude! It's not nonsense...” King Gauldi pouted.

“Hehe. I know how you feel, darling, but we must teach her the correct words to activate the spells...” Queen Relena chastised gently.

And so King Gauldi explained it to me properly.

The fire-attributed ruby was carved into the shape of a dragon. Maybe they intentionally made it look like Sol?

The activation word was “Farlem.” Using it would activate a high-level spell known as “the crimson salamander.” This spell would continue spouting flame until it burned its target to ash.

The wind-attributed emerald was carved into the shape of a bird in flight. It reminded me of a pigeon.

The activation word was “Veezae.” Using it would activate a spell known as “the forest storm.” It was easy to picture based on its name; it produced the hard-to-control wind of a large typhoon with a six-mile radius.

The water-attributed sapphire was carved into the shape of a dolphin.

The activation word was “Akdeen.” Using it would activate a spell known as “the maiden’s permission.” This spell unleashed a massive tidal wave that pushed aside anything and everything in its path.

...What does washing things away with water have to do with giving permission? Not sure about the logic behind that name...

The earth-attributed topaz was carved into the shape of a... dog? Or maybe it was a wolf?

The activation word was “Gnouas.” Using it would activate a spell known as “absolute inviolability.” This spell would create a dome-shaped wall of protection about three feet in every direction around the stone, impenetrable by either magic or physical attacks. However, while the spell was active, anyone inside the protective wall couldn’t see anything outside.

I’m not sure if this sounds helpful or more trouble than it’s worth...

Apparently, the activation words for the four jewels were actually the names of the elemental kings for this continent.

I wonder if I’ll be able to remember them all... And I doubt I will ever have a

chance to actually use spells like these.

“Unlike mother and father’s gift, this will actually protect you, so keep it with you at all times,” Will said, clearly doubtful about the practical usefulness of the magic gems his parents had gifted me.

Will’s present was a bracelet set with a small green stone. The stone was entirely opaque, so it was probably jade. When I asked what kind of power it had, he told me it was a secret. Jerk.

That broke the floodgates because soon everyone clamored around me with presents.

The cabinet ministers showered me with new dresses, shoes, and hats.

When I complained that I would only be able to wear the clothing for a short while before growing out of it, they countered that the dresses had been designed so they could be let out to allow me to wear them a little longer and that, depending on the design, even shoes and hats could be enlarged.

“You’re the type of person who doesn’t like to let things go to waste, right, Neema? I challenged myself to design these clothes so that you could get a lot of use out of them,” Auntie Olive proclaimed.

I can’t help it; I’m a product of Japanese minimalism. I hate letting anything go to waste!

...And, anyway, did Auntie Olive say she designed these clothes herself?! She’s incredible!

Olive was both intellectually and athletically talented, and her looks—green hair the color of spring and amber eyes—made her a ten out of ten when it came to being blessed by nature.

If she were an expert cook on top of that, even I would have wanted her to be my wife. Apparently, looks, brains, and fighting prowess were the most God could bless a single human with, though.

Auntie Olive was the youngest cabinet member and was still single.

Time to find yourself a man, Auntie!

Grandpa Gouche gave me a real, razor-sharp dagger. I was so shocked by the

weight of it in my hand that I did a double-take.

Why is he giving me a dagger?! Is it supposed to be for self-protection? And why is everyone acting like it's a foregone conclusion that I'll be in danger?!

Gwynn gave me an illustrated encyclopedia of animals from all three continents, which he said the royal guard members had all chipped in to buy for me.

Whoa! This book is incredible! It even has animals from other continents! I'm so excited! Thanks so much, everyone from the royal guard!

Dan gave me a hair accessory. However, there was nothing ordinary about it!

"This hair clip was made with scales from the dragons in the dragon stables."

That's right! It was made of dragon scales!

It was shaped like the wings of a bird, but the feathers were all dragon scales. The colors changed depending on the strength and angle of the light hitting them.

It's strange, right? When the scales were attached to the dragons' bodies, they were mostly copper, brown, or black. But once shed, the scales became all the colors of the rainbow.

Furthermore, only the most durable scales from around the dragons' throats were used to make my hair accessory.

"They let us take these scales without argument from the area on their bodies where they most hate being touched. They must really love you."

When I heard this, I unconsciously teared up.

Darn it! They really are so cute! Next time I go to play, I'm going to give each and every one of them a huge hug!

"This little one is from me," Lestin said, holding out *something* covered with cloth.

Little one? ...Is it alive?

Without taking the gift from Lestin, I timidly and carefully lifted the cloth. Underneath was a bird. It sat obediently on a wooden perch.

“This is a relative of the gleyhawks I showed you before; she’s a rain hawk. She is the cleverest and strongest of the clutch born during the earth season this year.”

Based on her size, she wasn’t a newborn baby chick. But if she’d been born in the earth season, she was probably in the stage of development where she needed to be with her parents for a little while longer. It wasn’t good to change a young bird’s environment so suddenly.

“Ish it weally okay?”

“She will be fine. We’ve trained her in preparation for coming to live with you, and her parents have given their permission as well.”

Based on Lestin’s answer, he’d been planning on giving this bird to me for quite some time. When I asked him about it, he said that from the way I always fixated on the gleyhawks and night owls every time I visited the beast stables, he figured I might like to have one as a pet.

Is my fascination with them that obvious? Well, I suppose among the different species of birds, I am most interested in the birds of prey...

I asked Lestin to take the rain hawk out of her cage.

Her feathers were primarily gray, with spots of black in a mottled pattern, and she was about the size of a pigeon. Smaller than one of those massive behemoth pigeons you find living in big cities, though. What on earth are they feeding those things, anyway?!

Rain hawks were small, but because of this, they were better equipped for flying in stormy weather than other species. Rain hawks naturally lived in forested areas, usually near a beautiful river or lake, because they loved playing in the water.

“Come here!”

I held out my arm, and the rain hawk hopped onto it.

Perhaps they’d magically outfitted the hawk because her nails didn’t hurt my arm, and she wasn’t so heavy that I couldn’t hold her for a short while. It would be impossible to have her sit on my arm for a long time, though.

She may be small, but she's still a hawk!

Her tiny, curved beak, the way her muscles flexed as she moved, and the characteristic way she tilted her head were all so cute I thought I might get a nosebleed from the intense emotions!

“Let’s be good friends!”

Unconsciously, I tilted my head in the same direction as the hawk.

I petted her feathers. They were soft and fluffy, almost as if she still had some of the down feathers of a newborn hatchling.

Once she grew up, her feathers would probably change to the smooth, sleek feathers of the other hawks I’d met had. If this was my only chance to enjoy these fluffy baby feathers, I would have to pet her to my heart’s content now while I could!

I even received a slew of presents from the servants working in our home!

The maids gave me a set of homemade soaps.

The cook surprised me with a whole cake, just for me! All my favorite fruits covered it; it was exquisite!

The stable-keepers gave me a tandem saddle, intended to seat two riders at once. They said I could use it to ride together with Papa. Maybe next year I could get a saddle of my own?

Of course, the gardeners gave me a bouquet. They told me they would show me how to make the flowers into potpourri before they wilted.

The butlers gave me a set of writing utensils, saying it wouldn’t be long before I started having private lessons at home. I couldn’t say I was exactly thrilled with that!



“NEEMA... Wake up...”

“Mmn... Huh? Was I sleeping?”

I’d been trying to decide on a name for the rain hawk, but at some point, I’d drifted off to sleep.

I thought I heard Sol's voice just now... Was I dreaming?

"Are you awake?"

Nope, not a dream. I wonder what he wants at this hour?

The party had officially ended when the king and his family departed. Afterward, the adults who wanted to keep drinking moved into the living room. After watching them settle in to continue their festivities, I went to my room and spent a while coming up with a name for my new pet. Before I knew it, it was already the middle of the night.

"What is it, Sol?"

"Can you come out on the balcony?"

The balcony?

Finding his sudden request unusual, I turned toward the door leading to the balcony outside my room.

A golden-yellow light shone beyond the glass door. Looking carefully, I recognized the shape of Sol's head, with his chin resting atop the balcony's guardrail.

Since when are you a peeping tom, sir?!

"Sol!"

It was already early spring, but it still got chilly at night. Goosebumps erupted on my exposed flesh as I let myself out onto the balcony and hugged as much of Sol's massive head as I could get my arms around.

"Hold on tightly, child."

Clinging onto Sol's face, I was lowered from the balcony to the garden below. I was awed once more by Sol's incredible size.

My room was on the second floor, but the ceilings were high, so the distance from the ground to my balcony must've been at least fifteen feet.

Once I was standing firmly on the ground, I noticed a bucket nearby... Perhaps bucket wasn't the correct word—it was more like a basket woven out of vines? Language was never my strong point, okay?!

The basket was round, with a handle crossing over the center, and fairly deep. It was large enough for me to get inside and lay down.

What was it for? I tried picturing Sol carrying it and thought he would look cute.

“I would like to show you a bit of the world.”

Sol scooped me up with the talons of his front legs and deposited me inside the basket.

Oh, I'm the intended contents of this basket?!

A dragon carrying a basket with a child riding in it...? Well, I suppose it's not outside the realm of possibility in a fantasy world like this... Not that I imagine it's a normal sight by any means...

A cushion was in the bottom of the basket, so it wasn't uncomfortable to ride in; in fact, it was pleasant. The confined space was surprisingly cozy, almost reminding me of being in a...nest?

No, it's more like being curled up in a kotatsu. Yeah, that's exactly how it feels!

“Now then, let's go.”

Sol gently beat his wings, lifting himself a few feet into the air, then gripped the basket's handle firmly with his front legs and flew off.

Strangely enough, it was silent.

I couldn't hear Sol's wings flapping or feel the wind on my face or the cold of the night.

This must be magic, right? How nifty. I'm jealous of people who can use magic.

We continued to gain altitude until finally, we were high enough that I could look out across the entire royal city.

As a security measure, spotlights swept periodically across the royal palace grounds. The thoroughfares radiating from the palace and delineating the divisions between the districts were lit by evenly spaced street lights. It was an enchanting sight. Seeing it like this, I begrudgingly nodded my head,

understanding the unusual city planning of the first king.

We passed over the royal city and continued north.

The number of houses decreased the farther we traveled, and a rustic countryside scenery spread out whimsically below us, illuminated by the moon. The cheerful way the first early seedlings danced in the wind was a beautiful sight.

The northern mountain range rose in the backdrop of all this.

This was the mountain where Sol lived.

Seeing it like this, I felt that the world was enormous, a multifaceted place full of many different sights.

To humans, this was a beautiful world. But how did the elves and beastpeople who lived in the forest at the foot of the mountain range see it?

Several decades from now, would humans and other species be able to enjoy gazing upon the beauty of this world together? Or would they be looking at it alone?

We passed the densely populated section of the forest. As we approached the mountain range, the forest below us became dark, like something out of a fairy tale. It was a world of only darkness, impenetrable by the light of the moon, where it would be easy to imagine that evil witches and monsters might run rampant.

“This place is a little frightening...” I muttered.

“There’s no need to be frightened. The monsters living here are weak and powerless.”

Compared to Sol, *everyone* was weak and powerless!

“Besides, in this forest that you call frightening, there is also great beauty. Look.”

I turned in the direction he indicated, and my eyes were captured. No matter how much I tried to find the words to describe it, there was no way I could convey the sight before my eyes in mere words.

This must've been the boundary line between forest and mountain. The shriveled and twisted dead trees were coated with a thin film of ice. They were shrouded in ice. I'd never heard of such a phenomenon in my world, where an entire tree was encased in ice. Maybe something similar occurs in the North Pole, but if so, I'd never seen pictures of it.

Ice trees? I'm sure that's not a word, but I can't think of what else to call them, so I'll go with ice tree.

Perhaps due to the moonlight reflecting off the snow, the ice trees appeared to be giving off an otherworldly bluish-white light.

The night sky wasn't pitch black but cast with a bluish tinge, to which the snow-covered ground stood in stark contrast, a pure, unblemished white. The gentle bluish-white light illuminating the dim, quiet nighttime scene created an almost spiritual experience.

"Thank you, Sol."

I gazed, transfixed, at the ice trees as I thanked Sol.

"This world is overflowing with beauty. Humans who can't see that are fools," he said.

I agree.

Humans were foolish and weak but also strong and pure-hearted.

They were so focused on living with all their might that they didn't spare the time to stop and truly see the world around them. What was immediately in front of them became their entire world, and they failed to see the beauty in their small slice of it.

Come to think of it, the same could be said about me and the world I came from. When I first moved out and lived alone, I often went to the zoo and the aquarium, but as I got busier with work, I stopped going. Even though I needed the emotional healing that being around animals provides more than ever, I let it get away from me.

In this life, I won't go so far as to say I'm committed to doing whatever I want so I can live with absolutely no regrets, but I plan to enjoy myself as much as I

can get away with without pissing off God.

I named my rain hawk Nox, so I would never forget this night.

It meant “darkness” and “night.” Who would’ve guessed that my geeky knowledge would come in handy?

...Seems like kind of a waste, though, huh? Not like anyone else will understand the meaning behind her name.



THE day after my birthday, I gave everyone the souvenirs I bought in the market!

I wanted to thank everyone for helping me celebrate my birthday the previous night, so I made the rounds handing them out myself.

Papa was moved to tears with delight, but I felt a little guilty...

Sorry for picking your present so haphazardly, Papa.

13 - I Hate Studying!

AFTER I turned four, I visited the beast stables regularly for Nox's training. Sometimes I would participate in the training sessions, and other times I'd play with the wild bear, Bae, and the other animals.

My days were fun and carefree... Until our steward, Marjace, announced he would tutor me, effectively bidding farewell to my peaceful days of freedom.

At first, I learned simple things like proper greetings and table manners. I got through those topics without much trouble. The real problem was political economics and history. It was all gibberish to me. I didn't have the best grades in school in my past life, either.

I even learned a bit of geography!

The royal city was in the center of the Kingdom of Gaché, and in each of the cardinal directions were territories. The prime minister and the three cabinet ministers ruled the territories. Each territory was named after the family that ruled it. Papa's territory was called the Osphe Territory; sometimes it was referred to as the Northern Territory.

There were two types of territories: directly controlled territories and allocated territories. Directly controlled territories were exactly what they sounded like. Allocated territories were created when a territory was too big for one family to handle. It would be subdivided, and lesser nobles were appointed as proxy rulers over the smaller territories. I guess it was similar to the feudal system.

The appointed aristocrat would be called the proxy lord, and the allocated territory's name would take the proxy lord's name, with the word "proxy" following the main territory's name; for example, ABC territory, XYZ proxy. I suppose territories were similar to states, and proxies were similar to cities, to put it in the terms of my old world?

I didn't really understand the structure of the government, but that was the gist of it.

Matters the proxy lord couldn't handle fell to the provincial lord, and matters the provincial lord couldn't handle fell to the king. Matters even the king couldn't deal with were handled by the royal council.

There was also a system of taxation; it was an unusual industry-based system.

Anyone possessing a certain degree of skill would pay their taxes by using their skill for the sake of the country.

I guess this is what they mean by earning your way with your skills. I'll need to learn a skill that will keep me fed, too.

My constant protestations of "I don't understand!" must've given Marjace a headache, but through patience and persistence, we somehow completed the basics.

I was then told that starting from my next lesson, a private tutor would come to teach me.

Hmph! I thought I was done! I'll start going to school once I turn ten, so why do I have to study now too?



"LADY Neema, this is Annalee Dessa. She will be your tutor from now on."

I was introduced to a full-figured woman in her late thirties. Her light green hair was in a fashionable updo, and her eyes were the color of amber. She wore tastefully natural-looking makeup and was an artful beauty.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Nefertima."

Whoa! Her curtsy is flawless!

I almost wished I could take a video of it as reference material.

"The pleashure is all mine."

Marjace prepared our tea, then left the room. As soon as he left, Annalee's demeanor changed completely.

"The first order of business is to do something about the way you speak."

Huh? Did I say something impolite? But I've hardly even spoken to her yet...

"For example, Mr. Marjace tells me that you address your noble parents as 'Mama' and 'Papa'..."

Ohh, so that's what she means!

It wasn't technically incorrect, so I nodded in agreement.

"You will answer orally when responding to questions!"

Annalee suddenly pinched me. It was through my clothing, but her long fingernails dug painfully into my arm.

"Ouch!"

I glared defiantly at Annalee.

In response, she roughly pinched me again.

"A young lady of noble breeding should never show unpleasant emotions on her face, no matter what happens."

Gosh darn it! Does this woman intend to put me through Spartan training?! The gloves are coming off—I'm declaring this woman an enemy! An enemy, do you hear me?!

Over the course of the following lesson, I was struck on the back for my bad posture, pinched for not answering a question out loud, and smacked on the head with a folded fan for being unable to do as I was told...

What is that fan made of?! It freaking hurts! I'm sure I've got a goose egg on my head after that blow! She's completely merciless even to such a young child. If this is how education works here, I'm never going to school!

Annalee had been my older brother and sister's tutor as well but, based on the exorbitant way she praised them, it didn't seem she'd used physical punishment on them.

