

FLUFFY PARADISE

2

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Fluffy Paradise Volume 2

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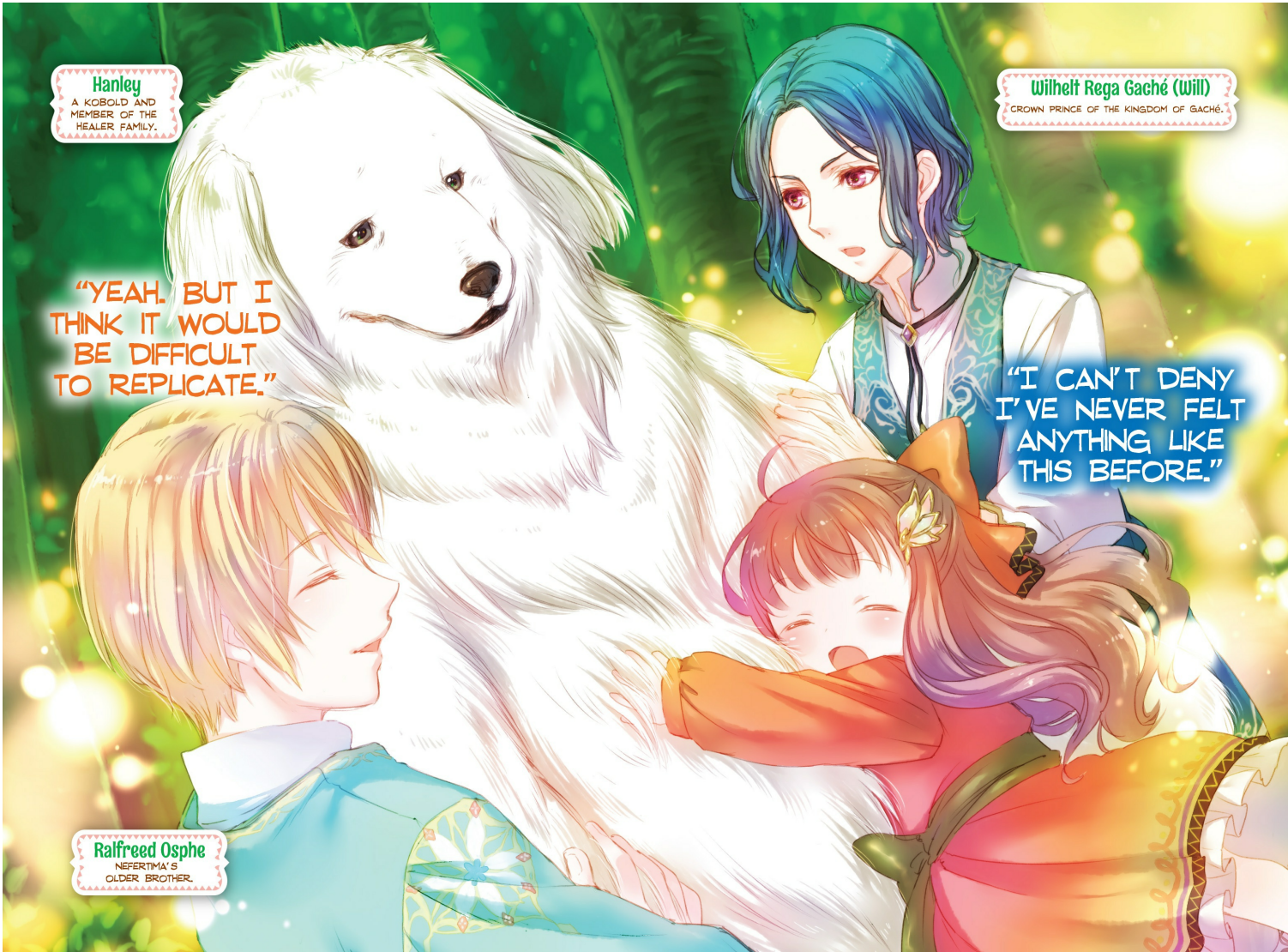


Sicily
LEADER OF THE
KOBOLD PACK, AND A
MEMBER OF THE
STAR-READER FAMILY.

Shinki
A FORMER HOBGOBLIN. HE
WAS NAMED BY NEFERTIMA
AND IS BOUND TO HER.

“WHAT BUSINESS
DOES A HUMAN
CHILD HAVE
WITH US?”

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



Hanley

A KOBOLD AND
MEMBER OF THE
HEALER FAMILY.

Wilhelm Rega Gaché (Will)

CROWN PRINCE OF THE KINGDOM OF GACHÉ.

"YEAH, BUT I
THINK IT WOULD
BE DIFFICULT
TO REPLICATE."

"I CAN'T DENY
I'VE NEVER FELT
ANYTHING LIKE
THIS BEFORE."

Ralfreed Osphe

NEFERIMA'S
OLDER BROTHER.





Gratia
A FROST SPIDER.

1 - It Might Be Time to Sound the Alarm? Part 1

ONCE things were wrapped up for the time being with Shinki, I finally discussed my plan with Papa. A lot of troublesome debating was involved, but... Papa seemed interested. I put my geeky knowledge to good use, and we ironed out a few weaknesses in the original idea until eventually, he deemed, "It'll probably be fine!" and gave me the thumbs-up of approval.

Then, it was time to set off for the next stop on our observational tour, but there was one problem...

I wanted Shinki to come to help us pick the location for the monsters' new home.

But he couldn't abandon the goblins in the cave. No matter how powerful Sol was, he couldn't maintain the protective barrier around the cave for days at a time. Besides, the barrier wouldn't work if I took the dragon orb channeling Sol's magic to power the spell out of the area with me.

Shinki's solution to this problem was interesting.

First, he used earth elemental power to fortify the cave. Then he made it so that if anything other than goblins approached the area around the cave, wind elemental power would attack them. And finally, he decided to bestow a name on the next strongest member of the clan.

And he insisted it had to be me who named the goblin!

"Why me?" I asked.

"Because you are the clan's boss, mistress."

Hold on... Did he just call me mistress?! Ugh, I've got goosebumps! Absolutely not—no way, no how! I don't fit the stereotype of a "mistress" at all. Oh man, I feel so uncomfortable...

"Don't call me mistress!" I trilled.

"...But you *are* my mistress?"

I had no problem with him calling me Neema, but I had a feeling Shinki wouldn't go for that.

But it'd be weird to have Shinki call me "my lady," too... Besides, Shinki doesn't seem like the type to say "mistress" and "my lady!" I picture him using "my lord" and "princess" since he seems more like a noble warrior.

...Wait! Does that mean he'd call me "Princess Neema?" Ugh, no thanks!

"Okay, let's compromise. How about 'miss'?" I suggested.

I don't mind the servants calling me "my lady." It's part of their job. But Shinki isn't a servant; he's a friend. Even if we have some kind of magical master-servant relationship. Besides, making your friend call you "mistress" sounds like a kinky game!

In the end, I convinced Shinki to reluctantly agree to call me "miss" instead of "mistress."

Now, it was time to meet with the second-strongest goblin after Shinki, so we headed back to the cave.

This time, I got Sol to fly us there, so the trip was easy-peasy!

We planned to jump from Sol's back once we got close to the cave, and he would use wind elemental power to slow our descent. But for some reason, I had major déjà vu...

I jumped off but landed softly on the ground... I know I've experienced this somewhere before. When was it? Oh well, whatever.

More importantly, what should I name the goblin? I'm excited to see what kind of person he is!

I trotted excitedly toward the cave, and Shinki wasted no time in introducing us.

To my surprise, the goblin who came out of the cave when Shinki called was a female! It was easy to differentiate between male and female goblins. The males had two horns, whereas the females only had one horn. The females were also a bit smaller and rounder than the males.

How unexpected! I never imagined the second-strongest goblin in the clan

would be a female! The other males must be pretty unimpressive, huh?

...A bunch of lazy goblins, hm? It seems unlikely for an actual monster, but I can totally see it for a character in a book. Yup.

“Gii... Boss, ya called...?”

“You can speak?!” I cried.

Another huge surprise!

It was halting and harshly accented, as if she were speaking a foreign language, but she was undeniably communicating with words.

“She’s been acting as my assistant,” Shinki explained. “She’s a goblin born from a human parent, and I suspect she’ll be ready to evolve after a few more hunting trips.”

Aww... Personally, I’d like to see her stay tiny and cute like this forever! Her eyes are so big and glossy, and her childish body type is so relatable. When she becomes a hobgoblin, she’ll get huge and beefy—a massive decrease in the cuteness factor!

Well, I’ve never seen a female hobgoblin before, so that’s just a guess, but still...

A person’s name represents them as an individual, so maybe if I give her a cute name, she’ll stay cute when she evolves? A cute name, huh? Hmm, let’s see... A cute name...

I can’t think of anything!

The potential names I thought up in advance were all boy names.

“What kinds of things do you like?” I asked her. Give me a hint!

“Gii?”

After tilting her head in confusion, she looked around inquisitively.

Somehow, her behavior resembled a potte.

The female goblin’s eyes stopped to rest on a specific flower, and she pointed to it. The flower looked like a lily of the valley and grew abundantly in cold climates. It was called a parsee and was well-known for the neurotoxin in its

petals and nectar.

I seriously doubted she was saying she loved poisonous flowers, so I took this to mean she liked flowers in general.

“Oh, you like flowers?”

“Gii.” She nodded.

Flowers, huh...? Lily of the Valley is called “suzuran” in Japanese, but that’s not very cute...

Suzu... Suzuko? A lot of cute Japanese names start with “Suzu.” Suzue, Suzumi, Suzuko... All right, I’ll go with my gut and name her Suzuko!

“Your name is ‘Suzuko!’” I declared.

“Gii?”

“Su-zu-ko,” I sounded it out for her.

“Su... zu... kooo...?”

Oh! She said it, she said it! I was worried she wouldn’t be able to pronounce a Japanese name, but she got it!

“That’s right, Suzuko! From now on, introduce yourself as Suzuko, okay?” I said.

After her naming, the usual mark appeared on Suzuko’s forehead.

Yeah, yeah! You’ll become a cute hobgoblin for sure!

I wanted to tease—or rather, pet and play with Suzuko, but Shinki stopped me. He said they needed to discuss how things would be handled from now on when he wasn’t around. *Hmph.*

I was sulking by myself when a goblin approached Shinki. He eagerly appealed to Shinki about something, but I didn’t know what he was saying. It just sounded like “Gii, gii!” to me.

While I watched, Shinki looked troubled, and Suzuko became visibly angry.

By the way, when she was talking to goblins who didn’t speak the human language, Suzuko still spoke in gii-gii’s. New discovery!

Now's not the time to get excited over something like that!

Shinki glanced at me with an inquiring expression on his face.

What? Does it have something to do with me?

Seeing my confusion, Shinki said a few words to the male goblin, then made his way over to me.

“Miss, he’s saying he’d also like to receive a name.”

Huh? A name?

...Oh, is that all? I thought it was something more serious!

“...Him weak!” Suzuko cried. “No deserve name!”

Oh, I see. Suzuko is angry because she’s opposed to giving him a name.

“Why do you want a name?” I asked.

In response to my question, the male goblin explained in a fervent series of gii-gii’s.

...Translation, please, Shinki!

“Apparently, his previous clan was all but exterminated,” Shinki explained. “That’s why he wants to become more powerful to protect this clan. However, as Suzuko said, he’s weak. Even if he receives a name, there’s no guarantee it will have the effect he’s hoping for.”



Well, I understand what Shinki's saying. But I don't want to abandon him just because it might not pay off much. But if he's really determined, I'll get him to prove it!

"If you make me a promise, I'll give you a name," I said.

I asked him to train until he could bring down a wild boar by himself before we returned.

A small-framed goblin would probably die if they took a direct hit from a giant boar. I also told him that if he didn't solve this problem, he would have to become a test subject. I explained that and told him that I couldn't guarantee his safety in either case.

In truth, it was a threat. That's right.

Even if being named didn't make him stronger, I got the feeling we'd find the perfect role for him in the future.