If she had, I'm sure they would've told Papa, and Annalee would've been locked away somewhere she'd never again see the light of day.

But in that case, why was she like this only toward me?

...You really wanna go, lady? I'm game. I'm not one to run from a fight. The

customer-service smile I cultivated at work is a mighty weapon!



HOWEVER, perhaps because my life in this world up to this point had been so stress-free, the next morning, I had no appetite and hardly touched my breakfast.

It's gotta be the stress. This must be a case of your physical condition betraying your inner turmoil.

My family was terribly worried when they saw I wasn't eating. Up to this point, I'd always cleared my plate at every meal without fail. I was worried they'd drag me off to the doctor to have my stomach checked.

I'm almost offended that they jumped to the conclusion that something must be wrong with my stomach! Have I been that much of a glutton?! What if I had a cold or some other illness? Then what would they do?!

In any case, I decided to run away.

Well, I say, "Run away," but I was playing hide-and-seek inside the house. I knew what the problem was, after all. And I didn't want anyone to see the marks all over my body.

"I found you, Neema!"

I'd just registered the sound of my brother's voice when I found myself unable to move. I was... wrapped up in an invisible rope?

This has to be magic, right?! That's cheating!

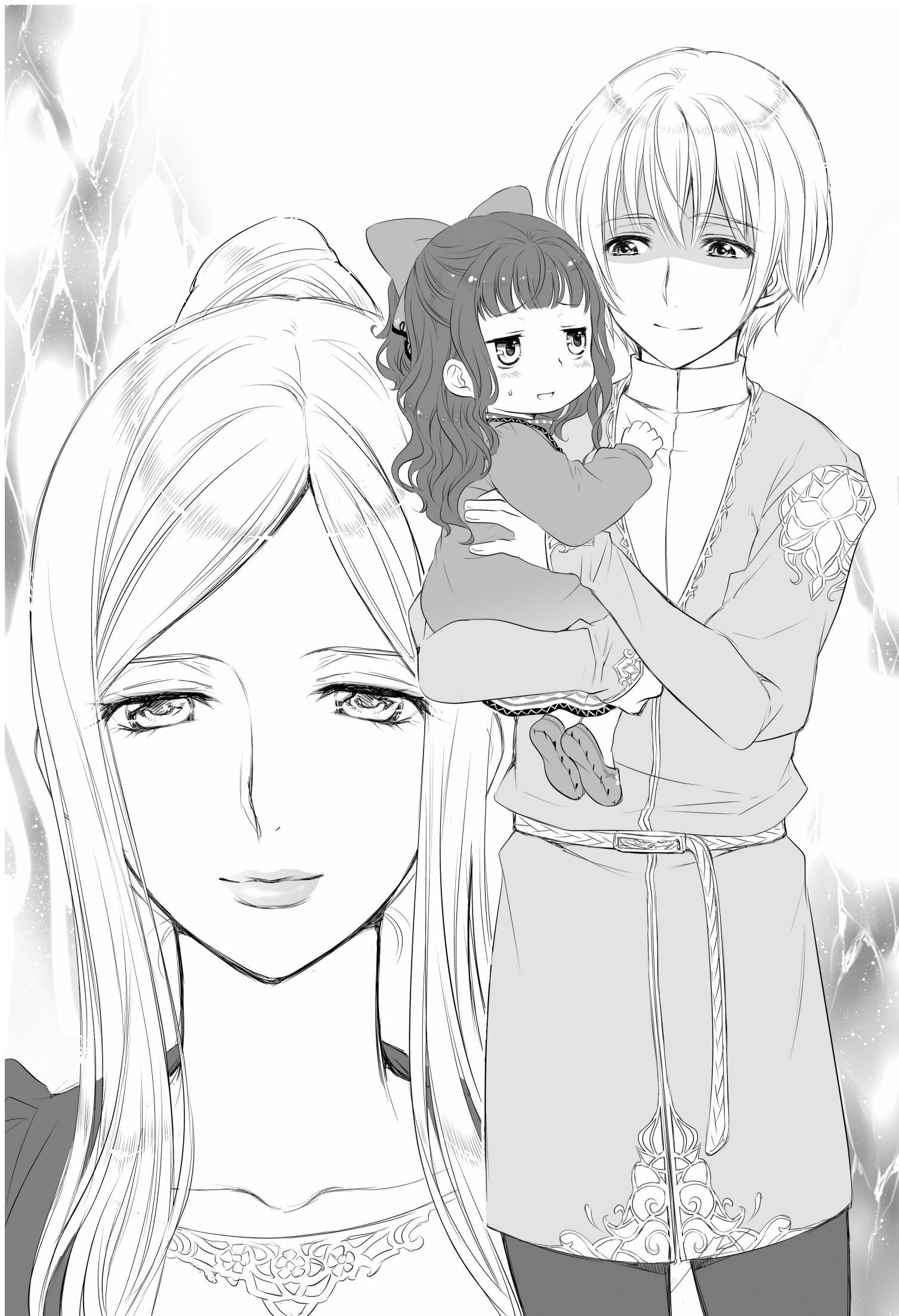
"Using magik ish cheating!" I complained.

"I'll listen to all your complaints later. Right now, you'd better think of how you'll explain yourself to Mama."

Urk! He's taking me straight to Mama...?

What should I do...?

Once my brother picked me up, the magical rope released me, but the frightening look on my angry brother's face paralyzed me and prevented me from trying to escape.



“Neema, can you please explain to me why you refuse to see a healer?”

Mama was in full-on scolding mode.

Tch, Papa would be easier to deal with...

“...Because I’m scared it’ll hurt,” I said.

“Do you think you can sneak a lie past me? I know you aren’t that stupid, Neema.”

Eek! I knew she’d never buy it, but I can’t deny being stupid! It’s just... It feels like losing if I admit the truth... But I guess I’m the only one thinking of this in terms of winning and losing?

“It’s because of those injuries you claim to have gotten while playing, right? They were caused by Annalee Dessa, weren’t they?”

...She figured it out?! Was Mama using her magic to spy on us? That’s an invasion of privacy!

But I suppose it makes sense. There’s no way the nearly superhuman servants working in our house would fail to notice my injuries or wouldn’t immediately inform Mama and Papa.

Does that mean that Papa knows too?

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Mama pressed.

“...I believe in fighting my own battles,” I said.

I couldn’t call myself a descendant of the great Japanese samurai otherwise!

...Who am I trying to fool? I’m not the descendant of anything more than simple rice farmers. Sigh. How am I going to get her to understand my lowborn sensibilities?

“Are you saying you don’t want us to get involved?” Mama asked.

That’s exactly what I’m saying! Fights are supposed to be brutal, one-on-one brawls to the bitter end!

“Papa will fire her, won’t he?”

“Yes, I’m certain he would.”

Based on her answer, it seems that Papa doesn't know yet?

I wanted to avoid Papa and Karna finding out. Those two were likely to breathe fire when they found out. And I'm not speaking figuratively, either! As was common with magic users gifted at using fire magic when they got furious, their magic tended to spill over in the form of literal, physical flames.

"Do you have a plan to defeat Annalee?" Mama asked. "She's known as the paragon of feminine grace—there's no way you can defeat her in a battle of etiquette."

Say whaaaat?! What kind of "paragon of feminine grace" goes around hitting children?! Now I'm even more determined than ever not to lose to her!

Mama chuckled wryly at the sight of me burning with fighting spirit.

She seems to have turned off lecture mode, but she's still up to something...

"If you're going to face Annalee, you'll first need to stand on the same level as her. Neema, I want you to take everything you can from Annalee. Furthermore, you must get to know your opponent. If not, there's no way you'll be able to battle with her."

She has a point. Basically, she's telling me to master the deportment of a noble young lady before taking the bait, right?

"You're saying I need to get Annalee to acknowledge me as a noble lady."

"Mm-hm. Do you think you can do that, Neema?"

Hmph! Do you think I can't?! I can do anything I set my mind to! Fine then! I'll dance to your beat, Mama!

"In that case, I'm going to help Neema."

Ralf had been silently watching our conversation unfold this whole time. What was he suddenly butting in for now?!

I felt gentle arms wrapping me in a tender hug and heard a spell being chanted quietly.

"Recul Cresiolle."

It was a healing spell known as "The Goddess's Healing."

All the places that had been stinging and throbbing suddenly felt as if they'd been touched by a warm, gentle hand. Beneath the brush of invisible hands, the pain faded away. I was certain that the marks had disappeared as well.

"I can heal your injuries instantly. I can also be your partner for dance practice."

Ralf was the only person in our family who could use healing magic.

And by dance, did he mean ball dancing and the like?

Now *that* sounded interesting! I loved almost any form of exercise.

"Yes, pwease! But, Walf..."

"I know. I won't say anything about Annalee. I just want to help you become a splendid noble lady."

Sigh. Ralf knows how to handle me better than anyone.

I was dancing in the palm of my mother's hand, with my older brother pulling my strings...

Grr, I guess I've got no other option but to go on the offensive!

"Leave Dayle and Karna to me."

When Mama put it like that, I knew there was no possibility either of them would find out. Mama was the strongest member of our family... Honestly, she might've been the strongest person in the entire country.

All right, let's do this! I'm gonna become the most finely mannered noble young lady in the country! Just wait!

...Hm? Was that my objective? Oh well, it's fine!



ALTHOUGH I'd made such a lofty proclamation, half a year had passed since then... Even I was shocked at my excessive foolishness.

My appetite had returned. Incidents, where I was left covered in cuts and bruises, had decreased. I suppose that as long as my brother was around, it didn't matter how badly injured I got. He always healed me right away.

I was almost five years old, but I'd mastered skills that were almost unbelievable for a five-year-old child.

My greetings and table manners were flawless. I'd also perfected the art of making tea and entertaining guests and even took it upon myself to study up on current events in my spare time.

Because I had the mentality of an adult but the body of a child, I'd improved my dancing to the level where people often praised me for being incredibly talented for my age. I enjoyed exercise, so I wanted to continue learning to dance.

My mother praised my progress, and my sister was surprised by it.

Apparently, it wasn't common to learn so much in such a short period. A child of the nobility was only expected to become competent in social manners by the time they entered school.

This is already enough to make all my effort worth it! Now then, the time has come for me to strike back. Mwahaha.



IN Annalee's presence, I kept up my mask of perfect manners. She probably deluded herself into believing that my improvement was the result of her instruction.

Heh, this is one mask I don't mind slipping a bit.

"Annalee, I was wondering... If Icoux is suffering from a drought, why doesn't the Church of Divine Creation do anything to help them?"

Icoux was a small country southwest of the Kingdom of Gaché.

This summer, a severe drought had destroyed all their crops, and the country's reserves wouldn't last until the next harvest. For this reason, Icoux reached out to neighboring countries and the Church of Divine Creation for assistance.

Following our country's lead, the neighboring country of Milma—Her Majesty the Queen's home country, the Linus Empire, and several others had agreed to send help.

However, the Church of Divine Creation declared that the drought had been divine punishment.

The Church of Divine Creation said there was no need to help a country that had incurred the wrath of God, and several countries whose governments the Church of Divine Creation was deeply entrenched in rescinded their offers of aid.

“It’s because Icoux angered God. If God’s disciples at the church helped them, it would be disobeying the will of God.”

“How do we know that the drought is God’s divine punishment?”

“Because one of the priestesses received a revelation from God himself.”

So now it’s come to priestesses and holy maidens, has it? Now all we need is for a hero to be summoned from another world to save us all, and it will be the plot of an isekai novel!

“But the God of Creation made all those people, didn’t he? It doesn’t make sense that he would let them die to punish them...”

“Icoux is a barbaric country that harbors beastpeople, so it’s no wonder God has turned his back on them.”

Oh, no, no, no. I really can’t stand obstinate elitists. What did you ever do to qualify you to be “chosen by God?” Nothing, that’s what! Aren’t you even a little ashamed, strutting around so full of yourself, thinking you’re God’s chosen species?!

“Have you ever met a human or beastperson from Icoux, Annalee?” I asked.

“Certainly not! I would be much too frightened to ever approach one of them.”

I thought so. Thanks for answering just as I expected you would!

I’d gotten the nearly superhuman servants working in our household to help me look into Annalee’s background. I say they “helped me,” but in reality, the servants did all the work...

Annalee, as well as her entire family, were devout followers of the Church of Divine Creation.

“I never imagined someone like you could be such a terrible person!”

I forced an expression of deep shock onto my face and waited for Annalee to make her move.

At first, Annalee didn't understand what I'd said to her, but the moment she comprehended the insult, her face turned bright red, and she glared at me.

“Do you mean to suggest that I am a terrible person?”

Her voice was cold as ice, as if she was trying to hold something in. She must've been fighting with all her might to control her anger.

But her fan came flying toward me.

Annalee had been lauded as a proper noble lady all of her life. It was possible she'd never been scolded by her parents even once.

The fan struck me in a direct hit, which I didn't attempt to avoid. This wasn't physical discipline that she believed I needed to learn. It was violence born of the anger she felt at being insulted.

And even if it were necessary, that freaking hurts! She intentionally aimed for my face! The fan hit me on the cheek! I wonder if it will swell... It probably will. I let my guard down because she's never hit me anywhere that bruises would be noticed before this.

“Am I mistaken?” I pressed. “I don't wish to become a contemptible person who scorns someone they've never met. Unless, perhaps, *that* is how a noble lady acts?”

“...Well...”

“As the daughter of Duke Osphe, I need to become a splendid noble lady to avoid bringing shame to my father's name.”

To be honest, I wasn't the least bit concerned about any such thing. Our family name would be fine even if my parents neglected the education of their youngest daughter a little bit.

“In the first place, it's not proper for a noble lady to speak of unrefined topics such as politics,” she huffed.

Funny for you to say that now, at this point!

Over the past half year, I'd been observing Annalee in an attempt to learn her preferences, deducing her thoughts based on her words and actions, asking roundabout questions to obtain the information I needed, and intentionally making her angry to try and get her to reveal what she was thinking. I'd never succeeded in the entire half-year I'd been trying, though.

And although I'd run through countless simulations, practicing how I'd carry the conversation and coming up with several patterns the confrontation might unfold, I'd never expected it to go this well. Annalee had an unexpectedly straightforward personality.

"Then what is an appropriate topic of conversation?" I asked. "Indeed, when I'm speaking with other noble ladies, they prefer talking about dresses, accessories, and which shop sells the tastiest cakes. But I wonder if gentlemen would also be interested in such topics? Or are you suggesting I stand by silently like a doll, not saying anything, whenever a gentleman is nearby?"

"Of course not. If the conversation becomes too difficult for you to follow, you nod in agreement from time to time to show you're listening."

"I see. But that would be rude to the other person. Is not the purpose of conversation to deepen your mutual understanding?"

I couldn't deny that, depending on the time and place, things might go more smoothly if you just smiled and nodded. Even so, I thought that if you at least made occasional comments like "Oh, that was a good idea!" it would serve the multiple purposes of confirming you understood what the other person was saying, allowing you to express your own opinions, and making the conversation more enjoyable.

To properly converse with another person, you first need to understand them.

"I wonder how the other noble ladies ensure that the gentlemen in their company are enjoying themselves without even speaking with them..." I said.

This mention of gentlemen "enjoying themselves" was intentionally chosen for its subtle but potent innuendo.

Indeed, Annalee had no answer to this question.

At least not one she can say to a child!

It's amazing what kinds of sordid tales you can overhear when no one thinks you're listening. The maids in our house were an excellent source of such gossip.

Annalee trembled almost imperceptibly. Her hands curled into tight fists as if fighting desperately to hold something back. I wasn't sure if it was anger or humiliation she grappled with. Finally, as if to escape my gaze, she left the room without another word.

All right! I did it! I won!

A sense of accomplishment so overcame me that I unintentionally struck a triumphant pose.

I guess this was just a small victory... I'll have to adjust my battle strategy depending on how Annalee acts after this...

I'll worry about that later. Right now, I'm exhausted.

Once the exhilarating sense of accomplishment passed, a heavy feeling of exhaustion bore down on me.

For now, I'll soothe my spirit by petting Nox.

"Nox, come here."

I called Nox over from where she sat sunbathing on a wooden perch in the room.

Without flapping her wings, Nox glided down to land on the ground at my feet. She fidgeted a bit, trying to find a comfortable position, then bent her legs and sat down. I liked to call this her relaxed pose.

I stroked her back, and it must've felt good because Nox drifted off to sleep.

It's a shame she's shed all of her downy baby feathers.

But her winter feathers would grow in soon, which I'd been told meant that she would become a bit fluffier, especially around her neck.

Speaking of winter feathers, night owls' winter feathers were the best! Out of

all the birds I'd pet up to this point, they were the softest by far!

Last winter, I spent so much time petting them that the night owls gave me all the feathers that fell out when they were grooming themselves.

The sight of them holding the feathers pinched in their beaks and offering them to me was so adorable it was almost painful. At times like that, I resented the absence of cameras in this world.

Oh no! Crap, I forgot to put ice on my cheek!

14 - This is Bad!

AS expected, the incident with my injured cheek caused quite a stir.

The maids noticed and told Marjace. He reported the news to my father, who barged into my room. The report he'd received included that Annalee had been in my room directly before my injury was discovered, so Papa was enraged.

It's fine to be angry, but please stop burning my room, Papa?! You're scaring Nox!

In any case, I explained the situation and told him I was in the middle of a decisive battle, so he shouldn't interfere. He suddenly became depressed, probably realizing he'd been left out of our scheming.

Sorry, Papa. I knew if I told you, you'd want to get involved. That's why I didn't say anything. It's not because I hate you or anything. I patted Papa's head—which was hanging in despair—comfortingly as I thought this.

While I was at it, I insisted that he not fire Annalee.

It wouldn't be a satisfying victory if we fired her. I want to make her quit of her own free will.

"You take after your mother, too..."

Well, yeah. I am her daughter, after all.

For appearances' sake, Papa settled for lightly scolding Annalee. I thought she'd resign, but she apologized and said she would continue as my tutor.

However, the number of days a week we had lessons decreased!



THE new year came and went. In the Kingdom of Gaché, the new year started in autumn, on the anniversary of the country's founding.

Every year the royal family rode at the head of a grand parade that made the

rounds of the entire royal city, and there were festivals and celebrations throughout the country.

I'd never attended. There were so many people that it was dangerous. Festivals were so crowded you could barely walk, and incidents of pickpocketing were common. Not to mention it would be easy to get lost...

Too bad, I wanted to see Ghizel and the others looking majestic as they joined the parade...



ONCE spring came and I turned five years old, Papa was going to go on an inspection of his territory. I asked to go with him, fully expecting to be told no, but he agreed readily. It was anticlimactic, to say the least, and more than a little suspicious.

Papa, are you scheming something?!

"I've heard that you'll be accompanying your father on a tour of the northern territory or some such thing?" Annalee asked.

"Yes. I didn't expect Father to allow it, so I was surprised."

As usual, I acted the part of a perfect lady in front of Annalee.

Since the fan incident, Annalee had stopped using corporal punishment against me, and the topics she taught me shifted from etiquette to extracurricular lessons.

I was so abysmally untalented at playing the terre—a stringed instrument similar to a violin—that I gave up trying. Instead, I changed to learning to play the piurre, a keyboard instrument more like a harpsichord than a piano. I wasn't amazing, but I became somewhat proficient.

Where are the drums?! That's what I want to play! Find me some drums!

I also started taking horseback riding lessons. I wanted to become proficient enough to ride alone, so I enlisted Lestin and Uwaz to help me.

Additionally, during winter, I learned embroidery and knitting, and during spring, I learned flower arrangement. Embroidery and knitting were a lot of fun. All I had to do was repeat the same basic steps, and while I lost myself

concentrating, it was almost like falling into a trance. My head would always feel clear and peaceful after coming out of those trance-like states.

But when it came to flower arranging... It was an art based on expressing one's creativity... Sadly, it seemed I had no aptitude for any of the arts!

"Now then, I'm giving you homework today. Please pass it in next time we meet."

Homework?! I planned to spend my time cuddling and petting cute animals across the territory!

"...Homework?"

"You are to observe the territory and write a report detailing your impressions and things you learned."

In short, she wants me to write a journal-style essay about my trip! I thought she was going to assign me something harder.

"Please write in concrete detail how you would fix any problems you notice while shadowing your father on his inspection of the territory."

Huuuh? ...Don't tell me Annalee and Papa were in on it together?! I thought it was suspicious how easily he agreed to let me go! It looks like I've been getting ahead of myself, and asking Papa questions about politics backfired big time... But that was necessary...

"In concrete detail...? That sounds like fun!"

As if! Give me back my soul-healing animal cuddling time, you harpy!



LARSHIA is the largest continent in Asdyllon. Its shape somewhat resembled a butterfly.

One-quarter of its landmass belonged to our country, the Kingdom of Gaché.

Wise Territory, to the east, was blessed with natural resources, most notably from their mines. Manufacturing industries flourished there, and countless workshops produced everything from currency to pottery, glass, metal tableware, and many other items.

Mieuxga Territory, to the west, abutted the ocean, and a large river cut straight through its center. For this reason, it functioned as the commercial capital of the country, due to its potential for transportation and trade. Because of trade and marine-based industries, even many in the lower class were wealthy.

Dierta Territory, to the south, boasted a mild climate, making it the ideal location for the bulk of the domestic agricultural industry. They grew crops such as wheat and vegetables; and raised cows, pigs, and other farm animals.

Osphe Territory, to the north, was dominated by mountains that took up one-third of the terrain. The cold was intense, and there was no singular innate industry. Citizens had to eke out a living by whatever means possible. People near the mountains worked in timber processing; the flat plains were used for dairy farming, and cold-hardy crops and flowers were farmed in the areas closer to the royal city.

As Papa explained this all to me, I pictured the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. It may have been a poor comparison, but when I pictured a cold climate where various industries somehow survived and even flourished, Hokkaido and the north-eastern Tohoku region immediately came to mind.

Although the territory bordered the sea, because most of the coastline was sheer cliffs and the water was freezing, only one area in the southwestern portion could support a small fishing industry. Seafood may have been scarce, but in exchange, the people did what they could with agriculture, dairy farming, and timber production.

I'm sure the food's delicious. And besides, I bet there are lots of rare animals living in such a cold climate.

We first headed to the royal palace. There, Papa would meet up with two of his subordinates and use a transportation spell to teleport us to our destination.

In this world, there were chanted spells and written spells. Chanted spells were cast merely by chanting an incantation. Written spells, on the other hand, were cast by using a prepared magic circle or paper talisman and speaking the predetermined magic word. This type of magic had the benefits of not needing to chant an incantation and being able to reduce the amount of magical energy

expended. However, it needed to be prepared in advance, which was tedious, so it was reserved for casting large-scale spells.

And transportation spells were a prime example of large-scale magic.

The royal palace had the facilities for transportation magic, connected to all of the major cities in the country.

Papa led me to the room which housed the teleportation circle. I called it a room, but it was more like a basement. The room was about the size of a gymnasium, in terms of height and width, and a stone platform was in the center. What appeared to be a magic circle was drawn on it.

Gems were placed on the four corners of the platform, but one was missing. In that empty spot, you were supposed to place a gem of the same type as those adorning the teleportation circle in your desired destination; this was how the spell worked.

The gems used to fill the space were stored in a separate room under strict supervision by a magic user whose entire job consisted of guarding these gems.

This equipment was all invented by old man Salzar. That guy made such an incredible magical item as if it were nothing.

While Papa spoke with the magic user, I took a peek at the teleportation circle.

I approached the platform, staring intently at it.

The magic circle had been carved into the stone surface of the platform. A complicated interweaving of detailed patterns compromised it.

The person who engraved this must have been superhumanly talented...

I got the feeling something might happen if I touched it, so I decided not to. If I got whisked off somewhere alone, I'd probably die of starvation and the elements out in the wilderness.

"Neema, it's almost time to go."

"Okay!"

At Papa's urging, I nervously climbed onto the platform.

I'm really nervous but also excited! My heart is pounding!

"We're ready."

"Yes, sir. Take care, and have a pleasant journey."

The magic user bowed, then placed a gem into the open spot on the platform.

At once, the magic circle began to glow, and sparkling specks of light danced around us.

Whoa! It looks like diamond dust! This isn't harmful to humans, right?

"Arsenta!"

Papa spoke the magic word, and the particles of light increased until it was so bright I couldn't see anything around me.

Even so, I desperately wanted to witness the moment we teleported, so I tried narrowing my eyes and shading them with my hands. The particles of light condensed, and before I knew it, we'd finished teleporting.

Tch! I couldn't see anything at all. It was just blindingly bright, and then it was over.

"We've been awaiting your arrival."

The person who said this was probably one of Papa's subordinates who worked in the territory. Six people were waiting for us, but I didn't recognize them.

"I've brought my daughter Nefertima with me this time. Please treat her well."

"I'm Nefertima, the second daughter of the Osphe family. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

I raised my skirt slightly and bent my knees just a little. The angle at which I bent my knees and elbows and the speed of my curtsy had been practiced countless times in front of a mirror until the gesture was flawless.

"What a well-mannered young lady! I am the proxy lord of this region, Warnus Gilva. Welcome to Arsentia, my lady."

The person who greeted us was a kindly old man.

More importantly, Arsenta is a placename? That would mean the full name of this place is Osphe Territory, Gilva Proxy, Arsenta? If there's a teleportation circle here, it must be a large city.

I want to go out and explore!

"Lord Osphe, the carriage has been prepared as you requested. Will you be heading out immediately?"

"Yes, I hope to arrive before sundown."

"Very good, sir. Please follow me."

We're going to change to a carriage and travel even further? It must be quite the distance if he's worried about arriving before it gets dark!

Warnus led the way through the building we'd arrived in.

The interior was suitably impressive, but its formidable construction reminded me of Grandpa Gouche's fortress mansion.

When we reached the front parlor, Papa helped me put on my coat. It was a sturdy winter coat made of thick fabric and lined with fur.

...It's already spring, isn't it? Yeah... My birthday came and went, so according to the calendar, it's spring now, without a doubt. So how cold must it be outside for him to dress me as if it's the dead of winter?!

The butler opened the door to reveal snow falling outside.

No way! It's freezing! What the heck, how can it possibly be this cold?! I don't wanna go out there!

The extreme cold made me cling to Papa in dismay. Goosebumps broke out all over my body. My teeth chattered as I trembled uncontrollably. The wind was bitterly cold. It wasn't merely cold—it was painful!

Taking pity on my obvious suffering, Papa picked me up and muttered something rhythmically in a quiet tone I couldn't quite make out over the chattering of my own teeth.

Why doesn't Papa seem at all affected by this extreme cold?!

...Huh? I don't feel cold anymore? In fact, I'm pleasantly warm.

A heavenly sensation stole over me, like being wrapped in a heated blanket, and I sighed in relief.

“You’re not cold anymore, right?”

I nodded emphatically in response to Papa’s question.

This must be magic... Similar to the magic Sol used before, I bet? That means... If I ask Sol to lend me his magic, I will never have to feel cold again! I’m so glad!

Freed from the hellish cold, I cheerfully climbed into the carriage.

I also released Nox from her cage and had my father cast the same spell on her. She still had her winter feathers, but rain hawks didn’t naturally live in the north, so I figured it was better to err on the side of caution.

Between the five people who’d been waiting with Warnus, as well as Papa and his two subordinates and me, there were nine of us. We separated into two carriages for the journey. The carriages were sturdy and suited for a snowy climate.

We set off in the carriages... And traveled for *five hours!*

I passed the time watching the scenery, playing in the snow when we stopped for a break, napping when I got tired, and playing in the snow some more... And, surprisingly, the time passed quickly.

When we finally reached our destination, it was a backwoods village that looked like the very definition of a ghost town.

...There’s nothing but forest! Where are we?!

A man, who seemed to be the village chief, received Papa with great emotion.

I didn’t know what was going on but focused on letting Nox out to fly. I wanted her to familiarize herself with the lay of the land and work off some of the stress of traveling so far.

“Nox, go for a ‘walk.’”

The word “walk” was a command to patrol a specific area around a focal point. To be safe, I’d chosen a code word for the command. Lestin had suggested it to me.

I watched until Nox disappeared into the forest, and then I also began to wander around the village. There were only about twenty houses. All had thatched roofs made of what looked like dried straw. Also, strangely, there wasn't any snow on the ground. Perhaps it was due to the geography of the land, or maybe there was some other reason. Maybe Papa would know?

"Neema!"

But I still haven't seen everything! Oh well. We're spending the night here, so I can explore more tomorrow.

We'd be staying at the village chief's house. However, there wasn't room for everyone, so several members of our group would spend the night with other families.

Dinner was boar stew! Of course, the meat was giant boar! It was a little gamey but matched the broth well, and overall, the stew was delicious.

When Nox returned, I asked her if she wanted something to eat, but she told me she'd been hunting and was already full.

Nox was cute when she was eating, so I'd wanted to watch her eat. Too bad.

That night, Papa and I shared a bed.

It was the village chief and his wife's bed, but they'd insisted we use it—an offer I was happy to accept!

Papa stayed up late working, so I went to sleep first.



A strange noise pierced through the fog of sleep.

I was curious about it, so I groggily roused myself.

Hm? It's already morning. I slept pretty well.

"...Uuuugh..."

Oh, right. The strange voice! Or, well, I guess it's more like a moan?

I looked around, grasping the situation.

...Oh...

I used Papa as a mattress!

It had been my father moaning. My bunny backpack was sprawled sideways in the spot where I'd originally been sleeping.

Oh? Did I move around a lot in my sleep? Hmm, but it's already time to wake up, so it doesn't matter.

"Father, wake up!"

I shook him, but he wouldn't wake up. He seemed to be having a nightmare.

I wonder what he's dreaming... I guess there's no other option.

I pinched his nose and held my hand over his mouth.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...

Oh, he's awake!

"Cough... Gasp ...Neema?"

"Good mowning!"

Either he didn't understand what was happening or was still half asleep because Papa seemed dazed.

He doesn't realize I cut off his air supply to wake him up...

"Mmm... Good morning."

"Breakfast! I'm hungry!"

Let's get dressed and find some food!

I urged Papa to hurry, and finally, we headed into the parlor.

The houses in this village were similar to traditional Japanese homes. It reminded me of my grandmother's place in the countryside, which left me feeling nostalgic. That's why I considered this room the "parlor" instead of the "living room."

For breakfast, we ate a savory porridge made with the leftovers from last night's stew. It contained mixed grains instead of rice, but was tasty!

This meat on the bone is the secret ingredient! I can tell this was a time-consuming dish to make. The fact that it contains bones means the person

cooking it must've spent a lot of time skimming the foam to keep it from getting bitter.

"...Could I have some more?" I asked the village chief's wife hesitantly once I finished my serving.

"I'm glad you enjoyed a simple rural dish like this."

The village chief's wife scooped more porridge into my bowl with a broad smile, seeming happy I'd asked for seconds.

"Your cooking is amazing! Of course, I like it!"

"Oh! I'm so happy! In that case, I'll pack you an extra-special yummy lunch to take with you."

"Yay!"

Wait, a packed lunch? Why would we need that?

With my arms still raised in celebration, I tilted my head, confused.

"We're going into the forest today. I wanted to leave you here, but..." my father supplied.

Of course, I'm going! If you try to leave me behind, I'll follow you! Even if someone's watching me, I have Sol's magic up my sleeve, so I'll figure something out... Probably.

"It will be dangerous, so you must listen to me carefully."

Papa explained that there had been a series of monster attacks in this region recently. Knights were dispatched to deal with the monsters, but the attacks hadn't stopped. For this reason, they built a fortress and stationed knights here permanently.

The purpose of this trip was to survey the forest and determine the best place to build the fortress.

Hm, isn't this a bit unusual? Normally, Papa wouldn't be willing to bring me to such a dangerous place.

I wonder what he's thinking...

"Father, why did you bring me along?"

If it's for a dumb reason, I'm telling Mama!

"...I'm sorry to ask, but I'd like you to serve as an intermediary between us and the fire dragon," he confessed.

Huh? What does he mean, an intermediary with Sol? Maybe he wants Sol to get rid of the monsters? I wouldn't suggest that plan... Well, I suppose it's okay if he doesn't mind the forest being annihilated in the process...

"The fire dragon knows a lot about monsters. I thought he could give us some insight into the cause of these attacks..."

Oh, right! Sol is a living encyclopedia... Or, rather, a living record of history. I wonder if he knows something...

"In that case, I'll ask him!"

I closed my eyes and pictured Sol in my mind, as I normally did.

"Sol! Mr. Sol! Lord Sol!"

"There's no need to call so many times, child."

Ugh, you're totally missing the point—I'm setting the mood!

"Well, you see, I'm accompanying my father on a tour of his territory, and there have been a lot of monster attacks lately. Do you know anything about it?"

"Monsters, hm? And where exactly has this been happening?"

Oh... Now that he mentions it, I don't know where we are.

"Father, what is the name of this village?"

Papa, stop looking at me like you're shocked that I don't know. If I don't know, then I don't know, okay! Even if you told me just yesterday, I've clearly forgotten. I was busy and focused on eating, you know!

"It's Gilva Proxy, Icoff. He'll understand if you tell him it's in the Needle Frost Forest."

I conveyed what Papa had told me to Sol.

Sol was surprised when he heard.

Hardly any monsters lived in the Needle Frost Forest. Those that existed were isolated individuals defeated in turf wars and driven out of the mountains.

“What kinds of monsters were there?” I asked on Sol’s behalf.

No matter the situation, gathering intel comes before all else!

I deeply regretted not doing any research in preparation for this trip because I was lulled into a false sense of security by the fact that Papa would be with me.

“The most commonly reported sightings were of goblins. There were also kobolds and even a few reports of frost spiders, I believe,” Papa explained.

Heh. Goblins and kobolds are the most standard of standard fare. I assume frost spiders are a type of spider exclusively found in snowy climates?