I used a giant boar as my requirement to gauge his determination.

Would he save himself out of a sense of self-preservation? Or was he committed to risking his life to become stronger?

Even when I gave him that ultimatum, the male goblin's feelings didn't waver. He agreed to my terms, so I kept up my end of the deal.

Reflecting my sincere desire for him to become stronger, I named him "Touki," made up of the Japanese characters for "battle" and "demon."

Once the mark appeared on Touki's forehead, I told him, "Always think carefully and then act decisively."

First, when choosing a weapon, one needed to consider their fighting style and what kind was suitable. Then, when practicing to become proficient with that weapon, one needed to think for themselves and, through trial and error, considering the number of enemies, their weaknesses, and the topography, proceed in a manner of benefit to oneself. Once this was mastered, they would be a formidable enemy on the battlefield.

He needs to develop both thoughtfulness and watchfulness. The last thing we need is an all-brawns-and-no-brain berserker on our hands.

“Touki, let’s both do our best!” I encouraged.

“Gii!”

Leaving the clan to Suzuko, Shinki and I returned to the village.

But, um...why is Shinki carrying me, and with just one arm at that? What’s that? It’s a long walk? And the sun is going to set soon?

Hmph... He’s already reached this level of overprotectiveness?! Papa’s met his match!

In any case, we got the chance to chat about many things on the walk back.

I told him how I met Sol, about Dee and Nox, my family and the servants in our home, the dragons at the dragon stables, the animals at the beast stables, and everyone at the royal palace...

In exchange, Shinki told me a little about his life.

What surprised me the most was that he had an older brother. Apparently, his brother had died in a battle with humans, but even monsters felt a deep sense of kinship for their relatives.

But that said, it differed depending on the clan. While some clans treasured their children, others weeded out the weak.

Shinki said that there were other species of monsters that also valued their families dearly and weren’t so different from humans in that way.

However, how terribly sad Shinki looked while talking about his brother bothered me. Hopefully, someday, he would tell me what happened.



THE next day, an incredibly gaudy carriage was parked in the village center. It was gaudier than the carriages we’d ridden here but not on the level of the royal palace’s carriages.

Well, the royal palace’s carriages were more “high-quality” than “gaudy,” but still.

Just when I was wondering, *Whose carriage is that?!* I learned it was Pino and Nino’s escort home.

Time to part with the angelic twins already?

They hadn't acted any different after learning I was a duke's daughter. In a way, they were my first human friends.

"You have to come visit, okay?"

"I will, I promise!"

I gripped Pino's hand tightly, enthusiastically accepting his invitation.

"In exchange, you have to show us around when we visit the royal city!" Nino demanded.

Yes, ma'am! I'll use all the combined powers of the Osphe household's servants to research thoroughly to create an itinerary sure to please a noble young lady like Nino.

I watched until the carriage carried them out of sight.

Pino hung out the window, waving his hand until the very end.

He's so sweet!

All right, now that they're on their way, it's our turn.

We'd start by returning to Arsenta.

There, we'd restock our provisions and head to the next location.

Of course, I played in the snow to my heart's content on the way home. I even goaded Shinki and some of the knights I'd become friendly with to join me for a snowball fight.

That was a blast!

We'd be setting off right away on our inspection tour, so the manor in Arsenta was in a flurry of activity, preparing our supplies.

I was told that the events that had unfolded in the Frost Needle Forest had taken up precious time, leaving us on a tight schedule.

Due to his busy work schedule, Papa could only spend fifteen days on this trip, and during that time, we planned to visit five locations.

When I protested that this was the first I had heard of this, I was told wryly

that it was explained to me before we departed.

...I have no memory of this...

We'd be leaving bright and early the next morning, so I was sent to bed immediately after dinner. I begged to be allowed to sleep in Shinki's bed since it was such a rare chance, but Papa shot the idea down in seconds.

Hmph! I guess I'll have to wait until we're camping out!



THE carriage bumped and swayed, carrying us onward toward the town of Cass in Parzeth Proxy.

It was three hours northwest of Arsenta.

The scenery along the way wasn't much to look at. I'd quickly become bored of the trees and rocky mountains outside and turned to trying to pry information from Shinki.

Papa pulled a map out from God-only-knows-where and spread it out.

The Kingdom of Gaché was northwest of the continent of Larshia. If you were likening Larshia to the shape of a butterfly, we would be the upper portion of its left wing.

Papa's map was of the Kingdom of Gaché, depicting the kingdom shaped like a diamond. Within the large diamond were four smaller diamonds, resembling an argyle pattern. These were the eastern, western, northern, and southern provinces.

In comparison, the royal city looked tiny! It felt huge when you lived there, though...

We asked where Shinki and his clan originally lived, and he pointed to a location in the Dierta Province, close to the Wise Province. It was a large mining-hunting forest that stretched along the boundary between the provinces.

There were mineral deposits and various animals living in this area, which was why it was referred to as a mining-hunting forest.

Many monsters also lived in this forest, but apparently, most didn't attack humans. They could get by just by hunting the forest animals, so there was no need to put themselves in danger by getting involved with humans.

However, Shinki said aggressive monsters like ogres and orcs lived in the mining tunnels in the Wise Province, where they could readily attack humans.

Papa asked Shinki for details about the path the goblins had taken when fleeing to the cave where they currently resided and roughly traced the route on the map.

"There was a road, and far off in the distance was a row of three mountains," Shinki said. "There was a fast-moving river with harsh rapids."

The way Papa identified "Such-and-such mountain" and "Such-and-such river" from this scant information was almost frightening. From here, Papa noted the locations of monster sightings he'd researched.

In a single night, Papa gathered information on all the reported monster sightings throughout the kingdom and memorized them all... Why didn't I inherit this incredible brainpower?!

And, somehow, he even got information from the adventurers' guild!

"My subordinates were too busy with other tasks to help, so there's not a lot of information..." he said.

Even so, the map is nearly covered in marks! If his men helped, would it be completely covered up?! That's more than a little frightening! But even more concerning is the distribution of the sightings...

Sightings from one year ago were marked in blue; those from half a year ago were green; and those from one month ago were red, but the result was remarkably strange.

The blue marks were more concentrated in the Dierta Province in the south and sparse in the Osphe Province in the north, with an otherwise fairly even distribution of sightings reported around the kingdom.

The species spotted also matched what Shinki had told us.

The green marks were scarce in the Dierta Province but had increased

dramatically in the eastern Wise Province and the western Mieuxga Province.

And the red marks... All of the Osphe Province and the neighboring regions were covered in overlapping red marks. There were also three reported sightings in the Dierta Province in the last month, but they were all fangs, a type of fire rat monster that only lives in volcanoes.

In short, it was safe to conclude that the adaptable monsters that weren't biologically incapable of changing environments had nearly all gathered in the Osphe Province.

Is it just me, or does this make it look like someone really, really despises Papa?

"While we were fleeing, every time we tried to turn south, we always, without fail, encountered humans," Shinki said. "And each time, they attacked us on sight, unprovoked."

Papa's wearing a grim expression... This means that some unknown mastermind is carrying out a large-scale operation dependent on overwhelming the opponent with sheer force of numbers, right?

"Is this the work of somebody with authority over a large number of people?" I asked.

"Well, it would require the equivalent forces of at least an entire legion of knights..." Papa said.

Umm, I'm pretty sure a legion is the largest division, so...around a thousand people?!

"But if there were ten or so magic users proficient in tracking spells, half those numbers would be sufficient," he added.

Tracking spells are amazing! Talk about cutting labor costs big time, eh?!

There were two types of tracking spells: those using wind-attributed magic and those using non-attributed magic.

Basic-level tracking spells cast pure magic out into the magic user's surroundings to search. Due to being so basic, this spell wasn't very useful. It only detected whether things it came into contact with contained magic or not

and couldn't differentiate between monsters and humans who possessed magic.

Furthermore, it was difficult for exceptionally high-level magic users like Papa to produce pure magic because their attributed magic was too strong.

Non-attributed refers to magic produced without relation to any specific elemental attribute.

However, people who possessed strong elemental affiliations struggled to produce non-attributed magic. Pure magic wasn't influenced by any of the attributes. In Papa's case, it would be like trying to filter the red pigment out of bright red paint, leaving only white and transparent.

Mama explained that to me. And since Mama was a water-attributed magic user, she invented a tracking spell that worked with water magic!

She would create mist and then infuse it with her magic, but I didn't understand the mechanics of it. However, when I pointed out that mist would make it impossible to see, so she could also use it as a smoke screen, Mama was shocked. *What, did that never occur to her before?!*

The wind-attributed tracking spell had more applications and was easier to use.

Apparently, it involved using wind magic like echolocation. This way, the magic user would sense the... quality? ...of the magic they detected and could tell if it was a monster, human, or even a beastperson or an elf. It wasn't fully known how this worked either, but researchers around the world were working on figuring it out. Magic users tended to be scientifically minded, which meant they characteristically felt driven to research what they didn't understand.

So, the people behind this might have ten wind-attributed magic users working for them. And at least 500 soldiers. Either that or they are using brute force tactics, in which case there are over 1,000 soldiers.

We don't know if they're enemies or not, but what's their motive? Are they going after the Osphe Province, or is there some other reason... Urgh, I just don't get it!

"Until I gathered this information, I doubted whether this monster activity

was the deliberate work of humans, but... I've already sent word of this matter to His Majesty," Papa said. "Neema, I'm sorry, but once we've completed our inspection of Cass, I will return to the royal city."

"What?! What about picking a suitable location for the monsters' new home?!" I cried.

I'm pretty sure he's concluded that, due to the scale of this issue, he's obligated to put his role as prime minister before his role as provincial lord, but... I really don't want to put off choosing where we'll put our plan into motion!

"I know. That's why I've summoned Ralf. He should arrive while we're in Cass."

"Ralf will travel with me?" I asked.

"That's right. It's about time he started gaining experience to prepare for his future as the next provincial lord. I'll have him complete the rest of the inspection on my behalf."

That's a relief. Even I'm well aware of how capable my brother is. Will Ralf be surprised when he meets Shinki for the first time?

The carriage arrived in Cass while I was imagining my brother's shocked face.

All right, we're here! Time to go check this place out!

The important people in the town are overrunning Papa with greetings. This is my chance!

Accompanied by Shinki, I set off along what I guessed was the main road. Even so, it was only two lanes. Lined on both sides with shops, the road appeared to be a marketplace. There was a greengrocer and a grain store, as well as a tavern and a teashop.

At the teashop, they were frying kana beans, the seeds of a plant that resembled the Chinese lantern plant. Kana beans were tiny but could be eaten fried or dried and were highly nutritious, so they were an essential staple in northern regions like this, where crops didn't grow well.

The rich scent of the kana beans called to me, but I'd already spotted the building I was looking for, so I decided to come back later.

Written on a sign hung on the building next to the tavern were the words “Adventurers’ Guild.”

All right, this is what I was looking for!

This was the local guild hall for the adventurers’ guild. All of the guild halls in the royal city were in the manufacturing district, so I’d never been able to see any of them. A town this size would contain guild halls for the adventurers’ guild and the merchants’ guild, so it was the perfect chance!

All right, I’m going in! I thought gleefully, but...then I noticed there was no doorknob on the door! It was made out of wood like an ordinary door, but... maybe this was the type of door you were supposed to push open?

“Aren’t you going in?” Shinki asked, nonchalantly pushing the door open.

Oh. Yup, I’m going in. Here I go!

Shinki escorted me into the guild hall. The interior was different from what I’d expected. I’d been picturing something like the guild halls you see in video games and novels, where there would be a reception counter, jobs posted on a bulletin board on the wall, and a bunch of adventurers hanging out inside.

Booths divided by partitions filled the room.

It looked like an unemployment office or a cram school or something. I could be wrong, though, as I’ve never been to either of those places.

“Hello. How may I help you today?”

A beautiful red-haired woman who wore her hair in a flattering ponytail greeted us. She kept glancing at Shinki as if concerned... Had she already figured out that he was a monster?!

“Also, um... There aren’t many beastpeople in this town, so it might be best if you didn’t linger...” she said hesitantly.

Thank goodness! She mistook him for a beastperson. But what about him looks like a beastperson? Is it his horns? By the way, lady, your face is a little red... Oh, is it because of Shinki?!

He isn’t my type, and I’ve been around so many gorgeous men lately that I’ve become a bit desensitized, so I didn’t really notice. But come to think of it, Shinki

is pretty good-looking, huh?

I prefer cute and angelic beauties like my brother, but he, too, will one day grow up to be a gallant prince type. Such a shame.

"I'm the lady's escort," Shinki said.

"Huh?!" the woman squeaked.

That's right, I'm the main character here. And I don't have any legit reason for coming. I just wanted to look around.

"I'm sorry for disturbing your work." I bobbed a quick curtsy. "I just wanted to see what kind of place the guild hall is, that's all."

I'll just come right out with the honest truth. Kids always seem to be able to get away with being forthright.

"Is there no guild hall in your hometown, miss?" she asked me.

"The royal city's guild hall is quite far from my home," I said.

The industrial district is far away, but more importantly, if I showed up there asking for a tour, they'd probably turn me down flat.

"You've come all the way from the royal city?! Indeed, the guild hall there is quite a distance from the residential district."

What's this? Apparently, she's been to the royal city before. I live in the upper-class district, not the residential district, but that's okay.

"Would it be okay for me to take a look around?" I asked.

"Certainly, I'll give you a tour. My name is Ariabelle; you can call me Belle."

"Thank you very much. I'm Neema, and this is Shinki."

Shinki, who'd been watching silently to see how things played out, gave a quick bow.

"Nice to meet you both. Now then, if you'll please follow me this way, Neema and Shinki..."

The kind Miss Belle led us on a tour of the guild hall.

She told us that the booths, which reminded me of the unemployment office,

were private reception areas!

Miss Belle explained that each booth was equipped with a silencing spell to ensure the privacy of conversations. Several rooms of various sizes were on the second floor for parties of adventurers, depending on the number of people. Of course, these rooms were also silenced.

Jobs were assigned based on the rank of the individual or party, with priority going to urgent jobs and those nearing their contract date, but guild members could request jobs according to their preferences.

I asked why they went to such lengths to speak with the clients privately and whether it was to protect the clients' privacy or something.

"Back when the guild was founded, there was a big problem with reward-snatching."

"Reward-snatching?"

"Yeah. People would attack a fellow adventurer after they'd completed a job and claim they'd completed it to collect the reward. For jobs like suppression and retrieval, multiple adventurers are allowed to attempt to complete the same job."

So crooked adventurers would eavesdrop on what job their target had accepted, accept the same job, and once the target had completed the job, they'd steal the credit and collect the reward. And they'd even earn experience points that they could use to advance their rank without doing any work! *How sleazy can you be, yeesh!*

"It speaks to a larger issue of trust within the guild, but even so, we can't let people like that call themselves adventurers! That's why the adventurers' guild is incredibly strict about ethics," Miss Belle said.

In the end, it boils down to their pride as adventurers! To the honorable adventurers who put their lives on the line to complete jobs, people like that are nothing but criminals. Especially since it sounds like the reward snatchers would sometimes even kill the adventurer who'd completed the job.

While I had the chance, I asked lots of other questions about the adventurers' guild.

Their ranks were represented by color.

The lowest rank was white. This symbolized “not yet colored by experience.” From there, the ranks got darker as they progressed, from yellow to green, then blue, red, and purple.

The highest rank was black. This symbolized “being fully colored.” Achieving black rank made a person legendary. Since the guild’s founding, fewer than ten people have achieved black rank.

The most famous example from our country was the first king.

That guy’s name keeps popping up all over the place, doesn’t it? I need to find the time to read a history book about him.

The kinds of jobs they received included anything from monster or robber suppression to retrieving items such as medicinal herbs or magical stones. They also received requests to guard merchant convoys, gather information for investigating historical ruins and creating maps, and even search for mineral veins and water sources. The adventurers’ guild really received a wide variety of jobs.

Adventurers would complete these jobs, build experience, and then, if they passed a combat test, they could proceed to the next rank. For example, if you completed 100 blue rank jobs, you could take a combat test. The member of staff overseeing the test would ask a red rank guild member to act as your opponent, and if you won, or at least drew even in the fight, you would pass and advance to red rank.

Miss Belle was in the middle of showing us a job request form when...

“Is the adventurers’ guild really going to ignore such a blatant case of unethical behavior?!” a man shouted.

So much for that alleged silencing spell, huh? I thought peevishly as the three of us stepped out of the booth into the middle of a chaotic scene.

A staff member ran up to the man and tried to calm him down, but it didn’t seem to be working.

“As there is no concrete proof, the matter is out of our hands...”

“What do you mean ‘no proof’?! The reward for suppressing a few measly goblins was three times the standard market price. The mayor requested this job, and his son received it. No matter how you look at it, the mayor is clearly lining his own pockets!”

“But the mayor and his son were only trying to protect the people of this town...”

“That’s just a smokescreen. The mayor takes minor monster attacks that we could easily take care of ourselves, calls them ‘monster rebellions,’ over-reports the casualties, and then collects compensation from the provincial lord. It’s just an elaborate money-laundering scheme to prevent the provincial lord from finding out that he’s keeping all that money for himself!”

“...Compensation from the provincial lord?!”

Oh! This sounds like it’s shaping up to be a very interesting conversation!

“Miss Belle, who is that man?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s Healran Dewitt. He’s one of the town’s chairmen. He’s dedicated to his job but doesn’t get along with the mayor.”

“Why can’t you do anything about this even though you know it’s unethical?” I questioned.

“I suppose it’s because the mayor’s claiming it’s for a just cause by saying it’s for the town’s sake. Most guild members are from this town, so they’re easily swayed by such an argument.”

Looks like it’s a case of small-town folks going easy on one of their own despite their convictions to be rigidly ethical.

“I heard that Mr. Healran used to work in the royal palace,” Miss Belle said. “Maybe that’s why he’s so passionate about eradicating corruption.”

He worked in the royal palace?! Then what’s he doing way out here in the sticks?!

Hmm... Well, given what I’ve seen of his personality, I doubt he was reassigned due to ethical violations. Besides, he wouldn’t have gotten a position as chairman if he had a history of corruption. Maybe his overactive moral compass

made him unpopular with his superiors? That seems like a distinct possibility.

In any case, I want to hear more.

“Excuse me, mister!” I called out, stepping forward. “Please tell me more about what you were just talking about!”

“What? I’ve got no time to be entertaining children right now!”

Ouch, that hurts! Okay, be calm. This is our first time meeting. I need to act maturely.

“Is that so?” I said. “I could help you with your problem, but... Oh well, I suppose if you’re too busy...”

I said act mature, not act like a childish adult! But my mouth moved of its own accord... Yeah, not my fault at all!

“Wait. What do you mean?”

Oh? He took the bait! That’s great and all, but he’s making a terrifying face! The way he’s glaring down at me from beneath heavy, furrowed brows is really intimidating!

Reading the uneasy atmosphere, Shinki stepped in front of me, shielding my body with his own.

I doubt he’s going to attack me or anything... Probably. But better safe than sorry, right?

I settled for having Shinki take one step to the side.

“I have connections to the provincial lord.” I gathered up my courage and shoved my fear deep into my stomach. And, of course, I didn’t forget to smile.

“You have connections to the provincial lord?”

His disbelief was written all over his face.

Hmph. I suppose I can’t blame him; I am just a kid. But I’ll get him to cough up that information, no matter what it takes!

“Healran Dewitt, I beg your pardon,” I said. “It seems I’ve forgotten to introduce myself. My name is Nefertima Osphe. Depending on what you have to say, I might be inclined to arrange a meeting for you with my father. Might

you be able to find some time to speak with me?"

Oh, crap... I'm wearing an incredibly smug expression right now, aren't I? That's so low-class... I need to behave with dignity, befitting a noble young lady!

"The provincial lord's daughter?!"

Not only Healran, but the staff member he'd been speaking with, and even Miss Belle, were all wearing shocked expressions.

Sorry for not being more aristocratic...

"And so, Miss Belle... Could we please borrow one of your private rooms?" I requested.

What's going on in this town? I suppose I'll do a bit of work on Papa's behalf. Well, it's only listening to what this man has to say, but still!

2 - It Might Be Time to Sound the Alarm? Part 2

WE borrowed one of the group meeting rooms on the second floor, and Healran agreed to tell me his story. Just to be safe, Miss Belle joined us to ensure nothing happened to me.

I'm sure I'll be fine since Shinki's with me, but I don't mind if Miss Belle sits in.

We began by introducing ourselves.

"Forgive me for my rudeness earlier. I'm the financial auditor for this town, Healran Dewitt."

Financial auditor?! I didn't realize such positions existed here!

Financial auditors were in my old world, of course, but I don't know much about what their job entails. Collecting receipts and adding them up and stuff, I guess?

"I'm Dayland Osphe's youngest daughter, Nefertima. Sorry to dive right in, but please tell me more about the mayor and his shady dealings."

"I'd be happy to, but I'm not sure how much a young lady such as yourself will understand..."

This again?! I'm starting to loathe being trapped in a child's body!

"I'm well enough educated that my father thought it appropriate to bring me along on his inspection tour," I said.

I do get it; it would probably be more unusual to assume a five-year-old kid would be able to follow a complicated adult conversation.

My brother was intelligent, my sister was clever, and I was a tomboy. That's what they said about the three offspring of the Osphe family in polite society.

Well, they aren't wrong, so I suppose I can't complain, but it still sucks that I'm the only one in a completely different category!

"...Very well. Are you aware of the increase in monster attacks in this area

recently?”

“Yes. I believe Father will soon be assigned to investigate this matter by His Majesty the King.”

Healran sighed, then spoke gravely. “Monster attacks are occurring one after another here in the Parzeth Proxy as well. However, the number of attacks in Cass, specifically, has only increased slightly compared to a typical year. A few people were injured, but the mayor exaggerated and submitted false reports claiming people had died. Due to this, he received five gold ingots as financial aid from the provincial lord.”

Whether five gold ingots was a lot of money or not depended on how many people he’d reported had died, but... Considering it was going straight into his own pocket, I’d say it was a lot!

“Did you request assistance from the knighthood?” I inquired.

Generally, dealing with monsters was part of the knighthood’s job.

Monster suppression jobs submitted to the adventurers’ guild were usually for incidents on privately owned property, though when there was an especially large-scale problem, adventurers might be hired to assist the knights.

Some municipalities also used public funds to hire the adventurers’ guild to ease the burden on the knighthood. The adventurers’ guild was often called in to deal with monster species that bred like wildfire.

“If the knighthood had arrived in time, the mayor probably wouldn’t have dared to do something so foolish,” he said.

They’d requested aid from the royal knighthood as soon as goblins had been spotted, but they couldn’t come right away due to various circumstances. Goblins injured several townspeople in the interim.

That’s when the mayor saw dollar signs! He could demand compensation for the knighthood’s failure to act if he pretended they’d died instead of merely being injured. Talk about a short-sighted plan!

“He also over-reports the cost of maintaining roads and so on,” Healran said.

Ugh, man... What do you call a bad guy who isn’t even on the level of a minor

villain? This reeks of patheticness...

“Is there any proof of the mayor’s embezzlement?” I asked.

“Yes, he looked elated while tallying the numbers in his private ledger.”

L-Looking happy doing accounting work?! Now I know it’s fraudulent! And what kind of idiot records their illegal activities when others are watching?!

I’m really interested in meeting this incredibly pathetic small-fry baddie!

“If you’ve got proof, we can hand it over to Father right away!”

“I would love to, but... The mayor has his private ledger hidden somewhere.”

Oh, right. Of course. He’s keeping it somewhere no one can find it. Maybe he’s using magic or a magical item to conceal it. Or he’s got it in a safe or somewhere it won’t be detected by magic...

But there’s a witness, so it’s safe to hand this matter over to Papa and be done with it.