In any case, I conveyed this information to Sol.

According to Sol, goblins and kobolds were native to a more southern climate. Based on the little I’d heard, I figured there were four possible explanations.

First, the monsters had begun reproducing like crazy due to the abundance of food and the lack of natural predators in this area. However, Sol refuted this theory.

Second, the monsters had fled from their natural predators. Those predators had reproduced prolifically in the goblins and other monsters’ natural habitats, forcing them to flee north. Papa shot this theory down, based on the fact that monster attacks hadn’t increased in any of the other territories.

Third, it was a man-made problem. It seemed unlikely, but we couldn’t discount the possibility that humans had gathered the monsters together and driven them here for some reason.

Fourth, it was God’s doing. That seemed like the most likely explanation to me.

When I suggested the God theory, the response was, “For what purpose?” They wouldn’t be asking that if they knew him. God had a track record for meddling.

Papa’s subordinates also joined in. For over an hour, we all hashed through various theories.

In the end, we went through the process of elimination, working through the possible causes one by one, and disproving them. If this was a man-made problem, there should be some evidence of human involvement.

The village chief's wife had finished preparing our lunch, so it was time to set off. Into the forest we go!

But before that, we needed to get properly outfitted.

I put on the pendant containing the magical stones I'd received from the king and queen and stashed the dagger Grandpa Gouche had given me in the stomach of my bunny backpack.

Papa and his subordinates geared up for a fight.

Based on their armor, I realized that the five men who'd joined us in Arsenta were knights. They belonged to the Royal Knighthood First Legion Northern Territory Division.

That means only two people accompanying us are Papa's direct subordinates... I guess he doesn't feel the need to travel with a huge entourage?

A hunter from the village agreed to act as our guide through the forest.

Currently, we followed a barely discernible animal trail. If we strayed from the path even a little, we would get lost.

Nox flew in wide circles above us, making sure nothing abnormal was in our path. I thought it must be nearly impossible to see anything from the sky due to the dense foliage, but maybe with a bird's sharp vision, it was possible? I'd always heard that hawks had amazing vision but doubted how much Nox could see.

We continued until the sound of crunching leaves reached us. We weren't the ones making this noise.

The knight beside me drew his sword, and with one swift strike, he cut right through a nearby bush... Or maybe it was a small tree?

Whoa, whoa there! What if it was a person?! I thought, peering around the knight.

There sat a furball, frozen in terror.

It was some kind of animal, but its fur was so long that I couldn't tell what type.

"It was just a rabbit," the knight told Papa, surprising me.

That is a rabbit? Rabbits are supposed to have short hair, long ears standing straight up, and twitchy little noses, like the Netherland Dwarf and the Japanese White breeds!

Oh, maybe this is a breed raised for fur farming? Not a chinchilla... Hmph, I can't remember what they're called!

Anyways, it hasn't moved a muscle this whole time. I wonder if the rabbit's okay?

I looked around, checking for danger, then approached the rabbit.

"Are you okay?" I called out in a calming voice and reached out to the rabbit, who finally reacted, dashing off into the forest.

...It ran away! It ran away from me!

I was so stunned that I couldn't even react, but the presence of the people behind me brought me back to my senses.

Oh, right, they're all here!

It didn't occur to me since usually Dan or Lestin accompany me, but come to think of it, wild animals are sensitive, so it must've been startled by the knights!

"Let's get out of here before the smell of blood draws in monsters."

The smell of blood?

There was a faint trace of blood on the ground where the rabbit had been.

That rabbit was injured by the sword?!

I set off running.

I knew, intellectually, it was a bad idea. But I couldn't abandon an injured animal!

"My lady!"

"Neema?!"

I'm sorry! Please follow me, preferably without falling into a murderous rage!



I ran as fast as I could in the direction the rabbit had fled. I wanted to find it before my pursuers found me and dragged me back. Somewhere behind me, I heard shouts of “My lady!” and the rustle and crunch of leaves and twigs.

...This is kind of scary. Maybe it's a psychological effect of being chased, but those sounds are panic-inducing! But at least I don't have to worry about getting separated from everyone and ending up hopelessly lost.

Oh, there it is!

Probably because of its injury, the rabbit hadn't gone far.

“Come here. I'll take care of your wound, okay?” I said softly.

Because of the rabbit's frantic flight, blood stained its long fur. It hobbled toward me, favoring its injured side.

Thank goodness. For a second there, I thought I'd lost my animal-charming ability.

I carefully picked up the rabbit and headed in the direction I'd come from.

Just then, I heard a rustling sound and turned toward it, assuming the knights had caught up with me.

“Geegii?”

Oh, crap.

I thought I was beloved by God!

Clearly, I thought wrong!

I was face to face with a green-skinned monster just a little taller than myself. It was a goblin.

The goblin was only wearing a cloth tied around its hips in a style more appropriate to the climate of the southern territory. I felt cold just looking at him!

Don't you know this is the north?! It doesn't matter how much of a monster

you are. You must be freezing!

I was a moron to stand there observing the goblin. Go on, call me an idiot. I won't deny it. I am a huge idiot.

The goblin wasn't alone, either. Maybe they'd been hunting as a team because four stood in formation, fanned out behind me.

Suddenly, something was thrown over me from behind, and I was being carried away, unable to move.

Damn it! I need to tend to the rabbit's wound!

Due to the irresistible beacon God had set before me, I, Nefertima, had been kidnapped by goblins.

Papa, this is all God's doing, after all!

In any case, it looks like I'm heading for the goblins' nest, so please come rescue me!

I would leave asking Sol for help as a last resort.

15 - How Did it Turn Out Like This?!

THUMP!

Ow! That hurt! Treat your hostages a little better, won't you?!

I'd been dumped unceremoniously on the ground, my right shoulder taking the brunt of the impact.

Is the rabbit okay?!

The rabbit, trapped inside the bag with me, struggled in my arms.

Thank goodness. It looks like the bleeding has stopped.

I was dragged out of the bag, only to find myself surrounded by goblins. There were so many!

An uncountable number of goblins were living in a gigantic but, by all appearances, naturally occurring cave.

Eek, they're all gathering around me excitedly! I think they might even be drooling! Hey guys, I'm not food!

...Huh? It's not me the goblins are looking at. Their gazes are focused a bit lower...

"You can't eat this little rabbit!" I cried.

As if they understood me, the goblins' gazes grew sorrowful.

Too bad! You still can't eat her!

"Anyways, why did you bring me here?" I demanded.

At this, they all tilted their heads to the side in confusion.



Darn it, they are cute, aren't they?! ...No, wait, I'm not thinking that! Not me, no siree! I absolutely will not give in to temptation!

A single goblin approached, still drooling.

I won't give you the rabbit! I thought, glaring at the goblin, but he didn't seem bothered as he took my hand and tugged it gently. *Uh, I think he wants me to follow him?*

Having no better plan, I let the goblin lead me until we came to an alcove.

This time the goblin pushed me gently from behind, so I obligingly stepped into the alcove. I thought it would be pitch black, but the walls glowed with a soft green light. Luminous moss, maybe?

And people were in the alcove.

...Wait, people?!

I did a double-take, then a triple-take, but there were indeed two girls a bit older than me in the tunnel. Their faces looked similar, so I guessed they were sisters.

"Were you kidnapped too?" one of the girls asked in a beautifully lilting voice.

"Yeah, you too?" I asked.

"Hmph, can't you tell by looking? We wouldn't be here if we weren't kidnapped!"

I suppose she has a point.

Even so, the second girl had a prickly personality.

"I'm Nino, and this is my older brother, Pino," the second girl offered gruffly.

Older brother? Oops, looks like he's actually a boy. Sorry, my bad!

Both of them possessed the kind of beauty that would make angels weep. Unfortunately, due to the dim light, I couldn't make out the color of their hair and eyes.

"I'm Neema. Nice to meet you."

It was my first time speaking with children around the same age as me. Just to

be safe, I kept my background a secret.

“Besides us, some adults were abducted, too. They’re being kept somewhere else, though, so we can’t see them...” Pino told me what he knew. However, it wasn’t heartening news. Whether it was goblins or orcs or humans, the outlook was grim for any woman captured by bandits, right?

It was bad enough when I thought it was just me, but now there was all the more reason to pray for a speedy rescue!

If I used Sol’s power, it would be over quickly, but it seemed a shame to blow this place to smithereens without gathering any information.

Besides, if I used fire magic in an enclosed space like a cave, wouldn’t it lead to a lack of oxygen? Maybe if I used wind at the same time, it would be okay?

“Hey Sol, is it okay to use fire magic inside a cave? Will it create a lack of oxygen?” I asked through our telepathic link.

“Why are you asking such a strange question all of a sudden?” he responded. *“Hmm... I think it would be okay, as long as you create wind as well.”*

“Well, you see... I’m inside a goblin nest right now, and there are other captives here as well, so... I’m trying to figure out how to help them.”

Sol responded with silence.

Oh, dear, I’ve shocked Sol senseless.

“Using my magic is possible, but aiming it only at the goblins is not. It would be different if I could see them, but operating telepathically, I’m afraid it’s beyond my abilities,” he explained.

So there were some things even Sol couldn’t do, huh... Sounded like I couldn’t count on Sol to get me out of this one.

“If you could control my magic, it might be possible...” he suggested.

“No way, I can’t! I’m too afraid to do something like that!”

I don’t have any magic of my own! There’s no way I could successfully bust out and do something in the heat of the moment that I’ve never even attempted before! All there is to do is wait for Papa and his men to rescue us...

I hope Nox was able to follow us here and will let them know where we are. Let's put all that training we've been doing to good use, Nox! As I was thinking that, my stomach let out a loud growl. I'm so hungry! And I didn't even get to eat the lunch the village chief's wife packed. What a waste!

"I can't believe you... To feel hungry at a time like this!"

It's not my fault! I did a lot of walking today. My energy is depleted!

I handed the rabbit to Pino and stepped out of the alcove.

Directly beside the alcove's opening stood a goblin on guard duty. His eyes widened in surprise, not expecting anyone to even try to come out.

He clearly didn't realize I was so close to him, that's why he's so surprised!

"I'm hungry!" I pointed to my stomach, trying to convey my hunger to him.

"Gee! Geegii!" the goblin called to one of its companions. I had no idea what he was saying, but it seemed I'd gotten my point across?

Maybe goblins are smarter than I thought?

The other goblin brought some fruits that looked like long, thin persimmons. I'd never seen them before, but they looked like they were probably edible?

I wiped the fruit on my clothes and, throwing proper manners to the wind, took a huge bite.

"...It's so bitter!"

Damn, that's bitter! I think my tongue is going numb! There's no way I can eat this...

"Gee-ga-gee!"

The goblin quickly snatched the fruit from my hands. Then he peeled off the skin with his teeth. Once he'd removed a section of the skin, he pointed emphatically to the flesh inside.

So you can't eat the skin... Should've told me that sooner! I hesitantly took a small bite of the peeled fruit. *It's sweet! It has a crisp texture, and the juice is sugary and delicious! Hmm, I wonder if there's any way to peel it besides with your teeth?*

Oh! I forgot I have a dagger inside my bunny backpack! I've been forgetting I'm even wearing it lately...

I whipped out the dagger and set to work peeling the fruit. The second I took out the dagger, the goblins shrunk back in fear.

It's fine! Don't worry! I'm not some ninja who could take you all on with a single dagger! Honestly, I'm not even peeling the fruit so much as clumsily carving pieces off the outside. Sometimes it's inconvenient being so tiny...

Once I'd removed the skin, I helped myself to the delicious interior. The goblins stared intently, watching me eat with gusto.

What are you looking at?! If you have the time to stand around watching me eat, give me another one of these delicious fruits!

I knew it was shameless and demanding, but I couldn't fight on an empty stomach. I accepted another fruit and peeled that one as well.

Several goblins began copying me, attempting to peel the fruits with their rusted knives.

...Oh! It must never have occurred to them to use a knife to peel these fruits!

The goblins handled the knives awkwardly.

Whoa! Be careful not to cut yourselves!

"While I'm at it, I'll show you how to remove the skin. Your hands are small like mine, so it's easier to shave the skin off like a peeler!"

I finished the second fruit and took a few more for Pino and Nino. I also grabbed some of the leaves, hoping the rabbit could eat them.

The goblins weren't so bad, after all. They were clever and understood me.



...UMM, I'm not sure why, but for some reason, the goblins and I seem to have become almost like friends? Is this also due to the ability God gave me? So it also works on monsters, huh? I had no idea.

...But now I'm in a real predicament. I don't want to see them destroyed in retaliation for kidnapping me. But Papa will find us. It's only a matter of time.

When he does, I don't think he'll stop to listen to what I have to say first.

So how am I going to rescue all of the kidnapped people and make it so the goblins can live in peace? Ooooh, this is so hard!

"Why are you guys living here, anyways?" I asked.

Goblins didn't normally live in such a cold climate. So what were they doing in a place like this?

"Gee? ...Geeggii! Gugigigi!"

"...Sorry, I don't understand what you're saying."

"Guu..."

The only noises they could make were screeching sounds like "gee" and "guu."

Just then, a commotion happened near the entrance to the cave. It appeared that a group of goblins who'd been out hunting had just returned.

There are even more of them?! Just how many are there?!

They carried two giant boar piglets into the cave.

Oh no, they became the prey of the goblin hunters... I suppose it makes sense that the hunters targeted the weak. It's the natural way of things in this eat-or-be-eaten world, but I can't help feeling sorry for the giant boar piglets...

At the same time, I also couldn't help being impressed.

The goblins could hardly use a knife, and yet they took down not one but two giant boar piglets larger and stronger than themselves.

I was so lost in thought that I failed to notice...

A shadow fell over me.

"Why is one of the human children out here?"

"...You can speak?!" I cried.

I can't believe it!

He looked like a goblin but was much larger than the others. Maybe he was a hobgoblin? In any case, why could he speak?!

“Geegii!”

“...You idiots kidnapped another one? I told you to stop doing that...”

“Wait just a minute!” I interjected.

Right. First things first, let's clarify the situation.

“I've got some questions, and you're going to answer them, got it?” I said with authority.

“.....”

I'll take your silence as agreement!

“First, are you these guys' leader?” I asked.

“...Yeah, I'm the boss of this clan.”

Well, that's the answer I was expecting.

“Second, why are you kidnapping people?”

“Women are the spoils of war, so it's an ingrained instinct for them.”

Huuuuh? A natural instinct?! Since when do goblins exhibit this kind of behavior?!

Either this was a fact I'd missed when amassing my vast knowledge of geeky hobbies, or it was a trait specific to the goblins in this world... I had no idea which.

“Instinct? Kidnapping children is instinctual for goblins...?”

“In their minds, it's not kidnapping. They think they're saving lost children. Goblins treasure all children, including human children.”

Good grief... So I was just being babysat this whole time?! I wasn't lost, though... Yeah, definitely not. My father was not far behind!

“Third, why do you attack humans?”

“...To survive. That's the entire reason I brought them here.”

All right, here it comes! I have a feeling he's about to get to the meat and bones of this story.

“Why did you leave your previous home?” I asked.

After hearing this question, the hobgoblin’s expression changed for the first time... Or at least I think it did. It was hard to tell; I couldn’t say with confidence either way.

“We were attacked by humans in the forest. Not just us goblins, but the kobolds, orcs, and ogres, too...”

Oh? So it wasn’t God’s doing after all? Either that, or maybe he’s manipulating the situation behind the scenes?

...But if you’re going to go to all that trouble, do it yourself, yeesh!

“But why come this far north? Surely there was somewhere else you could’ve gone?”

The hobgoblin quietly shook his head.

“The humans pursued us everywhere we went. The ogres are a warlike species, so they fought back and were almost entirely wiped out. As for the orcs, they aren’t suited to the cold climate. They either froze to death or stayed in the south despite the danger. We are weak, so we fled, but even so, many of us were killed along the way.”

I hadn’t heard anything about such a large-scale punitive force being formed, so this probably wasn’t the work of the royal knighthood. And I got the impression the issue crossed country borders, meaning it wasn’t a problem exclusive to the Kingdom of Gaché. That meant there was guild involvement, or the Church of Divine Creation was up to something...

If it *was* the church, it stood to reason that maybe the Kingdom of Gaché wasn’t the only victim. The drought that had brought Icoux to its knees last year immediately came to mind. Our king was well known for hating when the Church of Divine Creation tried to get involved with politics, so that might have something to do with it.

I decided then and there to have Papa investigate whether similar things were happening in Milma and the Linus Empire.

But what to do about these goblins?

Maybe we could establish a goblin village here where they could live freely and be self-sufficient?

...But, wait. If we do that, there's a lot they need to learn first! We'd need to teach them how to hunt, farm, tan leather, and preserve food... Ugh, that sounds like so much work!

Forget that plan!

"Um... So what do you guys want to do now? Are you planning to get revenge on humans?"

It became a bit overwhelming to think through, so I started by asking how the goblins would like to live from here on out. Although, if they *did* want to get revenge against humans, I couldn't just stand by and let them.

"...We want to go back to how things were, hunting and being hunted by animals and other monsters... We want to be an essential species to the survival of the forest."