“Would you be prepared to make a vow on your name in front of my father that the mayor is, without a doubt, embezzling?” I asked.

“Of course!”

Only one more thing concerned me...

“Why wasn’t the knighthood able to come? Do you know?”

Keeping the peace was the duty of the royal knighthood. For that reason, eight of the twelve legions were stationed in the provinces.

Something was up if they couldn’t make it, and I wanted to know what.

“Just east of here lies Lenice, the largest city in the Parzeth Proxy. It’s along the Manoa Highway and is an important base for trade with the Mieuxga Prefecture. But they’ve been having a terrible problem with kobold highway robbers.”

The Manoa Highway was the largest road in the Osphe Province, running horizontally across the province. Magic fortified the road, and the area was peaceful, so many people used it to travel to the Mieuxga and Wise Provinces.

Still, it's not okay to be lax about security just because the area is generally safe.

"I've heard that because the kobolds' numbers are large and they move in an organized manner, at one point, even the city of Lenice was in danger. Pretty much every knight in the area has converged on Lenice to deal with the problem..."

That's what I was waiting for!

The fact that their movements are coordinated means they've got a leader, which could mean someone unusual like Shinki is among their ranks. In that case, we might be able to resolve this issue by adding the kobolds to my plan to create a new home for the monsters.

It might be a simplistic solution, but the more, the merrier!

"...Miss, please calm down," Shinki urged.

Hmph! How rude, intruding on my private thoughts!

"Huh? Shinki, can you read my mind?"

"No, I don't possess such an ability. You just whispered, 'The more the merrier.'"

Ahhh, how embarrassing! I got so excited I didn't notice I said it out loud...

"...Forget this ever happened, please."

Erase it from your memories! I'm begging you!

But, Lenice, huh...? We didn't plan to stop there this trip, but maybe I'll ask my brother when he gets here. If I mention it to Papa, he's sure to reject the idea as being too dangerous.

All right then, I'll have Papa deal with the mayor, which only leaves the matter of the goblins allegedly appearing in this village.

Umm... Hm. Should we forcibly evict them?

"Mr. Healran, please come with me; we'll speak with my father together." Then I dropped my voice to a whisper and made a request of Shinki as well. "Shinki, make contact with the clan of goblins in this area and do your best to

win them over.”

Shinki could use wind elemental power to hear even the tiniest of noises. He could be eavesdropping in on Papa’s conversation right now on the other side of the village for all I knew... It was scary when you thought about it. Talk about super-hearing!

“Win them over?” he asked.

“Yeah. Get them to accept you as their leader and join your clan.”

Well, I guess for now, Suzuko will be their leader.

It should only take two or three days for the clan to travel to where Suzuko’s band is. There’s always the possibility they’ll be attacked by other monsters and even wiped out before they arrive, though.

Hopefully, he’ll explain and make sure they understand the risks.

“Very well.”

I feel bad for throwing it all on Shinki, but I have a feeling the goblins will respond better to him than if a bunch of humans came sneaking into their camp. And if it doesn’t work out, I can go later.

All right, let’s find Papa!

We parted ways with Shinki in front of the adventurers’ guild house and, for some reason, decided Miss Belle would lead us to the mayor’s house.

Oh, I’d better call Nox before I forget.

I would use the message tube—one of seven tools Lestin had given me for Nox—to have him carry a letter to Papa like a messenger hawk. It would be a waste of time if we missed him on the way or if he didn’t go to the mayor’s house.

“Will Shinki be all right by himself?” Miss Belle asked. “Even though they’re only goblins, it sounds dangerous...”

I’d explained to Miss Belle and the others that Shinki would take care of the goblins. He was essentially stealing a job from the guild, but they were willing to overlook it since he hadn’t received it from them and was working for free.

Everyone agreed that the faster the issue was resolved, the better.

I was grateful for Miss Belle's concern, but Shinki had always been as strong as a demon, even when he was a goblin.

I couldn't exactly say, "He'll be fine—they probably won't attack him since he's the same species as them!" So I vaguely answered, "Shinki's about as strong as my father, so there's nothing to worry about!"

I'm honestly not sure which of them is stronger! If I had to guess, I'd probably say Papa's the strongest?

"Has the mayor held his position for a long time?" I asked.

"Yes. The position has been passed down in his family for generations. I believe it's been around fifteen years since he took over for his father."

A hereditary position, eh? Verrrry interesting...

Miss Belle was born and raised in this village, too, right?

"Do you know how long ago he started embezzling?"

"I think it started about five years ago."

Five years, huh? That means he was doing his job right for ten years... Either he got sick of doing things above board, or someone corrupted him... If someone influenced him, then he has an accomplice.

"Mr. Healran, you arrived in Cass three years ago, right?"

Healran answered Miss Belle's question in the affirmative.

"It's surprising that you know when the embezzling started then."

"I looked through the previous records. My predecessor was not doing his job properly."

If he was so sloppy that Healran caught it right away, that says a lot about the predecessor's aptitude...

Discussing all this as we walked, we soon stood in front of a house much more impressive than the others around it.

Nox was perched on the roof, indicating that Papa was already inside.

No need for a battle plan this time. We'll come straight out and tell Papa everything right in front of the man in question!

"Won't the mayor be able to get away with it if we can't find his private ledger?"

"But there are some suspicious entries in the official ledger as well, right? Shouldn't that serve as sufficient proof?" I ventured.

Besides, the only people who can best Papa in a battle of words are His Majesty and Mama. He's the second-in-command of the entire country, after all. If he can't clear up a tiny matter like this before he's even had breakfast, he'd put his title to shame.

If he can't do it, I'll tattle to Mama!

I led the way toward the entrance to the house, full of determination, and Papa came out to meet me, feet firmly planted at shoulder-width... It was a reprise of Scary Papa from the cave!

"Nefertima. Let's hear it. What's your excuse for this?"

There it is, just as expected, the sub-zero aura of pure fury! I can't go against him at a time like this.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, Father. And I'm sorry for causing everyone trouble."

I apologized forthrightly. I also apologized to Papa's subordinates and the knights, but everyone stared at me in shock.

Even if I am an aristocrat, if I mess up or do something wrong, I'll apologize appropriately. This is just a guess, but I bet Papa scolded them for letting me slip away. I hadn't thought of that! Sorry, everyone!

"I wanted to have a look inside the adventurers' guild," I said.

"Where is Shinki?" Papa asked.

"He went to meet the goblins causing trouble in this area."

When he heard this, Papa heaved an exasperated sigh. "Nefertima, can you understand how foolish your actions today were? As a member of the nobility,

it might've been too early for me to take you along with me like this."

Papa's words shocked me. Even if he vetoed my requests because they were dangerous or for some other valid reason, he'd never outright denied or refused me like this before.

So I thought it over. I was slightly panicked, and my thoughts were spinning, but I thought back over my actions.

Essentially, I had disappeared without saying a word to anyone.

The gravity of what I'd done crashed into me all at once.

Once I realized that, the foolishness of my actions and shame left me sick to my stomach and with tears welling in my eyes.

I can't cry. It would be shameful and cowardly to cry right now. But I'd like nothing more than to crawl into a hole and hide. Please bury me.

What I'd done was akin to abandoning my post. No matter how gung-ho I was about finding the perfect location for the monsters' new home, our foremost reason for being here was to inspect the state of the province. Sure, I was only here as Papa's guest, but I was still a member of the inspection team.

But I'd not only left without permission from the group leader, I'd done so without even bringing along a security detail. If something had happened to me, the knights would have been punished for failing their duties.

"Status is something you have in order to protect those below you."

Despite how much my parents drilled this into me, I hadn't appreciated it. The ones to pay the price for my selfishness would be those below me. I should've known my actions could have negative consequences.

Thinking back, this had happened regularly in my past life as well. Whenever any trouble occurred at work, my immediate supervisor would always cover for me. But a senior coworker who held an important position in HR would always do and say whatever she wanted, making outrageous demands of those of us with less seniority.

My behavior today had been just like that senior coworker's.

I'd used my unreproachable position to do whatever I wanted. It was only fair

for Papa to be angry with me.

“Even if you are our father, I won’t sit by silently and let you make Neema cry.”

Just as I registered the familiar voice, I was picked up.

I looked up sharply, trying to make sense of the situation, only to come face-to-face with someone who shouldn’t be here yet.

What are you doing here already, Ralf?!



It's hardly been a day since Papa summoned him. How did he get here so quickly?!

My gentle and kind brother smiled warmly at me. Just seeing his face made me feel at ease.

Ralf and Karna would always take my side, no matter what. Even if I was at fault, they'd take Mama's scolding alongside me.

But as I relaxed, the tears started to flow.

"Uwaaaah..."

Not wanting anyone to see my hideous crying face, I buried it against my brother's shoulder.

"It's okay now. I'll take Papa's scolding with you; it'll be okay."

Wait, wait, wait. I'm really grateful for the sentiment, Ralf, but you can't go easy on me.

I shook my head, still buried in his shoulder, and insisted that I was the one in the wrong.

Oh, man... Ralf's clothes must be getting covered in tears and snot...

Just as I thought that, someone produced a handkerchief. The person wiped the tears from my cheeks and pinched my nose gently with it. *I guess they want me to blow my nose?*

Hmmmmnf!

Ahh, I feel much better now!

Once the handkerchief no longer blocked my field of view, I saw...an apparition?

Did my unconscious mind create it since we haven't seen each other much recently? No, that can't be it. I don't possess such a delicate and ladylike sense of whimsy.

Which means this must be the real thing? ...That would be bad, though. Am I allowed to say no?

“Are you finally done being stupid? Good.”

“Neema’s a clever child. She just has a tendency to act before she thinks.”

Across from my politely smiling brother stood a demon speaking ill of me.

He is really here!

Well, Lars is standing right over there, so that doesn’t leave much room for doubt.

I hadn’t heard his voice in a while. During that time, he’d passed the age where a boy’s voice changes into that of a man because an unreasonably sexy new huskiness was in his voice. He’d also gotten taller and put on muscle in his most recent growth spurt. I could picture the noble young ladies at court sighing over him now.

In any case, Ralf! Don’t you know there’s a fine line between reckless and idiotic?

“...Your Highness.”

At Papa’s clearly exasperated greeting, his subordinates and the knights joined him in paying homage.

Following their example, Healran and Miss Belle prostrated themselves.

Prostration was common for anyone other than members of the nobility and those who worked for the royal palace. Both men and women would kneel on both knees and put their right hand over their hearts. They would be required to hold this position without raising their heads until given permission to do so.

Oh! I need to pay homage as well! Put me down!

“Ralf, can you put me down?” I asked.

As soon as Ralf set me down, I curtsied where I stood.

Once Will told us to “Be at ease,” the entire group rose, and Papa immediately walked up to Will.

“Your Highness, what brings you here?”

“I’d finished with all my official duties, but when I decided to take a break and play with Nefertima, I was told she’d gone along on an inspection tour, so I

came to see for myself.”

Is it just me, or does it sound like he’s still calling me his toy despite using my name for once?

“His Majesty is aware of this?”

“Yes, I got his permission before coming. Apparently, I’m under surveillance as a condition of being allowed to come, though.”

Oh, I’ve heard of this from Papa! A secret group of ninja-like operatives serve the king. It’s a separate organization from the espionage department—essentially the king’s private soldiers.

“If His Majesty orders you to return, please do so without hesitation.”

Papa, your eyes aren’t smiling at all! There’s a polite smile on your lips, but your eyes are hard as steel! His presence creating more work for you is peeking out!

Will was totally undaunted, though, wearing his own blackguard smile.

Letting sleeping dogs lie, I turned to Lars, intending to revitalize myself by petting him.

“And who are these people?” Papa asked.

I tilted my head, confused by Papa changing the topic.

Then I remembered why we were here and pounded my fist into the palm of my other hand.

Oh, that’s right! I haven’t introduced everyone yet!

“This is Miss Ariabelle, who kindly showed me around the adventurers’ guild house and Mr. Healran, the financial auditor for this town,” I said. “Mr. Healran would like to speak to you about something, Father.”

“He wants to speak to me?”

“Yeah. I only heard the gist of it, but I think your authority will be needed to resolve this issue, so I brought him to meet with you.”

I did my best to appeal to Papa’s good nature by infusing my words with the nuance that he was the only one we could depend on.

He always hears me out when I come to him with a request. ...Though whether he grants that request or not is another matter.

“...If you put it like that, it must mean that I need to make a judgment either as the provincial lord or as the prime minister, right? Very well, I’ll hear what he has to say.”

Wow! He’s giving my words way more credit than I deserve right now! Is this because of how much he dotes on me?!

I’m sorry, Papa.

I’m sorry for using your position to take care of business so I can move on to a more interesting topic, especially when all I’m doing is intruding on others’ business.

“Let’s continue this conversation inside,” Papa said, ushering us toward the house.

He’s acting like he’s inviting us into his home, but this is someone else’s house!

When we stepped into the entryway, an obsequious man was waiting for us. He shook our hands with excessive enthusiasm, lavished us with insincere praise, and generally acted obnoxiously subservient and brown-nosing.

This is the dictionary definition of a small-fry character... Oh wait, is this the mayor?!

He looked normal enough. He reminded me a bit of the old man who ran the greengrocer’s shop in the commerce district in the royal city.

He smiled broadly at the “Provincial Lord and Honored Associates,” regarded me, Ralf, and Will with a slightly inconvenienced expression as if thinking, “What are a bunch of kids doing here?” and when it came to Healran and Miss Belle, his face warped into a contemptuous grimace. I was almost impressed by his comical display of expressions.

“Sorry for the intrusion, but may we use your home?” Papa asked.

“Have these two offended you, my lord?”

“Not at all; it would appear they’ve been of great service to my daughter.”

Hmmm, it seems out of character for him to talk down to the mayor. I mean, he is the mayor's social superior by quite a bit, but still. He's always so gentle and indulgent with me.

The mayor led us through the house to a spacious room that appeared to be a guest parlor.

"Meow!"

An adorable guest was already waiting in the room.

A large, all-white ria lay by the window, sunning herself. She let out a big yawn.

Rias were like cats, but at the end of the day, cats they were not. They lived in small groups with their mate and children, and were wild animals suited to living in cities.

Rias wandered around at their own pace, going wherever they felt like, catching small prey, or receiving food from humans at their leisure. But they didn't live in the homes of humans as pets.

They certainly *looked* like cats. Their bodies were a bit smaller than a housecat's, their ears were rounded, and they had thick tails.

"There's a ria in the house!" I cried, wanting nothing more than to run into the room—an urge I resisted with all my feeble willpower.

The royal guards accompanying Will quickly searched the room. Once they determined it was safe, they bid us to enter.

All right! I know it's unmannered, but I'm gonna run!

"Hello!" I scrambled onto the shelf of the protruding window where the ria was lying. The ria sniffed my scent, curious about me, then licked the tip of my nose.

Come to think of it, Lars often does the same thing. I wonder what it means?

Anyway, this is certainly an unusual ria. Not only is she inside a house, but her eyes are two different colors!

"You have such beautiful eyes! May I pick you up?" I requested.

The ria's right eye was a dark indigo. Indigo describes the hue more accurately than just calling it blue. And the ria's left eye was gold.

The ria meowed once as if saying, *"If you must,"* and I didn't waste another moment in scooping her up.

I nestled the ria against my chest with her head and forelegs on my left shoulder and my right arm under her bottom, supporting her weight. I pet her gorgeous fur with my free left hand.

Whoa! Her hair is so glossy and soft!

Rias were short-haired, and it was my first time encountering one with such a luscious coat. *Oh man, her hair feels so nice!*

Hm? Something is moving around... Oh, is it Gratia?!

Startled by the ria, he moved around in my hair. I found out that both Gratia and Nox were boys thanks to the researchers at the Beast Knights Legion!

Knock that off, Gratia—it tickles! I can't focus on enjoying the ria's incredible coat.

"Let me see! Oh, you're right. What unusual coloring." The moment Ralf peered over my shoulder at the ria, she puffed up and hissed.

He didn't have my special ability, so it wasn't on the same level, but animals usually liked Ralf, too. Even if they were cautious around him, they hardly ever hissed or growled.

"Don't scare her, Ralf!" I cried.

Worried that losing sight of the human she was hissing at would send the ria into a full-blown panic, I pivoted my body just a bit to scold my brother.

And don't believe for a minute that I failed to run my fingers through the ria's bristled fur, enjoying its altered but still tantalizing texture!

"Send for Croute right away!" The mayor was raising a fuss, calling for someone.

"Sorry, sorry. Hey, the color of her right eye is similar to your eyes, Neema."

Nobody asked the opinion of the peanut gallery, thanks!

I scratched the ria at the base of her ears and under her chin while she was still puffed up in alarm, trying to calm her down.

After a few moments of calming scratches, the ria finally relaxed, and she started purring deep in her throat.

The way her mood changes so dramatically from one extreme to the other is just like a cat!

“Mio!” A newcomer hastily ran into the room.

This house really is tumultuous, in various senses of the word!

“Get this ria out of here immediately! It’s a disgrace in the presence of His Grace!”

The way the mayor shouted told me this ria wasn’t here on his say-so.

“Come here, Mio.”

“Mio” appeared to be this ria’s name. It sounded like a Japanese name. She was probably given this name because it resembled the sound of her meowing.

“Meow!”

The ria let out an especially affectionate meow. Using my shoulder as a springboard, she leapt toward the person who’d called to her.

Nooo, come back to me, soft and glossy cutie!



IT had been one thing after another, but finally, we got a chance to take a break. We sat on a large sofa, each sipping a soothing cup of hot tea. And Mio was curled up on my lap. What more could I possibly ask for?!

I’ll leave the conversation up to the adults for now. I’m busy loving on Mio!

As for the young man, who I assume is Mio’s owner... Men’s jealousy is really something, isn’t it? I understand being upset that Mio picked me over you, but will you please stop glaring daggers at me?

Ralf and Will sat on either side of me, elegantly drinking their tea. They seemed to be following along with the conversation.

Almost as soon as Healran started speaking, the mayor kept interrupting to claim it was all a misunderstanding and that he would never do such a thing. Healran could hardly get a word in, and the conversation wasn't progressing, so Papa roared at the mayor, who immediately fell silent.

While the adults were speaking, I mentally considered our plans for what came next.

First of all, I need Papa's permission to travel to Lenice. And I want to gather more information before we go. I also have to confirm with Shinki how it went with the goblins and... Oh, I need to introduce Shinki and Gratia to Ralf!

Also—and this is the most important of all—I need to cuddle Lars! I haven't been able to see him lately, so I've got my work cut out for me to make up for all the petting of his pure white fur that I've been missing out on...

"Growl!"

Lying on the ground behind me, Lars let out a warning growl.

I think he's saying to calm down?

Lars was clever. Although he didn't have a connection with me like Sol did, somehow, he always knew what I was feeling. It might've just been due to all the time we'd spent together. To put it bluntly, I'd spent way more time with Lars than with Will.

That means ours is a love of mutual understanding!

"Growl!" Lars growled again, more forcefully this time.

Yeah, yeah, I'll calm down, I promise.

I focused on petting Mio, who was still fast asleep on my lap, to redirect my excited feelings.

Will snickered at the exchange between Lars and me, but I ignored him.

The adults' conversation had pretty much wrapped up.

Papa would dispatch a trusted subordinate from the royal city to oversee the mayor. Until that person arrived, he would hire a temporary supervisor from the adventurers' guild. He elected to leave the choice of candidate up to Miss

Belle.

It appeared that they were about to begin discussing matters of absolute secrecy because the mayor was taken away, Mio's owner (who turned out to be the mayor's son) was led away, and even Mio was taken off my lap and out of the room.

Tch!

Papa tried scouting Healran, asking him to work for him at the royal palace. But Healran declined, explaining that he'd had a terrible experience there working under a horrible boss, just as I'd guessed.

This is my chance!

"In that case, please come to work for me!" I piped up.

Everyone stared at me in confusion, having no idea what I was talking about. Except for Papa, who muttered, almost to himself, that the idea had merit.

"What about you, Miss Belle?"

Papa cut in just as I posed this question to Miss Belle. "I'll explain things from here."

Papa used his skill at manipulating words to roughly explain the plan without using the word "monsters."

"If you get involved with this plan, I would like you to fully understand it may put your life in danger. And before I reveal all the details, I will require everyone present to vow upon their name."

I breathed in sharply at the serious expression on Papa's face.

Of course, his angry face was scary, but his serious face was intimidating *and* scary.

Papa's subordinates, the knights, and the royal guardsmen in Will's security detail all vowed upon their names without batting an eye.

Healran and Miss Belle thought about it. After asking a few questions, they vowed upon their names as well.

"...You really come up with the most hair-brained schemes, don't you?"

Once Papa finished explaining the entire plan, Will's mutter of disbelief broke the silence that had fallen over the group.

"Even the monsters can't deny how lovable Neema is."

How should I respond to Ralf's unexpected statement that practically screams, "I have a huge sister-complex!"?

"I'm going to have you take point on this matter, Ralf, so prepare yourself."

Papa just mercilessly plowed right over Ralf! Is he going to protest? It would be normal to complain in this situation, right?

"Yes, sir. If it means I can spend more time with Neema, I'll gladly take on the responsibility."

Hey, wait a minute—what about school?! I don't know all the details, but aren't there still a lot of things he needs to finish before he can officially graduate?! I can't say for sure, but I get the feeling this is going to be a drawn-out uphill battle!

"I'll help too," Will said.

No thanks! Papa, refuse! Refuse immediately and without mercy! That demon will bully me if you don't!

"You must be very busy with your official duties, Your Highness..." Papa said.

"Naturally, I have no intention of neglecting them. I will contribute what I'm able to do from the royal city using my free time between my official duties."

Tch. Such a perfectly proper answer...

Papa gave in with a sigh. "I will keep Your Highness' involvement a matter of absolute secrecy."

If it became public knowledge that the royal family was involved, the project would appear government-endorsed. And if that happened, nearby countries would raise a fuss, claiming we were "increasing our military forces" and other such nonsense. More troublesome than anything was the barrage of complaints that would inevitably come from the Church of Divine Creation.

"Is Shinki a monster?" Miss Belle asked.

“Yes, he’s a former hobgoblin. He evolved into an unknown new species,” I answered.

I’ll keep it a secret for now that he can use elemental power. I can tell Ralf and Will in private later. Besides, it’s rude to talk about people behind their backs.

“Will the location be in a more rural area than this?” Healran asked.

“Yes. We’re hoping to find a small village in a rural, forested area further south,” I replied.

“Very well, I will join your team,” Healran said.

The decisive factor for him was the rural location? ...What, is he a huge nature lover or something?

“I’ll join too. I don’t have any family, so I’ll go wherever you need me!” Miss Belle declared.

A sudden, explosive answer! ...I almost feel bad for not matching her enthusiasm. But I’m surprised they’re both much more free-spirited than their first impressions led me to believe. They don’t seem to be opposed to the idea of helping monsters, so I suppose that’s all that matters!

“Okay. I’ll send for you once the location has been decided. Until then, please wait in this town,” I said.

“May I accompany you?” Healran asked. “It would be beneficial to have someone on hand who can get to work immediately once that’s settled.”

What Healran said made sense, but the undertone to his words sounded an awful lot like, “I want to quickly leave this town and live a quiet life in the countryside.”

Miss Belle said that she would wait here. She claimed that she didn’t have the necessary skills to protect herself and would only be a hindrance to us as we traveled.

Papa agreed, and then they discussed the terms of employment. Everything was starting to fall into place, and I was about to fall asleep.

I guess I’m the only one who can’t follow along without getting bored? Oh well, I’ll entertain myself by playing with Lars.

I was soothing myself by petting Lars' soft stomach fur when he let out a sudden, menacing growl.

"What's wrong?" I asked Lars, but Will was the one who answered.

"There's something outside."

Just then, a loud "*Screech!*" rang out.