Essential to the survival of the forest, huh... No matter how you looked at it, the goblins played the role of prey. That's probably why nature designed them to reproduce and mature so quickly.

That meant that if we protected only the goblins, it would throw off the natural balance...

So maybe we should put them all together? Not here, but on a mountain closer to the royal city, we can let the goblins, orcs, ogres, and other persecuted monsters live together!

Mama can help arrange a magical barrier to prevent them from leaving the mountain and heading into the human villages. The only problem is the money it would cost to put this plan into action... And even if there are predators, we'll still need to find a way to thin out their numbers somehow...

Hmm, I guess a labyrinth dungeon would be overdoing it a little?

...No, but we could make it like a survivalist training ground exclusively for low-ranking guild members and set up an item shop at the foot of the mountain...

That might work!

“How about this?”

It was a rough plan, but I told the hobgoblin about the idea I’d come up with.

“It’s okay if we kill humans?”

“Well, it’s a battle to survive, after all. The humans who enter the mountain will be informed of the situation in advance, and whoever defeats them can keep their possessions.”

It should be fine as long as we have the humans sign a waiver and make it clear upfront that we can’t guarantee their safety, right? I’ll leave the complex legal details up to Papa to hammer out.

It might have been a ruthless plan, but God had brought the goblins and me together.

And in any case, whenever someone dies, whether human or monster, blame it on God for deciding it’s their time and leave me out of it, please.

“The real problem is figuring out how to handle my father and his men once they get here,” I sighed.

Ah-ha! This is just the right time to take Sol up on his promise to lend me his power when I’m in trouble! I’m really on a roll today! It’s almost scary!

“Will you please promise to let me deal with them?” I requested.

“That’s fine with me, but what are you planning to do?”

“Heh. I’m going to get the ace up my sleeve to lend me his power.”

“Ace up your sleeve?”

The hobgoblin tilted his head in confusion at the unfamiliar expression.

...This seems to be a standard gesture for these guys, huh?

I wasted no time in explaining the situation to Sol. The goblins seemed confused by the sight of me communicating telepathically, so I explained what I was doing, and they seemed to accept my strange behavior.

Now that I had a plan, it was time to brainstorm battle strategies!

...Is what I wanted to say, but unfortunately, we faced a tall hurdle in that the extent of the other party's fighting ability was unknown...

No matter how much I searched my memory, I'd never seen my family using any offensive magic. All I knew was that my father possessed such strong fire magic that it tended to leak out whenever he lost control of his emotions. And I had no information whatsoever regarding the subordinates he'd brought. As for the knights, I could only assume, since they'd been accepted into the royal knighthood, they must be powerful.

This isn't good.

Even though I knew how critical information was, I had almost none.

I went back and forth with Sol and the hobgoblin, hashing out potential patterns for how the confrontation might go.

Time seemed to pass in the blink of an eye, and almost before I knew it, darkness had fallen over the forest.

If they're going to make a move, they'll most likely do it under the cover of darkness, right?

I also told Pino and Nino that help was on the way and convinced them to help a little.

Now all I had to do was go outside once Papa and his men arrived.

It should be a piece of cake, right?

The objective was to prevent Papa and his men from striking first and asking questions later. Things might take a turn for the worst, but I'd be fine! I would make sure to use Sol's protective magic on myself first.

All right, first things first, I need to get everything ready.

I entrusted nocturnal animals with strong night vision with the task of alerting me when humans approached the cave. I thought about summoning Nox but figured she was with Papa and the others, so I decided not to.

And finally, it might seem childish, but I also set up a bit of a booby trap. It was more for peace of mind than anything else, honestly.

All right, we're ready for you!

16 - I'm Sorry I Underestimated You, Papa

A single kewie entered the cave.

Kewies were small animals with long bodies, short legs, and dark brown fur. They resembled weasels, except their tails were twice the length of their bodies. They also had sharp claws and protruding fangs. That made them perfectly adapted for surviving in the forest. They were known for being aggressive despite their small size, so if you tried to touch them like a pet, you'd probably be in for an unpleasant surprise.

The kewie informed me that humans had approached the cave.

I patted the kewie's neck to express my gratitude, and while I was at it, indulged my desire to stroke its tail. The tail could be used like a whip for attacking, wrapped around a tree branch like a rope to support their body, or the tip could be used like bait to lure smaller prey. The kewies were blessed by evolution! They were incredibly flexible and possessed the dense fur characteristic of animals native to the cold northern climate.

I bet it would feel amazing if I wrapped him around my neck like a scarf... Of course, I won't, though. He probably wouldn't enjoy that much.

I gave the kewie a scrap of giant boar meat as a reward for obediently letting me pet him.

Sigh. The sight of animals happily munching on their food is so calming and uplifting!

...What am I doing? This is no time to be slacking off!

"Pino, Nino, I'm counting on you! Just do what we talked about in the meeting..."

"We've got it already! We'll do whatever we have to if it means we can go home," Nino quipped.

Oh! They're motivated; that's great. As I figured, the quickest way to motivate

a prideful girl is to question her capability. I'll keep the details of that conversation to myself.

"I'll take care of the rabbit as we agreed," Pino added.

To be safe, I'd entrusted the injured rabbit to Pino. I figured that no matter how this turned out, these two would be rescued safely.

"It won't be long now. Just be patient a little while longer."

I stroked the furball of a rabbit, and she twitched her nose happily. When everything was said and done, I would beg my parents to let me keep her at our house as a pet.

Pino and Nino walked out of the cave, fearfully looking over their shoulders. It was an act that they were playing out perfectly per my battle plan.

A moment later, three of the fastest goblins rushed out of the cave as if chasing the human children. Of course, I'd used Sol's protective magic on them in advance.

As for the hobgoblin and I, in addition to protective magic, we used a sound enhancement spell so we could hear what was going on outside.

"Oh no!" Nino screamed. I was pretty sure it was just part of the act...

"Nino, over here!"

As I'd requested, the two were following the script of being discovered immediately after escaping from the goblins.

"Gee!" A goblin screeched as if saying, "Catch them!"

The goblins were surprisingly good actors.

Just then...

"...There are two other children..."

It was faint, but I heard a human voice.

There was a pause, and then...

"Rescue them."

It was Papa's voice.

“...But doing so will reveal our presence to the goblins.”

I supposed this must be one of his subordinates.

Does he mean to ignore children fleeing for their lives? How cold-blooded can you be?!

“That’s fine.”

Of course, Papa would never abandon a child in need. But is it just my imagination, or does Papa seem a little different from usual?

I heard a rustling sound, then the patter of footsteps and the clanking of armor.

Based on the noise, I guessed that two, maybe three knights were on the move.

“This way!”

One led Pino and Nino off into the forest, and the others took up position to apprehend the goblins.

However, the goblins turned and dashed back into the cave as if the demons of hell were on their heels.

Their speed is a crucial part of my plan.

Once the goblins made it back safely, I signaled to the hobgoblin.

Without saying anything, he nodded faintly and went outside.

The hobgoblin deliberately made a target of himself at my request to prevent the humans from using magic to blow up the entrance to the cave the goblins had fled into.

“We’ll return those children. Now be gone from this place, humans!”

“How rare, a hobgoblin with the ability to speak.”

My father came walking out of the forest, completely defenseless. He wore the aura of flames drawn around him like a cloak, but his voice was cold as ice.

Scary! That’s not my Papa!

“Why don’t you go ahead and return Nefertima to me? It’s already well past

her bedtime, after all.”

Suddenly a roaring sound cut through the night, the echo of the loud noise echoing off the walls of the cave.

Panicked, I peeked outside.

I saw my father, wrapped in flames, and what looked like a giant snake made out of fire lunging toward the hobgoblin. The fire snake bounced off an invisible barrier scant inches from devouring the hobgoblin. Well, I suppose it didn’t bounce off so much as break in half.

A burning stench filled the air.

“...Nefertima! Come out here right now!” Papa called, ignoring the hobgoblin and approaching the cave’s entrance.

His voice was one I’d never heard before, cold and fierce as a blizzard.

I think this means he’s seen through our ruse, right? And he’s very, very angry?

...Checkmate!

I can’t believe he figured it out so quickly... Now I’m really in trouble. What should I do? I suppose the best course of action is to apologize and explain the situation?

“Sol, can you project my voice so my father can hear me?”

“It’s over already? How anti-climactic. ...You may speak now.”

Anti-climactic?! Is he sitting back and watching this unfold as a form of entertainment?!

“Father, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know what you’re apologizing for, but come out here and let me see you to set my mind at ease.”

The cold, biting edge to his voice had softened from blizzard-level to merely a heavy snow... But I couldn’t let my guard down.

“You won’t get angry? And you won’t use magic?”

“...Fine. I won’t get angry, and I won’t use magic, I promise.”

I suppose I can take him at his word. Papa would never lie to a child, and he’s never broken a promise to me in the past.

“Father!”

I exited the cave, running toward Papa. I threw myself into his arms, and the hug was returned a hundredfold.

Urk, too tight! That hurts!

It was a touching scene, like something out of a movie, but I had to keep Papa in a good mood for there to be any hope of this ending well, so I endured the painfully tight hug.

However, Sol’s magic was still active, enhancing my hearing. So I heard it clearly, the sound of someone chanting the incantation to a spell...

“Sol! Protect the cave!”

A wall of fire appeared in front of the cave entrance. Simultaneously, a huge ball of fire crashed into it. The fireball was absorbed into the wall of fire, becoming nothing more than fuel to add to the fire wall’s strength.

I moved away from Papa, throwing myself in front of the hobgoblin like a shield.

I knew that none of the humans here would dare to attack me.

“Neema!”

“I understand. You are the only one who promised not to use magic. But I won’t let any of you kill these goblins!”

Papa promised not to use magic, but his men made no such promise. Even so, read the air, will you?! This is a critical moment!

“Why do you protect them?”

“Because they were only being manipulated by humans!”

At long last, I was able to explain the situation to Papa. The hobgoblin jumped in from time to time, providing supplementary information. While we spoke, Papa switched modes from protective father to prime minister of the Kingdom

of Gaché as he listened carefully to our story.

Maybe we're not all the way to checkmate yet, after all?

When I asked Papa how he knew I was involved, he explained that even if they were children, Pino and Nino should've known better than to escape when all the goblins had returned to the nest. They would have known that running away in the daytime, when the goblins went out to hunt, would give them the best chance of encountering someone to help them.

When he'd gotten suspicious and tried using magic, he found a strong protection spell was cast on the hobgoblin, which he figured could only be Sol's magic.

Yikes, I'm no match for Papa's powers of perception.

After that, since we'd come to a tentative truce with the goblins, I emphatically reiterated they wouldn't do anything to harm the humans currently present.

Even so, Papa's men showed no sign of loosening their fighting stances.

Good grief, I'm exhausted! Let's stop standing around outside talking and either return to the village or go inside the cave!

I tried suggesting this to Papa, and he said it was dangerous to travel through the forest at night, so we spent the night in the cave.

His men didn't suddenly trust the goblins, but they most likely figured they could take them no matter how many goblins there were.

Oh well. I'll ask Sol to get rid of the wall of fire.

"Pino, Nino, are you okay?" I asked.

They'd agreed to help me with my plan, but it had gotten derailed pretty early on, so I'd need to explain to them what had happened.

"Screech!"

A birdcall rang through the air.

It's Nox! I can tell from the pitch of her cry that she's warning us of danger. Maybe a carnivorous nocturnal animal is approaching?

I looked up in the direction Nox's cry had come from to see eight orbs glowing with blue light floating in the air.

What is that?

"Look out!"

The hobgoblin rushed toward me. Apparently, he knew what those things were.

"Sol, please make several fires the size of torches!"

"Very well. What's happening?"

"I'm not sure, but there's something here!"

Like fox fire, three orbs of flame blinked into life around me.

The fires illuminated the looming figure of...a spider.

Calm down and think... First, how did such a freaking massive spider get so close without making any noise?!

Oh, and also! Is it even okay to refer to this thing as a spider? Its exoskeleton is much more sturdy than any spider I've ever seen, and it looks more like a crab than a spider...

Not to mention, its coloring is a mottled pattern of white and green... Is this supposed to be camouflage?!

"...Frost spider!"

Ah-ha! So this is what a frost spider looks like, huh?

The only sense I got from this frost spider was a strong sense of "hunger" and "desperation."

"I understand you're hungry, but why are you so desperate?"

I tried to ask, but the frost spider was locked in a staring competition with the hobgoblin and didn't reply.

Oh, right. From the frost spider's perspective, there's food right in front of her.

In nature, it was an eat-or-be-eaten battle for survival.

There wasn't much I could do except take the chance the hobgoblin was

giving me by drawing the frost spider's attention and fleeing back to where my father stood so I wouldn't get caught in the middle of the ensuing fight.

The frost spider raised its right front leg in a massive sweep and attempted to skewer the hobgoblin with it. The spider's front legs appeared to be sharp at the ends, as if maybe it had claws on those legs?

The hobgoblin deftly leapt out of the way. In a single leap, he covered a distance of more than six feet. It was a struggle to restrain myself from commenting on his incredible jumping ability.

The hobgoblin leapt into the air, plummeting down on the frost spider from above with his fist in front of him. With a wet popping sound, similar to an egg cracking, one of the frost spider's eyes burst.

Probably in anger, the frost spider clicked its fangs together, dripping liquid that I presumed to be poison.

The hobgoblin landed safely on the ground, but his fist was covered in blood. He was trying to wipe it away when the frost spider bent all eight of its legs and leapt into the air.

As you can imagine, it was targeting the hobgoblin.

There was a sound of bodies crashing together, and I unconsciously gasped.

I knew that if it looked like the hobgoblin was going to lose, Papa would light them both up with his hellfire without even batting an eye. He would do whatever was necessary and prioritize the survival of us humans. There may be a difference in power, but we, too, were fighting to survive.

I understood it. I might not be able to accept it, but I did understand.

Whether the hobgoblin or the frost spider won, the real victor would be us.

"Geegiiii!"

I heard a strange sound. The frost spider was an insect, so it couldn't speak. Next, I heard a cracking and popping sound, like something was being broken apart. The frost spider was clicking its fangs together nonstop.

What on earth was happening? All I knew was that the hobgoblin was unharmed.

Sol's protective magic was effective not only against magical attacks but physical attacks as well.

"Help me...."

So that's what it was.

I finally got a lock on the frost spider's thoughts.

Her "desperation" was regarding her children.

I wasn't sure of its exact biology, but the frost spider had children in her stomach. Maybe she was incubating the eggs inside her stomach, and until they got to a certain size, they would grow inside her like a parasite? She needed to eat a lot to nurture her children as well, but she hadn't been able to catch any prey and had gradually grown weaker and weaker.

She couldn't even seem to catch any of the animals she could normally catch with ease.

It made sense. The sudden introduction of such a large clan of goblins must have upset the delicate ecosystem of the forest.

When you looked at it this way, she was also a victim.

I couldn't see what the hobgoblin was doing, but the life slowly left the frost spider's eyes.

At some point, the sound of the spider's fangs clicking also faded away.

Thud.

Suddenly, the frost spider's body fell to the ground.

Then the hobgoblin pushed the spider's body up and climbed out from underneath it.

I should probably comment on his incredible arm strength at this point. I've never heard of such a powerful hobgoblin before... Is this normal for the hobgoblins in this world?

The frost spider was turned upside-down, and finally, I could see what the hobgoblin had done. He'd used brute strength to break through the spider's exoskeleton at the joint where its chest met its stomach and had eaten parts of

its insides.

Blood painted the hobgoblin's entire body, and a copious amount soaked the ground around him.

They say that mothers are the strongest creatures in the world, but she had become so weak that she couldn't win this fight.

I approached the frost spider's corpse and stroked its chest.

My hand became wet with blood, but I didn't pay it any mind.

I wasn't very fond of God, but right now I wanted to ask him a favor. I prayed that whether they went to heaven or were reborn, she and her children would be together and be happy.

...Such hypocrisy. I'm the one who killed her. She died because of my ego.

"I'm sorry..."

Just then, the frost spider's stomach moved. Or, rather, swelled up?

I stared at the spider's stomach, watching a single, tiny spider crawl out of the massive hole in it.

If she weren't already torn open, the babies would have ripped open her stomach to crawl out?! That's terrifying!

I continued to watch expectantly, assuming that many more babies would come crawling out, but there only seemed to be one.

Huh? Isn't it weird for there to only be one? Spiders usually lay tons of eggs at once.

A long time ago, a spider had laid eggs in my apartment, and when they hatched, it was an absolute nightmare!

The way the tiny baby spider, not even a quarter of an inch long, explored its surroundings on eight pitter-pattering legs while leaving a trail of spider web behind it was enough to make me break out in goosebumps and want to spray the entire area with pesticide.

While the baby spider and I stared each other down, Nox, having decided it was safe, flew to my side.

Once she approached the baby spider, Nox let out a screech and spread her wings intimidatingly.

That seemed to surprise the baby spider because it held out its two front legs as wide as possible and began waving them. Come to think of it, I was pretty sure I'd heard somewhere that spiders spread out their front legs to make themselves look bigger to scare off predators.