It was Nox, informing me, "*He's back!*"

"It's Shinki!" I exclaimed.

Just as I was about to rush outside to meet him, there was a knock on the door, and one of the knights escorted Shinki inside.

"Welcome back!" I slammed into Shinki with such force as I ran to him for a hug that it hurt a bit.

Damn, why does he have to be covered in so many rock-hard muscles?!

"Neema. You are going to *properly* introduce this person to us, right?"

Huh? Why does Ralf's smile look terrifyingly like Mama's expression when she's about to let loose and give me a thorough scolding?!

Uh-oh... Did I mess up big time again?!

3 - The Usual Pattern

WE hurried to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth to my brother, who, for some reason, was in full-on lecture mode.

“Shinki has been bound by his true name,” Papa said. “Just think of him as Neema’s personal bodyguard.”

If even Papa approved of Shinki, Ralf couldn’t reject him.

“Ralf, you see, umm...” I held my hands out to Ralf, asking to be picked up. Once he obliged, I leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Please send my voice to Will as well,” I asked the wind spirits I assumed must be lingering around him.

It would’ve looked ultra-suspicious if I’d called Will over to join us in a secret-sharing huddle.

“Shinki is special; he can use the power of all four elements,” I whispered.

Ralf and Will looked shocked but quickly recovered and schooled their expressions.

Everyone with us since the start already knew, but Healran, Miss Belle, and the royal guards didn’t. Thankfully, the others got the message that it was a secret.

Once my brother put me down, the next order of business was to introduce Gratia.

“This is Gratia; he’s the frost spider’s child!” I proudly held up Gratia, who sat in the palm of my hand, for Ralf and Will’s inspection. He raised his front right leg in greeting as if saying, “*Sup!*”

“...This is what you get up to *with* Father watching you...?” Ralf asked, astonished.

“Let’s just call this one an act of divine providence,” Papa replied wryly.

There seemed to be a tense, almost dangerous aura between Papa and Ralf.

Will was the only one examining Gratia curiously. “He’s a mutation; there’s no doubt about it. What’s his idiosyncrasy?”

Huh? I don’t have the faintest clue what he’s talking about.

“Idio...syncrashy?” I fumbled over the word.

“A mutation is a phenomenon seen only in monsters when one is born with sudden evolutionary differences from the rest of its species,” Will explained. “The one factor all mutations have in common is that they’re always pure black. Some say it occurs due to cannibalism, but this has yet to be proven. Abilities that mutations possess outside the scope of powers normally attributed to their species are known as idiosyncrasies.”

So he’s saying that in addition to all the things frost spiders can normally do, Gratia possesses at least one special ability? I don’t know what kinds of abilities frost spiders normally possess, though...

“It would be dangerous to try here, but once you return to the royal city, why don’t you have the folks at the magical research center run some tests?” Will suggested.

“They won’t try to take Gratia away from me, will they?”

I was worried since I’d heard crazy rumors about the researchers at the magical research center.

They won’t dissect him or anything, right?

“I doubt there’s anyone brave enough to attempt to steal a beloved companion from the daughter of the noble Osphe family,” Will said.

In that case, it might be good to have a professional look at him. I bet they could tell me interesting stories about monsters, too!

“I’ll ask Mother to arrange it when I get home!” I declared.

I’m excited to find out what Gratia’s superpower is!

“Maybe I’ll get myself a pet monster, too...” Will hummed to himself. He seemed to have taken quite a liking to Gratia. He had Gratia resting on the palm of his hand and was playing with him.

They cut a striking image: the fatally handsome prince and the pitch-black spider.

It's perfect for a gothic fairy tale, but not ideal for the prince of our country!

"Will, you already have Lars, so you should quit while you're ahead," Ralf pointed out.

Oh, that's right! How greedy can you be, wanting monster friends on top of being blessed with an awesome partner like Lars?!

But it's rare for Ralf to take such a casual tone with Will. He usually speaks more formally. I know they're childhood friends and rivals, but maybe Ralf acts differently depending on the situation? There's a lot I still have to learn from him!

While I was lost in my thoughts, Will kept playing with Gratia.

He gently poked and stroked the spider's back, testing the firmness of his exoskeleton. It was more durable than those of regular spiders; it felt more like a rhinoceros beetle. I suspected that as he grew, his exoskeleton would become more like the shell of a crustacean.

I had no idea what he was thinking, but suddenly, Will gently pinched Gratia's back legs between his fingers and held him up in the air! He moved his hands forward and back, causing Gratia to sway like a swing.



What are you doing to my precious baby, you demon prince?! What if his legs pop off?!

Moving at the speed of light, I rushed to save Gratia from Will.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, searching Gratia all over for injuries.

Gratia waved both of his front legs back and forth as if saying, *“I’m fine!”*

Thank goodness!

“Are you guys done playing?” Papa said. “I’d like to move on to the next order of business...”

Oops, sorry, Papa! But first, I want to hear what Shinki has to say!

“Father, can we listen to Shinki’s report first?” I asked.

“Sure. It’s about the goblins that have been appearing in this town, right?”

Once Papa gave permission, I asked Shinki to fill us all in on what had happened.

“The goblins who’ve recently appeared in this area are a small clan with only fourteen members, led by a hobgoblin,” Shinki said. “I tried explaining the plan to the hobgoblin, but he couldn’t comprehend what I was saying. In the end, I had no choice but to challenge him to a fight for dominance. I won, and the clan now follows me.”

Oh dear. Looks like their leader’s intellectual abilities were lower than expected. Well, I suppose it’s also possible that Shinki’s clan is an exception, and this clan is the norm.

“What did you do with the goblins after that?” I asked.

“I told them to head to the cave. I asked some bugs to guide them, so they should make it okay.”

Bugs? You do understand that those are sacred beings, right? Yes, they’re small and might even have wings, but stop treating them like bugs! Besides, how are the elemental spirits supposed to lead the goblins to the cave when the goblins can’t even see them?

“How are the elemental spirits going to tell the goblins where to go?” I asked.

“I don’t know. They said they could, so I took them at their word.”

If the elemental spirits say they can, it will probably be okay?

Will chuckled wryly at Shinki’s “bug” comment, which led me to believe the elemental spirits in the area were complaining.

We’ll have to make sure to thank them when they return.

“Okay, it looks like that’s handled for now, then. That leaves Lenice, then,” I said. “Father, do you have any information regarding the kobold raids occurring in and around Lenice?”

“The city of Lenice that’s along the Manoa Highway? ...If I remember correctly, a large group of kobolds was spotted in the area, and several cases of merchant convoys being attacked and robbed were reported.”

So the information hasn’t made its way up to Papa yet, eh? Should we take this to mean that the situation is so dire that the information channels have been disrupted?

“Lenice is in a worse state than that. Isn’t that right, unit leader?” I addressed my question to the leader of the small unit of knights accompanying us, who I figured had the most information.

The unit leader was surprised I addressed him, but he quickly recovered and turned to Papa, requesting permission to speak.

Papa nodded, and the unit leader shared more information than I’d imagined.

There were approximately 100 kobolds. Aside from the main force, there were five additional groups, each with assigned tasks such as keeping watch and scouting. A high kobold led each group, and a werewolf—the highest evolution of a kobold—was with the main force.

At one point, the kobolds slipped through the city’s defenses and attacked Lenice directly, but fortunately, the knighthood held them off. Currently, the knights were putting together a punitive force to subjugate the kobolds and had contracted the adventurers’ guild to send any willing members of green rank or higher to assist.

The combined forces of the knighthood and the adventurers’ guild totaled

approximately 300 soldiers. Depending on the situation, they might increase their numbers further.

“This information is directly from the knighthood?” Papa asked.

“Yes, sir. After this security detail mission is completed, we have orders to help with the situation in Lenice as well. That’s why we received a report from the regional headquarters with the most recent information while we were in Arsenta.”

“Sorry for asking, but what type of person is in charge at the regional headquarters?” I asked.

“Huh? The person in charge? I’m not sure I understand, my lady.”

The unit leader seemed confused about why I was asking about the person in charge, but I could tell that Papa understood why I was asking.

This information was significantly different than what Papa had received. Perhaps intentionally on the part of some unknown party?

If that were the case, the cabinet members in the royal city might be unaware of the monster sightings in their provinces because the information was intentionally withheld from them...

That would mean that, as the person taking point on this monster issue, Papa would need to go back over all of the personnel involved—a task I didn’t envy at all. Although, it would affect me as well. If Papa was busy, I couldn’t count on his help choosing a location for the monsters’ new home.

“According to what I’ve heard, the regional headquarters commander used to be one of the commanders at the central headquarters in the royal city but was moved here as part of regulatory personnel rotation. I don’t know him, but I get the impression that he’s not very popular with his subordinates.”

Sounds an awful lot like a demotion to me! Hmm, things have gotten complicated!

“Father, how far does Will’s authority extend?” I asked.

If Papa wasn’t with us, we couldn’t use his authority as prime minister. Even if Ralf were granted a certain degree of authority due to his position as the

provincial lord's representative, people probably wouldn't take him seriously since he was still a kid. It wouldn't surprise me if the same were true for His Highness the Crown Prince...

"I doubt it will work on the royal knighthood," Papa said. "In theory, they operate autonomously from the authority of the central government. Maybe I should get Gouche to write you a letter of authorization..."

I thought so. In the end, Grandpa Gouche's name holds the most sway with the knighthood, huh? I'll use whatever help I can get! But I wonder why even the royal family's authority doesn't hold much sway over the royal knighthood...

"Why doesn't his authority work on the knighthood?" I asked.

"Because the royal knighthood exists to serve the people, not the nobility," he said.

According to Papa, the royal knighthood was structured so that it couldn't be misused by aristocrats because it existed to serve the people.

For example, if monsters appeared, the aristocrat overseeing that area could request the knighthood's assistance in suppressing them. However, if a proxy lord demanded they prioritize his lands, the knighthood was free to decline. Conversely, the same couldn't be said for the royal guard. As long as it wasn't against the law and didn't interfere with their duties, the royal guard was obliged to follow orders from those with the authority to issue them.

In this case, when Will suddenly announced he would tag along with Ralf to the other side of the country, since the king had approved the trip, the royal guards assigned to Will's protective detail had to accommodate his whim as part of their job. They had to fly by the seat of their pants, adjusting to sudden changes.

The royal guard sure has their work cut out for them!

"Father, how should we proceed from here?" I asked.

"How, indeed... Well, everything began when someone attacked the monsters in the Dierta Province and drove them north. I will open an official investigation, but I think we can say that much for certain. We don't know if this person or group is a friend or an enemy or what their objective is, but for the time being,

let's proceed under the assumption that they are an enemy. It's becoming confusing to discuss the matter without any names, so let's call the enemy 'Runohark,' and since the monsters were attacked in the south, we'll refer to it as 'The Southern Province Incident.'"

Runohark is the perfect choice of name.

Runohark was the name of an insect used as the primary ingredient in creating a monster repellent. I'd seen them in an illustrated encyclopedia, but they looked almost identical to the *least* popular insect in my old world that starts with a C. If that wasn't bad enough, they were the same iridescent color as scarab beetles. Even I didn't want to get anywhere near one of them, and bugs freaked me out less than most girls.

If we used this name as a codeword, no one would bat an eye if they heard the words "defeat" or "was attacked" in the same sentence. Runoharks were known to fly into people's eyes.

And there had been several "Southern Province Incidents" throughout history, so if someone overheard us talking about them, they would assume we were discussing one of those.

"Shinki said that adventurers attacked his clan, but did Runohark disguise their own people as adventurers, or did they hire the adventurers' guild?" Papa wondered. "The former sounds like a more effective plan, but if that's the case, then they really must be a massive organization."

That's true... They might have magic users working for them, and even if they don't, they're an organization capable of mobilizing at least 1,000 people.

"Um..." Miss Belle raised her hand, requesting permission to speak. "Shall I look into whether a job request was submitted to the adventurers' guild? It was most likely a regional request, so it would only have been posted in a few locations."

"I appreciate the offer, but we wouldn't be able to protect you if Runohark found out and traced it back to you," Papa said. "They could have an agent within the guild, so you need to be careful that your connection to us isn't discovered."

Miss Belle seemed disheartened by Papa's rejection. But I didn't want anything to happen to Miss Belle, so I agreed with Papa's opinion.

"Lord Osphe, do you believe that there are agents within the regional government of the other provinces and the knighthood as well?" Will asked.

It would make things even more difficult for us if there were spies everywhere we turned. Spies from other countries were one thing, but if some mysterious organization had penetrated so many different agencies, it would put this on the level of a national crisis.

"Neema," Ralf called to me, gently stroking my head. "Don't worry. Nobody can defeat our King Gauldi."

"How did you know what I was thinking?" I pouted.

"You had worry written all over your face."

Hmph. My emotions are still showing on my face, huh? Whenever I get emotional, I get careless with guarding my expression. I need to smile at all times, as befits a noble lady. I'll be more careful from now on.

"I believe it's very likely," Papa said, answering Will. "For this reason, I caution you all to be careful. Especially you, Neema. If you cause any problems, I'll take you back to the royal city immediately."

"...Yes, Father. I'll be careful."

He backed me into a corner there. But it'll be fine! ...Probably.

"I'll return to the royal city tomorrow, but Ralf will carry on with the inspection of the province," Papa said. "I ask those of you from the knighthood to carry on in your assignment as security detail for the duration of this mission until my daughter achieves her goal. I know it's an unreasonable request, but do you accept?"

Whoa! Such a grand speech, Papa!

But wait a minute... The knighthood exists to serve the people, right? Then why are they working as private security for an inspection team? I'm just now realizing how strange this is...

"Come to think of it, why are members of the knighthood serving as our

security detail anyway?" I had to ask.

"I originally refused, but the commander of the first legion made me an interesting proposal..." Papa said.

What's that supposed to mean?

"Our true mission is not protection but reconnaissance. Our job is to observe and report how His Grace deals with monsters within his province. If a fortress is built here, our people will work there, so we're also tasked with making recommendations to make the fortress suitable for the knighthood's needs," the unit leader explained.

Umm, is it really okay for him to blurt out the true purpose of their secret mission?

"Won't you get in trouble for revealing all that?" I asked.

"It's fine. Besides, protecting the members of the Osphe family and honored associates *is* serving the people."

I'm glad to hear him say that, but still... Is it really okay?

I tried asking Papa, but he said that if the knights deemed it to be in service to the people, then it was fine. However, if even one of them objected, that may change things.

The unit leader conferred with the other knights in hushed voices.

Ughhh, I'm so nervous! I really want their help... But they have to be in unanimous agreement, right?

"As long as our superiors approve it, we would be honored to accompany you. We, too, look forward to seeing what Lady Nefertima will accomplish," the unit leader said with a smile.

Thank you! I'm so grateful; you have no idea!

"Thank you for accepting!" I exclaimed.

To put it another way, I was incredibly grateful to the knights for graciously taking on babysitting me!

"I will contact your superiors as well," Papa said. "Just to be safe, I'll have

Gouche convey it to them as official orders.”

“In that case, Father, you’ll allow us to go to Lenice, right?!” I asked.

If he said no after the direction the conversation had turned, I’d have to either turn delinquent or win him over with tears as a last resort.

“Knowing you, Neema, even if I say no, you won’t listen, will you?”

“That’s right! I want to get the kobolds to join our plan,” I said.

“As I suspected. Your Highness, Ralf, I’m counting on the two of you to keep her on a short leash.”

Urk, that’s a restrictive way of phrasing it, don’t you think?! Oh well, at least he gave us permission.

“Neema, Ralf, listen carefully—from here out, I’m not going to be able to leap to your rescue,” Papa cautioned. “You must prioritize His Highness’ and your own physical safety above all else. Don’t run headlong into entanglements with monsters or people who might be part of Runohark.”

I’m well aware of how important it is to ensure our safety. The monumental burden of protecting the precious heirs to the throne and the Osphe duchy is weighing down on my shoulders!

“We shouldn’t do anything even if we find out who’s behind Runohark?” I asked.

“It’s not that nothing should be done. Only that *you* should not be the ones doing it,” Papa stressed.

Ummm, that was too evasive for me to follow...

I think he means that it’s okay as long as we don’t make direct contact?

“You’re suggesting we use elemental spirits?”

While I was tilting my head in confusion, Will understood what Papa had been trying to say.

“Exactly. If you get the opportunity, will you please teach Neema how to use a holy beast’s power?”

“Certainly.”

It looks like they've made plans for me without even asking my opinion on the matter... But wait, by "a holy beast's power?" Do they mean that I'll also be able to control elemental power?! That would be so cool! But there's just one problem...

I can't see elemental spirits.

"Will I be able to see the elemental spirits?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, that depends on the fire dragon," Will said.

Way to kill the vibe! Dumb Will!

"Even if you can't see them, as long as you believe in the elemental spirits, they will lend you their power. Elemental spirits are always hovering around you, so they must like you," he added.

The elemental spirits around me must be attracted to the traces of Sol's fire elemental power and Lars' wind elemental power they sense on me... I bet they've helped me a lot, and I never even knew it. I wish I could see them...

The adults continued discussing boring topics like security issues, and Healran and the unit leader got into a good-natured debate about something or other. In the end, we spent the night at the mayor's house.

Later, I'll explore the house with the knights I've made friends with!



AFTER an afternoon-turned-evening spent exploring the house, playing with Mio, and eating our fill at dinner, it was finally time to go to bed.

"Lars, let's sleep together!" I exclaimed.

We were in a spacious living room equipped with a fireplace. A giant white body lay on the ground in front of the fire.

Papa, Ralf, and Will were chatting amicably off to the side, but I ignored them. I was only interested in Lars for the moment.

I ran up to Lars as fast as my short little legs would carry me and gave him a forceful hug.

Hello, hello, soft and fluffy fur! Oh, how I've missed you! Mmm, when I rub my

cheek against him like this, his muscles have the perfect amount of spring; it feels so nice!



“Neema, Lars is His Highness’ holy beast,” Ralf said.

I know that! Duh! But this and that are separate matters.

“I don’t care! I wanna sleep with Lars!” I protested.

“You have Nox and Gratia, so you don’t have to worry about getting lonely,” Ralf tried to reason with me.

“Fine, then I’ll sleep with Shinki.”

If Nox and Gratia are fine, then Shinki should be, too. He’s my friend, the same as them.

“Absolutely not,” Ralf shot it down at once.

“Grr!”

“In that case, would you like to sleep with me?” Will offered with an amused expression as I sulked.

“Will...” Ralf growled his name. “I’ll kill you; don’t think I won’t.”

A sudden frigid aura filled the air, emanating from Ralf.

Scary! But it’s surprising for Ralf to act like this toward Will. I wonder why he’s so angry...

“I want Lars!” I announced.

No interlopers, thanks. Offer respectfully declined.

“Heh, you got turned down flat.” Ralf’s satisfied grin was almost blindingly bright.

“Would you like to sleep with me, then?” Papa asked.

I’m bored of sleeping with you, Papa!

I shook my head, refusing. Papa looked sad, but I staunchly ignored it.

“I only want Lars!”

We went back and forth for nearly thirty minutes.

In the end, I got my way!

“...Fine. I’ll lend you Lars, but you have to give me Shinki in return,” Will said.

“How’s that?”

“Why Shinki?” I asked.

“I have some questions I’d like to ask him, and I’ll have him spend the night in my room as extra security. In the meantime, you can snuggle up with Lars as much as you like, Neema. Are the two of you okay with this arrangement?”

“Tch!”

I wasn’t sure if it was Papa or Ralf, but someone clicked their tongue in disappointment.

Are you really that against me sleeping with Lars?!

Ralf doesn’t seem like the type to click his tongue, so I’ll pretend it was Papa.

“...I suppose it can’t be helped if that is Your Highness’ wish,” Papa said. “Lars, please take good care of Neema.”

“Growl!”

I think he’s saying, “Leave it to me!” not “If I have to...” ...Right?!

“Yay! Lars, let’s go—my room is this way!”

“Good grief. No matter what you say, you’ve got a weak spot for Neema, too, Will,” Ralf said.

“I’m pretty sure the only person who can win against her is Lady Cerulia,” Will countered.

Apparently, they said that to each other as we left. I’d climbed up on Lars’ back and headed toward my room, so I barely heard them.



“**OVER** here, Lars!” I patted the left side of the bed, inviting him to lie there. Lars quietly leapt onto the bed, stretched, and curled up in a sleeping position. “Come on out, Gratia.”

I picked up Gratia, who’d been hiding in my hair, and put him on top of Lars’ head.

Gratia stood frozen where I’d placed him as if terrified of Lars.

I watched until he slowly began to move. Apparently, Gratia wasn't immune to the siren call of Lars' luxurious fur, either, because he soon found a stable spot and laid down to sleep with his legs stretched out.

Does he intend to pet him with his entire body?! And anyway, do spiders normally sleep like this?

I wouldn't be surprised if it was just Gratia; he was unique in many ways.

Nox perched on the back of a chair and immediately began to nod off.

You worked really hard today and deserve a good rest. Just be careful not to fall so deeply asleep that you slip and fall off the chair, okay? Oh, I think he just nodded. ...I guess that means he'll be careful?

I climbed onto the bed and used Lars' foreleg as a pillow.

Oh man, I can't get enough of this silkiness!

While I was at it, I curled my whole body against Lars.

Ahhh, he's so warm! This will chase away the chill in the night air for sure! Lars is so wonderful in so many ways. I get the feeling I'll have good dreams tonight.

Well, time to get some sleep—goodnight, my fluffy paradise!

4 - I'm Really Getting Sick of Riding in Carriages

I awoke peacefully, surrounded by fluffy warmth. It was an improvement from being awoken by Papa's agonized groaning.

Today, we would depart for Lenice. But first, we needed to see Papa off on his journey back to the royal city.

"Neema, be a good girl and mind your brother. And try not to get into any trouble, okay?" Papa leaned down to repeat what had become almost a mantra by this point as he stroked my hair affectionately.

Does he really have that little faith in my ability to behave myself?! Don't worry, Papa! As long as Shinki's with us, we can make it through just about anything!

"Yes, Father. You be careful too, okay?"

"Awww, Neema!"

Owww, Papa, you're squeezing too hard! What's with the sudden bear hug?!

He hugged me so tightly that I thought my ribs might crack for a moment.

It had taken us three hours to travel from Arsenta to Cass by carriage, but apparently, it would only take a little less than two hours to travel on horseback.

One of the royal guards would be accompanying Papa as a bodyguard and carrying a report back to the royal city. Originally, Papa had insisted he didn't need a bodyguard, but the highest-ranking royal guard present strongly resisted and refused to budge.

I'm sure the royal guards are well aware of how strong Papa is, but they can't just let the prime minister go off on his own without a bodyguard.

Papa had also protested that he couldn't take one of the bodyguards guarding Will. But in the end, it was Papa who gave in.

“Fine, assign me someone who can use wind magic then,” he said.

“Why wind?” I asked.

Will had told me that you had to be a high-level user of at least one of the magical attributes in order to join the royal guard.

“Wind magic works well with my fire magic because wind can make fire more powerful,” Papa explained.

Does he mean in scientific terms, like oxygen being crucial for combustion? It would be more interesting if it were because fire spirits and wind spirits tended to get along well.

“Besides, using wind magic, you can reduce wind resistance, which allows the horses to run without getting as tired,” he added.

I wonder if that’s what Sol was using. I didn’t feel the wind at all when he was carrying me.

“But it’ll be dangerous if you encounter a big group of enemies,” I said.

“It’ll be fine. I’m the strongest fire magic user there is. The only people who could beat me would be...” Papa paused for a moment, then said, “Cerulea or a holy beast, probably.”

...Mama really is the strongest magic user in the Kingdom of Gaché, huh? I guess I’ll have to pray that nothing happens.