She's trying to scare off Nox, is she? It looks more like a dance than anything threatening, though. The movement is funny and even kind of cute. All right, Nox, keep it up!

Who would've ever guessed the day would come when I would find a spider cute after that nightmarish experience in my apartment...

I want to bring her home as a pet, too!

"Neema..." Papa said, softly laying his hand on my shoulder.

Does he think I'm depressed? I am a little sad, but the baby spider helped cheer me up!

"I'm okay! No matter the situation, the strong always survive, and the weak perish. It's not my place to interfere with the way of nature just for my own selfish feelings."

Papa hugged me tightly as if saying he was proud of me for my mature insight.

But I couldn't deny that I would've liked to save her if I could have.

Maybe I could have saved her, but I didn't. I'd been too afraid.

If I had saved her, the responsibility for that act would have all fallen onto me. I didn't have the confidence that I would be able to handle such a responsibility.

I hated how small and powerless I was. I wanted to become strong. I wasn't picky about the species, I just wanted to be able to get by on my own in the environments where animals lived, and for this reason, I wanted to become a more capable version of myself.

As the hobgoblin had said, all creatures fundamentally want to be necessary for the balance of nature.

I'm going to get stronger, I promise! So please forgive me for not being able to do anything this time.

I cried my heart out, wrapped safely in Papa's arms. I was sure I hadn't cried this much since I was a baby.

Nox, the hobgoblin, and all of Papa's men watched us warily. They didn't need to be so taken aback!



...Huh? Hold on, Mister Hobgoblin... Isn't there something strange about you?

I rubbed my eyes, attempting to clear my tear-blurred vision. Papa silently stopped me and handed me his handkerchief, which I gratefully accepted and used to wipe away my tears. While I was at it, I blew my nose and wiped the blood from my hand.

Feeling much better, I turned back to examine the hobgoblin once more.

A mysterious sparkling effect surrounded him, and an aura encased his body like fire.

What is that, Papa?

The aura became so strong that I could no longer see the hobgoblin's figure.

There was a loud kaboom, and suddenly the sparkling effect and the aura dissipated, revealing a different creature standing where the hobgoblin had been. ...I call it a "creature," but it looked similar to a human.

Its body was almost identical to that of a human with a lean build. His ivory skin was covered in what looked like green tattoos, and his ears were ever so slightly pointed. His blue hair and red eyes made an eye-catching combination. Two black horns were growing from the top of his head.

...Hello, who are you?

"He evolved...?" Papa muttered in disbelief.

The disbelief in his voice led me to believe that Papa wasn't quite sure what had happened either.

"...Is that you, Hobgoblin?" I ventured.

"Yes... What happened?"

Don't ask me! I was just wondering the same thing! How can he not know what happened to him?

When in doubt, ask Sol!

"Sol! I think the hobgoblin just evolved or something!"

"The evolved form of a goblin is a hobgoblin. They don't possess any further

evolution...”

“But he literally transformed right in front of my eyes into a human-like form! ...He does have horns, though.”

“Horns, you say? The only creatures I know of that match that description are a species called oni that live on the continent of Wazhite. They have the bodies of humans and horns on their heads...”

From what I could remember, Wazhite was southwest of Larshia and was only about half the size.

Hmm, trying to picture it in terms of my old world, Larshia is like Eurasia, and Wazhite is like Africa, roughly?

“Oni,” huh? I suppose he does resemble the Japanese creatures called oni, but Japanese oni aren’t nearly this flashy looking... Japanese oni only come in red, blue, green, and black, right? Why is that, anyway? If there were yellow oni instead of black ones, they’d have all four primary colors covered... Seems like a waste!

“I’d like to see it for myself.”

“...There isn’t room for you to land here, Sol.”

“I see... In that case, how about the village where you stayed last night?”

The village was tiny, but there was probably enough space for Sol to land, right?

“I think that would work!”

“Very well, then let us reconvene tomorrow for the first time in quite a while.”

Sometimes Sol used very antiquated language, which I had trouble understanding.

I think he’s saying he wants to meet tomorrow? Yeah, that’s gotta be it!

“I asked Sol, and he thinks this might be a species from the continent of Wazhite called an oni.”

“An oni?!”

Whoa, nice reaction, Papa!

“He also said he’ll come here tomorrow to see him.”

Oh, right. I forgot something important.

“Father, please give him something to wear.”

The former hobgoblin was butt-naked. I didn’t know where to turn my eyes.

Papa, embarrassed for failing to notice the problem sooner, hurried to snatch a trench coat from one of his men and give it to the former hobgoblin.

I felt a little sorry for the man whose coat had been stolen.

The former hobgoblin smiled faintly as he hesitantly put on the trench coat, but...

Oh no, I’m about to burst out laughing at an inappropriate moment! But I can’t help it; he looks like a quintessential flasher! Make sure you close the front properly! And whatever you do, don’t let it slip open—you’ll get arrested for public indecency!

Well, when it came to this former hobgoblin’s muscular figure, many young ladies probably wouldn’t mind ogling it.

Seeing the former hobgoblin struggling to button the coat, I went to help him. I had something important to tell him while I was at it.

“Thank you for saving me!”

I even gave him a hug for good measure. Now that he had an almost human body, he had neither fur nor scales, so the hug was a little underwhelming.

“Neema!”

Yeah, yeah. Papa, don’t you know that jealousy is a disgraceful trait in a man?! In any case, now it’s finally time for sleep!

Gasp! Pino’s already sleeping! I can’t believe he fell asleep amidst all this commotion. Nino looks astounded as well...

I wasn’t sure if he was brazen or just moved at his own pace, but either way, I had a feeling he’d grow up to be a force to be reckoned with in the future.

And he wasn’t the only one!

“Are you two still at it?! You’re just playing, right? Yeesh... Nox, you do know that’s not an enemy, right? There, there, good girl. Thank you for leading Papa and his men to find me.”

Nox climbed up on my shoulder because being petted put her in a good mood.

What does she look so smug for, huh?

“What will you do? Do you want to come with me? Or do you want to stay in this forest where your mother lived?” I asked the spider.

I hadn’t noticed it before, but the baby spider was black in color. I didn’t think her father was a different species, so it must mean that her color would change as she matured.

Even so, a white base color with green splotches stood out! Black was much more spider-esque, in my opinion!

The baby spider swayed back and forth in indecision.

Then, making up her mind, she leapt onto my arm and climbed steadily up to my shoulder.

Even spiders are cute when they’re little like this.

The baby spider claimed the opposite shoulder from Nox as her de facto perch.

Being careful of her eyes, I gently stroked the slight depression in the center of her back. She really was an insect. Her exoskeleton was hard like a rhinoceros beetle’s horn. I was careful not to crush her while petting her.

What should I name her?

I looked away, contemplating the issue, and my gaze caught on the frost spider’s corpse.

That’s right; I’ll use that... It’s one of my favorite words and a precious emotion.

“I’ll name you Gratia. It will be a tribute to your mother from both of us for making me stronger and for giving you life. Gratia means gratitude.”

It sounded like a girl's name, and I was pretty sure the spider was female, so it seemed like a good fit.

“Let's be good friends, Gratia!”

I stroked her back once more, and this time a white pattern appeared on her head, between her eyes.

...Look at that...!

I think I've gone and done it again...

Oh well, I'll have to ask Sol about it tomorrow. More importantly, I'm hungry! I'll steal the emergency rations that Papa always carries around with him, hehe!

17 - You've Got a Special Ability, Too?!

IT'S morning, time for breakfast!

I was wiped out last night, so I slept like a log. Of course, using Papa as a mattress. Sorry, Papa!

When we left the alcove, the goblins were awake and at work.

Some were off hunting, others had gone to fetch us water, and another group was butchering the frost spider.

I'm glad to know her death won't be in vain, but I'm not eating her! I won't eat a single bite of that meat, so please keep it all for yourselves.

And so, the interior of the cave buzzed with activity.

I washed my face with refreshingly cold water and straightened my clothing as best I could. Afterward, we ate a simple breakfast consisting of fruit the goblins had picked for us and rations my father and his men had brought.

Now it was time to negotiate with the former hobgoblin!

We still needed to get him to agree to release the adults who were being held captive.

"Will you please release the adult humans who are here too?"

"Sure."

...Tch! That was too easy!

"Really?!"

"If your plan goes ahead, it will solve all our problems."

He doesn't waste time playing hard to get, does he?

And so, the adults were released without a fight.

There were five captives. One was a man and the others were women. I'd been worried the women might have been *mistreated*, but they seemed

unharmmed.

When I asked why, he answered that taking care of the aftermath would've been too troublesome. I wasn't quite sure what he meant but decided not to ask for the sake of my virgin ears.

Between Papa and his men, as well as the freed captives, we made a sizable group when we set off to return to the village.

Of course, the former hobgoblin accompanied us. He looked even more like an exhibitionist pervert in the light of day. It was all I could do to keep from laughing every time I looked at him.

Since the goblins' boss would be absent for a while, I got Papa and his men to cast a wide-range protective spell around the cave.

I asked if it was a barrier but was informed that barriers were a different type of magic. They had more to say, but I got the feeling the explanation would go right over my head, so I quickly ended the conversation.

We instructed the goblins who would stay behind not to venture far from the cave. If something happened, no one would be able to rescue them.

When I saw Pino and Nino for the first time in the light of day, they looked like angels. Pino had cheerful yellow hair and dark green eyes that shimmered like gems. His hair was voluminous and curly, giving him the overall appearance of a sunflower. Nino was her brother's opposite, with dark green hair and bright, topaz-colored eyes. Her hair was long, so gravity naturally stretched the curls into gentle waves.

Their personalities were very different, too. Pino was nonchalant and moved at his own pace, as if time flowed differently in his orbit. Nino was a *tsundere*; there was no other word to describe her. And, as it turns out, they were twins. Their coloring and personalities were polar opposites, but they were each captivating.

Oh, and the rabbit's injury healed completely!

One of the knights accompanying my father possessed the ability to use healing magic, so I asked him to heal the rabbit, and he agreed.

While I was at it, I asked Papa if I could keep the rabbit as a pet.

“Neema, since you’re a smart little girl, you understand the responsibility involved with keeping a pet, right?”

“Of course!”

I would care for Dee and Nox diligently until death do us part. Sadly, I knew that I would most likely outlive them both.

Dee was a member of the family, and we all took care of her, but I took care of Nox all by myself. Even if she got sick, or one day got so old she couldn’t move anymore, that wouldn’t change. It was my duty to her as her owner.

“Personally, I think it’s in her best interests to live as nature intended, in her natural environment,” Papa said.

...That’s an incredibly indirect answer, but I think he’s saying I can’t keep her as a pet?

“Why?”

“When humans take wild animals as pets, the animal’s instincts become distorted. They lose the ability to feed themselves and their natural protective instincts.”

Oh, so that’s what he means. Even if you give food to a stray cat, they won’t let you get too close, but a housecat will let strangers pet it. That’s what he’s referring to, right? Unlike domesticated cats, wild animals need to maintain that wariness of danger to survive...

But if I care for her for the rest of her life, does it matter if she loses her survival instincts? I understand what Papa’s saying, but it doesn’t explain why I can’t keep her as a pet...

“That which has become distorted cannot return to the way it was and will only lead to further distortion. ...Hm, let me put it like this: think of the distortion as ripples. If you bring the rabbit home, it will set off a tiny ripple in the world. That ripple will travel across the world, bumping into other ripples, destroying them, or being consumed by them. These are the inner workings of the world. Every day, countless ripples, large and small, appear, creating the

events which determine the fate of the world.”

Whoaaa, hold on there a moment. This has suddenly turned into an abstract philosophical discussion that’s hard to follow.

Ummm, so, in summary, if you attempt to go against the laws of nature and the rules set forth by God, regardless of the magnitude of the act, it will affect the world? I’m not misunderstanding anything, am I?

“Furthermore, sooner or later, the consequences of your actions will always come back to you.”

Is this what they mean by those old adages, “He who seeks to do ill upon others should first dig two graves” and “Reaping what you sow?”

...How did we get onto such an esoteric topic?!

“It’s best for the world to have as few ripples as possible. Having no ripples means the world is peaceful and calm.”

He’s referring to the cosmic balance of nature. All events are connected, and interfering in any way throws off the natural balance. The universe reacts to correct the unbalance, and that reaction returns to where the unbalance originated.

“Huh? Then why is it okay for me to keep Nox as a pet?”

“The animals born at the beast stables are distorted simply by being born outside their natural environment. And Nox has magnified that distortion for your sake, Neema.”

Oh, that’s right. I’ve known for a while now that Nox’s abilities exceed those of the other birds at the beast stables. Have I been asking too much of her?

“You will one day find yourself in the path of the reverberation of the ripples you created. So don’t you agree that it’s best if the ripples are as small as possible?”

Wait just a minute!

Don’t compare a person to a giant rock protruding from the sea! A somber air has just blown in! In the first place, all I wanted to do was cuddle and pet cute animals. I have no desire to get involved with such weighty matters as world

peace!

Well, if someone tries to get in the way, I'll use Papa's authority and Sol's magic to drive them away, but that's not unreasonable, is it?

...Ahhhhh!

Is that what he's trying to say?! He's warning me that this twisted personality of mine is going to send out ripples all across the world?! No, no, no. Everything's going to be okay; I still have time to fix this. Probably...

In any case, I gave up on keeping the rabbit as a pet. Once the topic reached a global level, it seemed the only possible course of action was to return it to the wild.

Papa certainly has a way with words, befitting his role as prime minister of the entire country!

"I agree that it's best to return her to the forest. I'll be sad to see her go, though..." Pino said, driving the final nail into my coffin.

His sad smile would perfectly fit the face of an angel. I wanted nothing more than to comfort him with a big hug. Unfortunately, I was too short to reach.

"If you want to keep her, you should! Who cares about some weird 'distortion,' anyway?! If that's what you want, go for it. And besides, I bet you, of all people, can avoid any so-called repercussions, Neema!"

As expected from a prideful, tsundere young miss! She has the opposite opinion. I appreciate the support, but you're not helping when I just decided to do the right thing...

Nino's words caused me to waver, but in the end, I got ahold of myself and bid farewell to the rabbit.

One last time, I allowed myself to cuddle the soft and fluffy rabbit, admiring its sweet little twitching nose.

"I'm sorry you got hurt because of me. Let's play together again someday!"

I placed the rabbit on the ground, and after a long moment of staring at me with its ears standing straight up, it turned and ran off into the forest.

I'm so sad...

Nox rubbed against my cheek as if trying to cheer me up.

That's right, I have Nox here with me, and Dee's waiting for me back at home, and I can even see Sol today.

...Oh!

"Father!"

I pulled out the creature I'd been concealing and held her in front of Papa.

Yeah... I'm sorry. Really, really sorry. So please don't be angry...

"That spider is a monster. You do realize that, right?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

It's the frost spider's offspring, so yes, that would make it a monster.

"Furthermore, the fact that it's entirely black means it's one-of-a-kind."

Now that you mention it, black is supposed to be a bad color in this world, isn't it? I have to admit—I haven't met any other entirely black creatures.

"Do you understand the difference between animals and monsters?" the former hobgoblin asked, butting into the conversation.

"One possesses the power of sentient thought, and the other doesn't, right?" I answered.

I'd learned this from Dan.

In this world, there were four humanoid species: humans, beastpeople, elves, and demons. Dragons and elemental spirits were revered as beings surpassing all of the above.

Animals and monsters were generally distinguished by their capability (or lack thereof) for sentient thought, but there wasn't always a clear distinction. For example, in some regions, pests and animals that preyed on livestock were also lumped in with monsters.

When I protested this was ridiculous, Dan explained that the Church of Divine Creation defined monsters as any creature harmful to humans. That could include pests and predatory animals.

“So that’s what humans think... Put simply, monsters are defects. We’re all defective versions of something else.”

“Defective versions of something else?”

“That’s right. Us goblins are defective versions of humans. Frost spiders are defective versions of spiders. For this reason, all monsters are weak. Goblins born to a human mother may be a little stronger, but in the end, no matter how much human blood you add, goblins will always be goblins. I’m not sure if we’re lacking something crucial to being human or if there’s something we’ve got too much of.”

Monsters were defective versions of other creatures...

This unexpected revelation shocked me. This seemed to be news to Papa, too, because he listened with concentrated interest.

“Young goblins are sometimes killed by kewies. Until frost spiders grow to a certain size, everything that moves in the forest is their natural predator. It’s rare for one to get as big as the one we encountered yesterday.”

My goodness! I didn’t realize how brutal the struggle to survive is for them! Well, I guess that’s probably why monsters have such an outstanding reproduction rate.

“For a monster to become stronger, they need to receive a ‘name.’ I suspect that frost spider must’ve had a ‘name’ as well.”

“A name?”

“If we’re given a ‘name’ by a strong person, the world recognizes us as an individual. Once that happens, we can use magic and receive the divine protection of the elemental spirits.”

Interesting. I suppose names are important in this world.

Having a name could be restrictive in many ways, but it also came with many blessings.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

I bet it’s a super manly and badass name! And besides, it’s gotten pretty tedious referring to him as “the former hobgoblin,” so I’d like to know his name!

"I don't have a name..." he said. "I didn't get along well with the previous boss, and he was killed shortly after I took over."

A nameless warrior, huh? But he was able to evolve even without possessing a name?! He must be incredibly skilled!

This whole situation is bizarre, God!

"To be honest, I'm jealous of that little spider," he said. "That symbol on her forehead means she has a name, right?"

"Her name is Gratia."

Gratia clicked her fangs together.

I think she's probably trying to brag, "It's a pretty good name, too, right?"

At some point, our conversation had turned into a lesson, and before I knew it, we were already arriving at the village. Apparently, the captured man was from this village because the villagers seemed shocked to see him, shouting and then crying. A woman, who I could only assume was his wife, ran over and threw herself into the man's arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

Thank goodness...

Another contingent of knights would escort the women to their respective villages the following day.

More importantly, what about their mental health? They must be incredibly traumatized...

"Father, please have a doctor examine the former captives. Preferably someone who specializes in mental health..."

Do psychologists even exist in this world? Even if they don't, an examination by a doctor might help to ease their psychological burden even a little.

"Good idea. I will dispatch the territory's order of healers."

Come to think of it, the twin angels are probably from around here, too, huh?

When I asked, I was informed they were the children of the proxy lord who ruled Ireiga Proxy, which neighbored Gilva Proxy, where we currently were.

They're the genuine article, children of the aristocracy!

“I see, Earl Ireiga’s children... In that case, we must hurry to inform him of their safety.”

At Papa’s order, a messenger hawk was dispatched to Earl Ireiga’s estate.

According to Papa, Earl Ireiga was an excellent proxy lord.

In that case, he’d be perfect to drag into my plan... Er, I mean, his assistance would be beneficial, should he choose to give it. He does owe us for saving his kids, after all.

Well, I’ll discuss this topic at length with Papa later on.

For now, I’m starving! Somebody get me something to eat!



WE were once again imposing on the hospitality of the village chief and his wife.

The village chief’s wife was overjoyed to see me safe and sound and immediately sat me down in front of a bowl of piping hot stew.

Oh, the simple pleasures of a hot meal! I’m in heaven!

It was the twins’ first hot meal in quite some time, and they dug in ravenously, shoveling the stew into their mouths. They’d subsisted almost entirely on fruit during their time in the cave.

I asked the village chief’s wife for some raw meat for Nox and Gratia, which she kindly provided. Nox pinned her chunk of meat down with one of her legs and tore into it enthusiastically. Gratia wrapped her legs around her small chunk and deftly spun it as she ate.

I feel like the “nom-nom” sound effect is especially appropriate here... She’s eating through that meat like a hungry caterpillar devouring a cabbage leaf.

Once she’d finished the chunk of meat, Gratia clicked her fangs together as if begging for more, so I gave her a bean from my stew. Just like with the meat, she spun the bean around while happily devouring it.

I could get addicted to watching her “nom-nom-ing!”

Once we’d finished our meal, it was finally time—my long-awaited chance to

pet Sol had come at last!

But first!

I need to ask the village chief to get me some clothes! I have to do something about the former goblin—he can't meet Sol looking like a perverted flasher!



SOL landed in an open area that served as the village center.

The former hobgoblin, the twins, and the villagers were so dumbfounded and awed that all they could do was stare.

I, on the other hand, ran up to Sol without batting an eye and latched onto his face in a giant bear hug.

Ahhh, I can't get enough of this smooth texture! Sol's scales are the best!

With me still clinging to him, Sol examined the former hobgoblin.

"His characteristics differ from those of the demons I have heard of. Furthermore, I sense the presence of elemental power emanating from him... Hm..."

I wonder if I'll finally be able to sleep curled up against Sol tonight?

Should I stay traditional and use his stomach as a pillow, or should I go off-script and use his wing membranes as a blanket? Oh, wait! Leaning up against Sol's cheek while he's lying down is a quintessential "fantasy" image...

"...Are you listening?"

Hmmm, but I want to try the wing-membrane blanket, too... What should I do?

"Neema! You're not listening to a thing I'm saying, are you?!"

Whoa! Sol called me by name! That was surprising!

"This creature is not an oni. Oni cannot use elemental power. I have no knowledge of any monster that possesses these characteristics."

In conclusion, Sol doesn't know what he is either, huh? ...Isn't Sol supposed to be a living dictionary?! But, wait a minute, what's that about elemental power?!

“You can see elemental power?” I almost bowled the former hobgoblin over with the force of this question.

“If elemental power looks like half-transparent bugs flying around all over the place, then yeah, I can see it.”

Bugs?! Don't shatter my dreams like that! Say they're like fairies, not bugs! Oh wait, I don't think fairies exist in this world... And dwarves are as big as human children... What do you call Thumbelina's species, then?

...I give up. I guess there's nothing better to compare it to than bugs...

Let's postpone this issue for the time being! Good idea!

“Can you use elemental power?”

The former hobgoblin readily agreed to indulge my curiosity. With Sol's guidance, he attempted to use elemental power.

I searched the area for something we could use as a target but came up empty-handed. Thankfully, one of the knights who accompanied my father picked up on what I was doing and used magic to create a golem.

Magic is incredible, too. But I'm looking forward to seeing elemental power in action!

Without warning, the former hobgoblin spoke, and...

Boom!

The sound of debris scattering filled the village center.

Umm... It exploded?

“Elemental power can be invoked, even from a distance...?”

Right. As Papa had said, magic was cast outward by a magic user, originating from their body, so it couldn't be invoked at an origin point a distance away from the caster. When humans wanted to do this, we had to use magical items.

“He simply asked the element of fire to destroy the golem, that's all.” Sol seemed highly amused by the humans' surprised reactions.

The knight obligingly created another golem, and it was reduced to fine rubble. The former hobgoblin used the wind element to create a razor-sharp

whirlwind that cut the golem to pieces, after which the pieces were dried out and reduced to sand...

The element of water turned the golem into mud, then just as quickly reversed directions and stole all of the water out of it. The golem shattered into pieces that couldn't be put back together again.

How did the element of earth—the same material the golem was made of—fare, you ask? The golem became more glossy. Apparently, elemental power wasn't effective against the same element.

However, the element of earth was able to change the properties of things and make plants grow faster, so it was perfect for agricultural applications.

"It's nearly unheard of to be able to control all four elements..." Sol remarked.

Now that you mention it, even Sol can only control fire and wind. Humans can manipulate all four elements using magic, though. It would appear that this former hobgoblin was also the lucky recipient of a special ability. I think it's safe to say he's a new species? The fact that he can use elemental power even though he's not a holy beast is ultra-rare, isn't it?

"So it looks like he's a new species, right? How about the name 'shinki'?" I suggested.

"Shinki? What a strange sounding word..."

Well, yeah, it's Japanese. Using the characters for "forest" and "demon." It suits him perfectly!

I was patting myself on the back for my stellar naming sense when something unusual happened. A white symbol appeared on the former goblin's forehead...

Hold on. It's not a name! The name of the species is shinki! It's not a given name! Oi, God! Come down here right now! I know you are messing with me here!

I stomped my foot in frustration since there was no one I could take it out on.

"Neema..." Papa all but moaned.

It's not my fault!

“It’s the name of his species!” I tried in vain to insist, but it was too late—I couldn’t take it back now.

Fine, whatever! The former hobgoblin’s name is Shinki!

“Hmmm. And so, the ranks of those that serve you continue to swell,” Sol noted.

Those that serve me?! Knock that off right the heck now, please!

Sol is the only person I chose of my own volition! All the others either happened by accident or because God meddled in things...

Yeah! It’s not my fault!

“I’m sorry for giving you a name without asking permission,” I told Shinki.

“Don’t worry about it. I was planning to ask you to give me a name, anyway. You are the one who gave us a path to walk when we were out of options.”

Well, I’m not sure how it will turn out, but if that plan falls through, there must be another way...

“I, Shinki, and all of the goblins who follow me, hereby swear our allegiance to Nefertima,” Shinki proclaimed, bowing his head.

Whoa, it’s like a knight taking a vow of loyalty or something!

“To me? Are you sure?”

“You are the one who gave me a name; that makes you my master from now on.”

Woo-hoo! I became the goblins’ boss!

...Something tells me I’m dreadfully mistaken...

Side Story: Safari Park - One More Time!

TODAY, I came to the royal palace by myself! Well, I rode in my family's carriage, so I suppose I couldn't claim to be completely alone.

Today's objective was to take another stab at touring the beast stables! Last time I'd been forced to leave early, but today, I was determined to meet with the large felines!

And so, I headed toward the beast stables.

I knocked with all my might on the gate located along the long, loooong fence.

The sound it made was more of a tap than a knock, probably because of the feeble strength of my small arms.

"Excuse me!"

I was rearing for a fight.

With a heavy-sounding rumble, the gate opened. Why did it sound so heavy even though it was a sliding door?

I suspect it must be to prevent animals from escaping, but is a sliding door really necessary?

"Is Commander Lestin here?" I asked.

The knight who peaked out of the gate made a surprised face.

"Lady Nefertima?!"

It looks like he knows who I am.

"I will summon the commander right away. Please, come in!"

Huh? Is it okay to let me in so easily? ...I suppose I do have a free pass to go wherever I want in the royal palace, but still...

The knight quickly closed the gate, then began preparing something.

I watched closely and determined he was putting something inside a small, thin tube.

“Lottie!”

A bird flew toward us, responding to the knight’s call. It was a particularly eye-catching bird with green and yellow feathers.

After looking closely, I recognized it as one of the birds of prey I was so interested in. The way it glided through the sky was so cool! Its widespread tertiary feathers, the fact that it didn’t make a sound as it extended its legs in preparation for landing, and the way it tilted its head while resting on its perch were all food for my ravenous appetite for observing birds of prey.

Oblivious to my intense excitement, the knight fastened the tube from earlier to the leg of the bird he’d called Lottie.

“Deliver this to Commander Les right away, okay?”

The knight spoke seriously to the bird, but the bird replied with a flippant, playful squawk before flying off.

“Commander Les will be here momentarily. Until then, you can wait for him in his office. Right this way.”

Oh, I see—he’s using that bird to contact Lestin.

It didn’t occur to me that they’d use messenger birds within the confines of the beast stables, but I suppose it makes sense, considering how big this place is. Last time I was here, a messenger hawk delivered a letter to Lestin, after all.

“Are you sure it’s okay to leave your post to accompany me?” I asked.

I’m pretty sure he’s supposed to be guarding the gate right now... I don’t want to keep him from doing his job...

“It’s fine. When they see Lottie flying, the men know it means a guest has arrived, and my replacement will come to watch the gate.”

I see, so that’s why they used such a brightly colored bird. No one could fail to notice her.

I followed after the knight as he led the way to Lestin’s office.

The building where Lestin's office was located was the knights' guard room... waiting room? No, it was more like the office of a zoo. There were knights wearing work coveralls, carrying cleaning tools, food for the animals, *etc.*

When you entered the building, to the left on the first floor was a room that appeared to function as a break room or cafeteria for the knights. To the right was a wide-open space containing stone tables and what appeared to be sinks. At the far end of this room was a large door.

"This is where we prepare rations for the animals," the knight guiding me explained.

As if a little kid would understand what "prepare rations" means! ...I mean, I understand it, but still...

"...Prepare rations?"

"Sorry! What I mean is, we make the animals their food in this room."

There you go! Simple and easy to understand; very nice.

We climbed the long staircase between the cafeteria and the feed room, and the knight led me to a room at the back of the building. It was Lestin's office.

I sat on the sofa and looked around the room.

Books about animals filled the bookshelves that took up one entire wall.

Ooooooh, let me see!

Encyclopedia of Rare Animals Around the World... All About Warhorses... The Evolution of Flarehogs... The Hound Dog Almanac... When Your Precious Family Member Gets Sick: 100 Things Every Pet Owner Should Be Aware Of.

There's everything from reference books to self-help books, all battling for my attention!

It would appear that Lestin was quite the academic. Although, it could just be that he *had* to study a lot for his job as a legion commander.

The knight served me tea, which I gratefully accepted.

Mmm, this tea is delicious.

"Meow!"

I'd recognize that sound anywhere!

I turned to look in the direction where the cry had come from and spotted a cat outside the window. It wasn't technically a cat—it was an animal called a ria, the closest thing to a cat in this world.

The ria had warm brown fur and scratched at the window as if asking us to open it.

"Sunali, Commander Les isn't here right now." The knight opened the window, and the ria entered the room.

From the name Sunali, I can tell he's a boy.

Sunali was the name of the hero from a well-known children's story. It seemed that all boys went through a phase where they admired and wanted to be Sunali. My brother had read the story to me.

"Meow!"

Sunali headed straight to me and curled up on my lap. This was, without a doubt, his sleeping pose.

"Do you want to take a nap?" I asked.

He looked just like a cat, curled up and sleeping.

Sunali was brown but had vertical stripes of white. He had round ears and a thick tail. Something about him called to mind the image of a Pallas's cat. Except he wasn't quite that ferocious...er, playful!

The way his ears twitched unconsciously occasionally was so adorable that I couldn't resist the impulse to touch them playfully.

Sunali released an aggravated "*Meow!*" and smacked my arm with his tail.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll let you sleep. Goodnight."

I slowly stroked Sunali's back until he fell asleep for real. It felt as if his weight on my lap had increased.

"I'm so sorry, Lady Nefertima. He has never been affectionate with anyone other than Commander Les before, so I didn't think Sunali would do something like this..."

The knight apologized, but he didn't need to feel guilty! Fur babies exist to be loved on, after all!

"It's okay. He's adorable!"

Ahhh, I can't get enough of this fluffiness! My hand won't stop! I want to keep petting him forever...

I was enjoying the luxurious texture of Sunali's fur to my heart's content when there was a knock on the door.

Without a word to me, the knight opened the door.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, Lady Nefertima."

Lestin had come right away, just as the knight had promised.

"Mishta Les, let's play!"

"It's not me you want to play with, but the animals, right?"

"Yup!"

"I see you've already conquered Sunali..."

Lestin seemed grumpy about it, but I was confused. I hadn't done anything mean to Sunali to "conquer" him; he'd jumped up on my lap of his own accord and fallen asleep.

"Benan, please give Sunali a treat. Okay, Lady Nefertima, let's go, shall we?"

Sunali reacted instantly to the word "treat."

Weren't you supposed to be asleep?!

He meowed as if demanding, *"Hurry up and give it to me already!"*

Sunali was focused on his treat, so I left him in the knight's care.

"See you later, Shunali!"

I gave him one last scratch under his chin, and he rewarded me with a *"Purr!"*

Oh man, I really want to bring him home with me!



LESTIN wasted no time leading me to an area like the savannah.

“Many animals roaming here are predators, so please be careful.”

“Yes, sir, commander!”

The time has finally come to meet predators... Mwahaha, I can't wait!

The first target we spotted was a group of rye panthers.

They were larger than I'd imagined and somehow looked a bit like Lars. Maybe it was their facial features? The area from the top of their heads through their foreheads was not very pronounced, plus the lines of their cheek muscles resembled him... Oh, but the fluffiness starting under their chins and extending around their necks was different.

Lestin put his fingers into his mouth and whistled loudly, and the pack of rye panthers slowly approached. That's right; they were a pack.

When it came to felines on Earth, lions were the only species that formed packs, but the rye panthers here formed packs with their blood relatives.

One of the rye panthers approached Lestin as if to ask what he wanted.

“This is the pack's leader, Leife. By the way, rye panthers live in family groups with the mother at the center.”

Meaning Leife is everyone's mother? In that case, their organization is closer to that of a group of orcas than lions.

“Leife, can I pet you?”

“Rawr!”

Since she'd readily agreed, I wasted no time.

She had round ears and stocky front legs. From her stomach back, her body was slender and streamlined. Her fur was a shade of gray so light it was almost white, with lighter-colored spots. She looked a bit like a snow leopard.

And her fur felt incredible. Her body was short-haired, except for the area on the back of her neck, which was fairly long. The fur was dense and smooth but also plush. The hair on the back of her neck, around her throat, and on her stomach was soft and long enough that my hands disappeared in it.

If Lars' fur was like whipped cream, the rye panther's fur was like a

marshmallow.

When I scratched her throat, Leife let out a satisfied “*Purr!*” Yup, this reaction was 100 percent feline.

I could hug her while standing flatfoot, so she must’ve been a bit over two feet tall.

She licked my cheek affectionately, but it hurt! Her tongue was like sandpaper.

Now I understand how careful Lars always is when he licks me. Thanks, Lars!

Seeing their pack leader wasn’t wary of us, the other rye panthers approached. Some of them were smaller than the others, which led me to guess they might be children.

The smaller panthers batted at Leife’s tail with their paws.

Oh my goodness, they’re so cuuuute!

As I pet the other rye panthers, they happily purred and rubbed against me.

I want to come live here!

Lestin told me it was time to see the next animals, so I sadly bid farewell to Leife and her family. Before I left, Leife rubbed against me especially forcefully, which I figured meant we’d become friends, at least. Unfortunately, I was pretty sure her scent would fade all too soon...



“THERE’S a yargle in that tree over there.”

I looked toward the area Lestin had pointed out but couldn’t see anything.

“Huh?”

“Before we get any closer, I’ll get rid of Leife’s scent.”

I thought so.

Many animals had sensitive noses and would be on their guard if they smelled the scent of other animals.

Lestin cast a spell that even removed the dirt and stains I’d gotten on me

while playing with the rye panthers.

I'll just get dirty again, but I appreciate the gesture.

"Thanks!"

I went to the tree Lestin had pointed out earlier and found a large cat perched high up in its branches.

"This species is called a yargle; they're related to rye panthers. As you can see, they're good at climbing trees, but they're also very fast."

The yargle gracefully leapt from its perch and landed safely on the ground in one impressive bound. As it landed on the ground, the yargle's body bent to absorb the impact. This movement was undeniably feline.

"This species isn't suited for being a beast mount, but we use them for stealth operations, providing a distraction, etc."

The yargles were large but smaller than a human. There was no way they could carry a knight on their back. Furthermore, the spines of such flexible animals curved as they ran, making them difficult to ride.

"What do you use Leife and her family for?" I asked.

"Rye panthers move as a group, so we use them to hunt enemies."

...Hunt...? Well, this is a legion of knights, after all. I suppose that's the kind of work they do. I bet the agility of large felines is handy for rounding up scattered enemies.

"The rye panthers each have their own role in the hunting team. One ambushes the enemy, another chases the enemy, and another takes the enemy down. This makes them suited for hunting down groups of enemies. Yargles and toetails, on the other hand, are solitary hunters, so we have them pursue individual targets."

Interesting. Even though they're all large felines, there are significant differences in the way they hunt.

"Baiser, come over here."

The yargle Lestin called "Baiser" leapt for something the man was holding in

his hand. In the space of a second, Lestin dodged, and Baiser ended up with something in his mouth. They moved so quickly that I wasn't entirely sure what happened.

"It's a piece of dried meat; we give them to the animals sometimes as treats."

When did you pull that out? I didn't notice anything!

Baiser was chewing on the dried meat for dear life. He held it with his front legs and gnawed it with his molars.

Excuse me, Mr. Baiser, you're drooling like crazy...

Gnaw, Gnaw. Chew, Chew. Gnaw, Gnaw. Chew, Chew.

The dried meat was gone before I knew it.

Then Baiser turned his attention to cleaning up after his snack. He licked his drool-soaked front legs clean. Once he'd cleaned up, the yargle came up to me and licked my face. I got the feeling he was inviting me to play.

Very well. If you insist! I've got a secret weapon that I got my sister to make me, especially for today! It's called a cat toy! No cat in the world doesn't want to play with one of these!

Baiser's eyes lit up when I took the cat toy out of my bunny backpack.

The cat toy was made with feathers shed by the birds living in our garden. My sister cast a reinforcement spell on the feathers to strengthen them. It should be able to stand up to being played with by a large feline for a while.

I dangled the toy teasingly in front of Baiser.

His head moved back and forth in time with the toy. The way he crouched down and followed the toy with his eyes was adorable.

I dropped the feathered piece to the ground and deftly moved it around. At this, Baiser raised his bottom as if preparing to leap.

I abruptly stopped moving the toy, then slid it slowly toward Baiser. Moving so fast that I could've sworn I heard him slicing through the air, Baiser grabbed the feathered piece with his front legs. He peered apprehensively at the prey he'd captured and sniffed its scent.

That instant, I flicked the toy, startling Baiser so much that he instinctively leapt into the air.

Oh man, he's just so stinking cute! Who ever heard of a large feline falling for the allure of a common cat toy? ...Can I take him home with me, pretty please?!

"...Lady Nefertima, please be careful," Lestin warned, but I was focused on Baiser.

I jerked the toy up as high as I could, and Baiser jumped.

With a single, graceful leap he reached a height well above my head. Once he caught the feathered piece, he twisted in midair and landed on the ground. Then he yanked, shaking his head back and forth.

"Whoa...!"

The stick end of the toy I'd been holding was ripped from my hand and flew back and forth as Baiser shook the toy.

I pitched forward and was about to fall when Lestin grabbed me and helped me regain my balance.

"This is your fault for not listening when people try to warn you, you know?"

"I'm sowwie..."

I almost face-planted in the dirt! Phew, that was a close call!

As for Baiser, once he realized the cat toy was no longer moving, he brought it over to me.

Are you asking to play some more? Just what I was hoping for!

However, after thirty minutes, Baiser lost interest. He marked me with his scent, then climbed back into the tree where we'd first spotted him.

His fickleness, too, was perfectly reminiscent of a cat.

"It looks like Baiser is going to take a nap. Let's move on, shall we?"

"Okay! See you later, Basier!"

I waved goodbye and saw a tail poking out from between the branches wave back and forth. I'd take that as Baiser's unique version of a farewell gesture.

I got Lestin to clean me off again, and then we set off in search of the next animal.



IN an area littered with large rocks, we came across an animal. I couldn't determine if it was feline or canine.

It had long, pointed ears and facial features resembling a cat, but its body was more similar to that of a fox or a dog. Its body was reddish brown, except for its stomach, which was gray.

I knew an animal that looked a lot like this.

Those long ears look just like a caracal's!

"This is another relative of the rye panthers, a species called toetails. Among the various relatives of rye panthers, they have the most sensitive noses and the greatest jumping ability. They operate in small groups, and it's their job to exterminate the enemy's messengers and lookouts."

Don't say it like they're pest exterminators or something, yeesh!

"Do they ever make a mistake and accidentally eat one of their allies?"

I hadn't seen any messenger pigeons in this world, but there were messenger hawks, and I'd heard there were owls as well. I'd also heard of other small animals being trained to work as undercover operatives. I wondered if any of them ever got caught by accident.

"It's not a problem. We've trained them to recognize the scents of all the animals from the beast stables."

Huh?! All of them...?! There must be over a thousand animals here! They can differentiate all of them by smell?!

"Dat's incwedible!" I exclaimed.

"Toetails are extremely curious and love learning—they see it as a game."

One of the toetails sniffed the air, then approached Lestin.

"Rawr!"

Its cry was higher pitched than the rye panther's.

In response to the toetail's cry, several roly-poly bodies came out from behind a large boulder.

"Looks like they found us," Lestin said, seeming happy.

I understand how you feel!

That was because of the *extremely* cute creatures bounding toward us on wobbly little legs.

"Mew!"

The baby toetails coiled around us. Compared to the adult toetails, their coloring was lighter, and their fluffy baby fur was to die for! They were the ultimate fluff balls!

Ahhhh! I'm in heaven!

The baby toetails had big, shiny eyes and short, stubby legs. Their ears folded downward, and they held their tails straight as a pin upright in the air.

They're so cute! I can hardly stand it!

The baby toetails were mewling adorably in that way unique to babies, begging for a treat.

"Here you are, Lady Nefertima." Lestin handed me what appeared to be tiny, sphere-shaped crackers. "They're treats for these guys."

I supposed the perfect treat for a baby would be something like this—easy to chew and digest and not too intensely flavored.

Once the crackers appeared, the babies' cries became even higher pitched.

I held a cracker up near the mouth of the first baby toetail. It grabbed my hand between its front paws and bit down on the cracker. It was so enthusiastic that it attempted to eat my fingers, but it mostly just sucked on them. Its tiny fangs did poke me, but it was so cute that I didn't care *what* it did to me.

Go ahead, eat my whole arm while you're at it!

One by one, I fed crackers to the pack of babies crowding around, each begging for their turn. The mother toetail approached, asking for a treat, but Lestin gave her a piece of dried meat instead.

I wanted to try giving her the dried meat!

Once the babies were satisfied, it was time for their mother to groom them. The mother toetail meticulously licked all the babies clean, one by one.

For some reason, I'm a little jealous! Lucky!

By this time, the baby toetails started to doze off, so their mother began carrying them back to the nest. She gestured with her eyes as if asking us to watch the remaining babies while she carried each one back.

"Don't worry, we'll be right here," Lestin responded.

The mother toetail grabbed the first baby by the scruff of its neck and carried it back up toward the boulder.

We watched as she made five trips back and forth, and then she licked our hands as if to say, *"Thank you!"*

"We'll come play again soon!" I told her.



AFTER we parted ways with the mother toetail, Lestin suggested heading down toward the river next.

There's even a river here? I thought the same about the dragon stables, but this place is massive!

Lestin led me by the hand until, at last, we reached the river.

Yup, it is a river. There are mysterious objects protruding from the water here and there, but all in all, it's an impressively wide river.

"What'sh dat?"

I pointed to the mysterious objects sticking out of the water near the riverbank.

They looked like logs, but they were stacked up haphazardly.

"It's a dirkie's nest."

Lestin stuck his fingers in his mouth and blew one shrill whistle. In response, a creature popped its head out of the mysterious object.

It popped its head in and out of the holes in the stacked logs.

“Squeak?”

The way it tilted its head coquettishly to the side as it squeaked was so precious!

The animal reminded me of a prairie dog, but overall it was more like a cat.

“Dirkies are semi-aquatic, building their nests on the riverbed and hiding in the water to hunt prey.”

Whoa! They’re like cats that can swim!

“They normally live in family units, but this one has just reached maturity and set out on his own, so he doesn’t have a family yet.”

“They gather logs?”

“That’s right. There is an adhesive agent in their saliva that activates over time. They use it to stick logs together to build their homes.”

If their saliva has adhesive properties, don’t they ever accidentally get it on themselves and get stuck?

“The dirkies’ job is helping with missions involving rivers and waterways. They can dam up the river without the enemy ever noticing.”

Oh, they’re more like beavers than prairie dogs, after all! Beavers are a type of rodent, so they can use their teeth to gnaw on logs, but I don’t think a dirkie can do that...

“Come here, little guy.” I called the dirkie over so I could examine him more closely.

The way he ran deftly over to me was just like a cat.

I pet his head and found that, perhaps because he was a semi-aquatic animal, his fur repelled water. His fur was glossy, which I guessed was due to oils secreted from his pores. I looked closely at the dirkie’s front legs and discovered his claws weren’t retractable. Instead, the toes were webbed.

His teeth were cat-like fangs, so he wasn’t a rodent. His ears were small, and the tip of his tail was a little flatter than a normal feline.

Overall, I decided that the animal from my world he most resembled was a weasel.

“Why is he making a house?” I asked.

“Why...?”

“Did you tell him to build it here?”

“Ohh... Yes, I suppose that’s right. We teach them to build a nest where we’ve laid out the materials. In nature, they only build dams during droughts so that water will collect and the smaller creatures the dirkies prey on will naturally gather in the area.”

I see. During droughts and the dry season, animals will gather where there’s water... Although, I imagine that also includes larger animals dangerous to the dirkies.

“Won’t it be dangerous if predators are drawn to the area?”

“It’s okay; the wood they use to dam up the river also functions as a fortress for the dirkies.”

At this, I turned to look at the dirkie’s nest again.

Hmm... The edges of some of the logs are sharp and pointed. The sharpened logs aren’t evenly spaced, but they cover the entire structure, more or less. So this is how they fend off attacks—how clever!

“I hope you can find a wife quickly,” Lestin said.

“Squeak?”

Lestin seemed concerned that, although this dirkie was already an adult, it hadn’t started a family yet.

“It’sh okay! For now, he needs to focus on buiwding a weally impwessive house. He’ll find a wife later!”

“Squeak!”

My pronunciation wasn’t great, but the dirkie seemed encouraged by my words.

Does he really understand? Build a great house, okay?

“...That might work. I’ll get Rick to work with him on his building skills.”

Huh? What’s the rush?

“I’m sure that one of the female dirkies will be attracted to him if he becomes a skilled nest-builder.”

Does he mean the females choose their mates based on their nest-building skills? Is nest-building a form of courtship or something?

“Thank you, Lady Nefertima.”

“You’re welcome?”

I wasn’t sure why he was thanking me, but I decided just to accept it.

However, I was concerned about what kind of special training they would undertake to teach the dirkie to build better. It wasn’t anything that would hurt him, was it?

“Squeak!”

The panicked Dirkie turned and hurried back into its nest.

I wonder what that was about...

Several birds that had been resting on the riverbank all leapt into the air at the same time and flew off.

What’s happening?!

“It would appear that your escort has arrived, Lady Nefertima.”

I spotted a familiar shadow in the direction Lestin had pointed.

“Lars!”

Once Lars landed on the ground, I flung myself at him.

His fur was smooth and impossibly fluffy, and he smelled like sunshine. Just touching him brought me intense joy.

“Purr.”

“Does Will want to see me?”

“Growl.”

That jerk Will! Doesn't he know better than to interfere with my time in fluffy paradise?!

"You can come here again any time, so please see what His Highness wants," Lestin said.

Ugh... If even Lestin agrees, I guess I have no choice.

I'll make you pay for this, Will!



I climbed up on Lars' back, and we set off walking back to the interior of the royal palace. Lars still wouldn't fly with me on his back! So we were stuck taking the land route.

There was no barrier that could stand in the way of a holy beast such as Lars. He used the wind to open doors, and any servants that saw him got out of his way.

Mounted on his back, I drew a lot of attention. I heard more than a few people whispering in hushed voices, "The youngest daughter of the Osphe family" and "The fire dragon's chosen."

Who was that?! I heard you calling me His Majesty's plaything!

Will is my toy, not the other way around!

...Huh? Is something wrong with that logic?

...Well, who cares!

I'd assumed we were heading to Will's room, but when we finally arrived, it was in a different room I'd never been in before.

Whose room is this?

Lars nonchalantly blew open the door, revealing a group of sparkling people within.

"Welcome, Nefertima."

"Please come in, Neema."

It was the king and queen.

Will was there as well.

For some reason, the queen picked me up and carried me to the table.

“Let’s have some tea. We just received some sweets from the Linus Empire. I called you here to eat them with us.”

An arrangement of small, beautifully decorated sweets was set out on the table. I was always down for sweets, but this situation struck me as odd...

What business did I have, casually taking tea with the king, queen, and crown prince?!

“Um... How do you do?”

I had no idea what to say and blurted out the first semi-polite phrase that came to mind.

What was I thinking?! That was rude to say without a preamble to someone as exalted as the queen!

Should I backtrack and start over with a proper greeting? I wish Mama were here to tell me how to behave!

“Hehe, I’m doing very well, thank you. How are you today, Neema?”

“I’m good!”

The queen had responded without taking insult, but I could see Will’s shoulders shaking. There were no two ways about it; he was laughing at me!

“We’re the only ones here, so you needn’t feel nervous.”

This issue precedes nervousness! One can’t just throw manners to the wind, even among friends.

“Proper greetings are important!” I insisted.

“I’ll have to get you to remind Dayle of that,” His Majesty laughed.

Just what is Papa saying to the king every day?!

“You don’t need to stand on ceremony with Mother and Father,” Will said. “Come now, which would you like to eat?”

“Right! You can have whichever one you like.”

Will's being nice?! But I don't see any pigs flying by outside the window... Oh, that must mean he's up to something!

But I do want to eat the sweets... And yet, Will's smile is truly terrifying...

Oh! I can get through this by using the queen as my ally!

"Queen Relena, I'd like that yellow one, please!"

"This one? Okay, here you go! Say 'ah'!"

"Ah!"

I opened my mouth wide, and the queen fed me a bite.

I-It's incredible!

"Yummy!"

The sweet flavor of a fruit called peche, which was similar to a peach, spread through my mouth. The texture was crisp, and it melted on my tongue. It reminded me of a macaron, but it was actually a type of meringue.

"Girls are so cute!" Queen Relena gushed. "If only Will were a little cuter..."

"My apologies, Mother..."

Queenie, if this stereotypical hottie started acting cutesy, it would be a little disturbing...

"Will's good like this!" I opined.

"Oh my!" Queen Relena cried with delight. "You must love Will very much, isn't that right, Neema?"

WHAT?!

Love Will?!

I suppose if I had to choose between love and hate, I'm on the love end of the spectrum, but... I'm pretty sure it's not the kind of "love" the queen has in mind!

"Uh-huh! Will's like another brother to me."

Heh. Being able to play dumb like this is an evasion tactic that only works when you're young.

“So she still sees him as a brother, huh? You’ve got your work cut out for you, Will,” His Majesty said.

“What are you saying?” Will sighed. “If you’re concocting some kind of weird scheme, Duke Osphe will kick your butt.”

“...I’m not scared of him,” the king retorted.

...Papa, the royal family has figured out what a sappy father you are!

More importantly, now I’m really curious what you’re saying to the king every day!

The tea party continued like this until the carriage arrived to take me home.

Frankly, I was exhausted. I’d just soothed my soul by petting all those pretty kitties, and now I’d recouped a mountain of mental strain.

I think I’ll visit Ghizel and the others tomorrow. In the meantime, Lars! Please let me cuddle and pet you to relieve some of this stress!



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