One of Papa’s subordinates would stay here to “take care of the aftermath.” The subordinate was tasked with keeping an eye on things here until the person appointed to monitor the mayor arrived. The other subordinate would return to the royal city with Papa and the royal guardsman.

We watched until the riders faded from view, and then it was our turn to leave.

That said, the only people who’d come to see us off were Miss Belle and the subordinate who’d been left behind.

“See you later, Miss Belle!” I bid her farewell.

Me, Ralf, and Will rode in one carriage together with Shinki, who said he

preferred to be outside, sitting in the driver's seat. The knights and royal guards, who hadn't been able to get horses, rode together in the other carriage. Healran sat right in the middle of all of them. It probably smelled like a locker room, but he'd have to deal with it.

The Manoa Highway was well-built, so we could expect to arrive in Lenice before lunchtime.

Here we go!



...I'M bored.

I'm seriously bored to death of riding in a carriage.

The so-called Manoa Highway was a seemingly endless road through quiet mountain scenery. You'd expect tons of animals in a place like this, but we didn't see a single one, which only added to my boredom.

According to the unit leader, we were already in the area where kobold attacks had taken place, but there was no sight of any kobolds, either.

Ralf was bored, too, because he started questioning me about my plan. "Assuming that our family and the guild cover the start-up costs, can we expect to see a steady income from this venture in the future?"

"I think it will be possible, but not for a while," I said. We were essentially starting a business, so we couldn't anticipate turning a profit right away. "I think the money the adventurers spend in the local businesses will probably be the real money-earner, more than the entrance fees."

"The money the adventurers spend... Meaning you plan to make your real money from getting them to buy weapons and armor at the on-site shop?"

That's right! And not just items—we also need to earn bank from their lodging and food as well!

"That's why we have to build a really nice hotel! And we need to find a skilled cook as well," I said.

"Sounds like just the kind of plan a glutton like you would come up with."

Ralf! I'm not a glutton! The food in this world is just so tasty that I can't help myself!

“And besides, even if it doesn't work out, as long as the hotel is well-made, we can change directions and develop it into a tourist attraction,” I said.

I didn't even want to consider it not working out, but we needed to prepare for the worst, just in case. I was playing with the idea of creating a hot spring bathhouse using Shinki's elemental power. I figured he could use earth elemental power to search for a naturally occurring hot spring we could build from. And if not, there was probably some way to make it work using fire and water elemental powers.

“Interesting. You're saying that we'll be able to recoup our investment by rebranding the province as a tourist destination,” Ralf surmised.

“But the goblins will still be in trouble if it goes in that direction, so we need to do our bestest to find the perfect place for their new home,” I insisted.

The kobolds would also potentially be joining the plan, and if we could get the remaining orcs and ogres to join as well, all the better.

I wish I could find some slimes to join, too! We'd also need to get creative to make the plan functional long-term. But we need to find a location before anything else.

While half-jokingly building a hypothetical scenario that sounded like something straight out of an RPG with Ralf and Will, plausible ideas started to take form as well.

A young and attractive female beastperson tending the bar at the tavern, special events such as a swords-only tournament, and a hot spring bathhouse... All sound good to me!

“Come to think of it, do we have a codename for this plan yet?” Will asked.

...Oh, he has a point! Now that he mentions it, we've been calling it “the plan” this whole time.

“I wonder what we should call it...” I said.

“Hmm... What about ‘the plan to make friends with monsters’?” Ralf

suggested.

...That's so lame, Ralf!

Yes, I want to make friends with them, but the adventurers using the facility won't be making friends with them—they'll be enemies!

"Don't suggest such stupid names, Ralf," Will said drolly.

"Okay, Will, what do you suggest we call it?" Ralf shot back.

I like seeing them like this. No ranks or social niceties, just two best friends. Besides, I don't often see Ralf pouting because someone called his idea stupid!

"You're asking me? ...Hm, what about Project Shiana?"

"Shiana?" I repeated.

I'd never heard this word before.

The common language in the Kingdom of Gaché was Larshian. Larshian was spoken throughout the entire continent of Larshia, so it was the common language of our country as well.

In addition to Larshian, there was also the Sacred Language used by the Church of Divine Creation and in casting healing spells, as well as Elemental Runes, which were for written magic and magical studies.

Humans couldn't pronounce Elemental Runes, so by process of elimination, this word must be from the Sacred Language called "Celestian."

"It means strength. Courage," Will explained.

"In Celestian?" I asked.

"Yeah. I figured Celestian made sense since it seems the God of Creation has taken a liking to you," Will said.

Oh? Has he figured it out?

I tilted my head and furrowed my brows, indicating that I didn't understand, and Will explained.

"Lars, Sol, Shinki, and now Gratia... Perhaps you haven't noticed, but an unusual amount of power has gathered around you. It wouldn't be a leap to

assume that the God of Creation must have gathered them for your sake.”

Yup, you’ve hit the nail on the head. But it’s disappointing—I’m not the one who’s special, it’s everyone else.

Not just the people Will named, but my family and even Will himself—they’re all like secret weapons God placed in my arsenal. I’m just an ordinary little kid! Not that he’d believe me even if I said that...

“It’s not just me; God loves everyone equally!” I insisted. “I’m sure he loves you and Ralf, too.”

Technically, it was true. Being favored by God was a secret weapon all on its own.

“Well, possessing royal blood probably makes us special somehow,” Will agreed. “So I suppose he favors us a little, even if only for that reason.”

Pft, how can you be so naïve, Will?! You’ve got the ultimate fluffy companion, Lars, as your bonded partner! You’re probably one of the front-runners among all the humans with God’s favor!

Not that I’m going to point it out, though...

“Okay, let’s go with that—we’ll call it Project Shiana,” I decided.

“Lenice has come into view.”

Just as we decided on a name, Shinki called out this welcome announcement.

I hung out the carriage window to look, and a scene like something straight out of a fantasy movie greeted me.

At the end of a stone-paved road wide enough for two carriages to pass each other with room to spare was a wall so high and thick it looked like the fortifications around a castle and a huge, seemingly impregnable gate.

A wide grassy plain surrounded the city, but not far off lay an inviting forest that almost seemed to beckon, “*Come, take a walk!*” Unlike the Frost Needle Forest, it was maintained and not overgrown.

But I wonder where the kobolds are? I want to meet them as soon as possible!

When the carriage rolled up to the gate, it was firmly shut.

A smaller door was to the side of the large gate, upon which one of the royal guards knocked.

“Who goes there?!”

The door opened just a crack, and someone demanded we announce ourselves.

“We are members of the second brigade of the royal guard. His Highness Prince Wilhelt and the noble son and daughter of Duke Osphe have arrived. We request that you open the gate and let us pass!”

Once he’d proclaimed this, the royal guard held up his sword, which served as a form of identification for inspection. The royal crest was engraved on the sword’s sheath.

The royal knighthood used the national emblem. Both had a butterfly motif, but the royal crest incorporated a complicated, European-looking design of detailed lines, whereas the national emblem was simpler, like a Japanese family crest: an inked butterfly with the empty space carved out to remain white. Furthermore, the royal crest depicted a butterfly with its wings upraised, while the national emblem was of a butterfly with its wings spread.

I think the butterfly with its wings spread represents the continent of Larshia?

“Just a moment.”

We didn’t have to wait long before, with a screeching noise, the gate began to open.

I always wonder the same thing: Why do they design such massive doors to be opened by hand? Magic would be perfect for this, wouldn’t you think?! I’m going to ask Mama about it later.

Once the gate was open, the carriage proceeded through it.

The knights and guards seemed tense with nervous energy, and all of us were prepared for a fight. I tried to peek outside but was scolded fiercely by my brother, so I gave up.

A voice came from outside the carriage. “Your Highness Prince Wilhelt, the Royal Knighthood First Legion Parzeth District Commander, would like to pay his

respects.”

They claim they want to greet him, but what they mean is they want to see if he’s the real thing or not, right?

Royalty and nobles generally sent a servant ahead to announce their arrival, but we hadn’t done so because we were in a hurry. They were understandably suspicious.

“It’s fine. I’m sure they are desperate to protect this city.”

With Will’s response, the carriage door opened, and as one, the royal guards tightened their defenses.

The knights surrounding the carriage were all at arms.

They’re all lined up like dominoes!

“You stay here for now, okay, Neema?” Ralf instructed.

You’re leaving me behind again?!

Ralf stepped outside with Will.

The moment the two of them exited the carriage, a large commotion of clanking filled the air as every person in the courtyard fell to their knees.

“Your efforts to protect the city of Lenice are commendable. Be at ease,” Will ordered in a clear voice.

The noise of people moving came again.

“My sudden, unannounced visit to Lenice is merely to accompany my companion here, Ralfreed Osphe. My apologies for not sending word ahead in our haste to arrive.”

“It’s an honor and pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Dylan Noctis, and I’m Commander of the Parzeth District Office of the Royal Knighthood and a member of the First Legion. As I’m sure you have heard, kobolds have been appearing frequently in the vicinity of this city. For the sake of Your Highness’ safety and that of your honored companions, I must recommend that you leave the area with all haste...”

“We understand the situation, but we’ve come at my father’s request. I’m

tasked with inspecting areas experiencing monster-related casualties as the provincial lord's representative, so, unfortunately, we can't leave just yet," Ralf explained.

"An order from the provincial lord...? I see. Very well. Please follow me; I'll lead you to the proxy lord."

I could only hear their voices from inside the carriage, but the discussion had pretty much wrapped up.

"Marquis Parzeth is here as well?" Ralf asked.

"Yes, following the first attack, he's taken charge in place of the mayor."

In larger cities and the provincial capital, the mayor was always chosen from among the nobility. Settlements were labeled a village, town, city, or capital city depending on their size. In addition to the national capital in the royal city, there was also a capital city in each province.

The capital cities were usually controlled directly by the provincial lord.

"I see. In that case, we can hear the latest report directly from him," Will said.

"The regional headquarters commander arrived last night, so I believe he has news to report as well."

Uh-oh, the demoted commander? Is Will going to be okay? We haven't received the letter of authorization from Grandpa Gouche yet...

In any case, I'm sick of not being able to see what's going on out there! I wonder where we'll be spending the night tonight...

"Ralf, are you guys almost done talking yet?" I called out from inside the carriage, speaking quietly so that only Ralf and Will could hear me.

Recently, the elemental spirits had been considerately carrying my words on the wind, but I was worried they might one day accidentally convey my badmouthing of someone to the person in question. When I was with my sister, complaints about Will poured from my lips like rain.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's go meet with Marquis Parzeth now," Ralf replied indulgently.

After bidding farewell to the district commander, Ralf and Will climbed back into the carriage, and we set off again. Our destination was a large manor atop a hill overlooking the city.

It's all the same to me, but aristocrats and those in positions of power sure love building their houses on high ground, huh?

A pair of young knights were on guard duty at the manor's gate. Will narrowed his eyes at the sight.

"What is it, Will?" I asked.

"It's nothing; I was just wondering what they're doing here."

"It can't be on Marquis Parzeth's order..." Ralf said.

Why do I get the feeling that Ralf and Will are so in tune with one another that they can practically communicate telepathically?

They're saying the knighthood shouldn't be assigned to guard a private residence, right? And since Marquis Parzeth isn't the type to give such an order, it must've come from this regional commander that we keep hearing about? Why is that a problem, though?

And do Ralf and Will know Marquis Parzeth personally?

"I don't get it..." I mumbled.

"The royal knighthood exists to protect the people. Except in extenuating circumstances, that doesn't include nobles. Do you know why?"

Our family, among the highest ranks of the aristocracy, followed the belief that "the aristocracy were entrusted with the power and authority of our status in order to protect those below us."

The first king proclaimed that. It was taken as a creed not only for the five noble houses descended from the founding heroes but all of the aristocrats who'd pledged loyalty to the kingdom.

Well, it seems like more aristocrats than not have forgotten the meaning behind these words these days, though.

In short, no aristocrat worth their salt would prioritize their own safety over

their people.

“Because it’s their duty to protect the people?” I replied.

“That’s right,” Will nodded. “And yet the knights are protecting an aristocrat’s manor. Which means...?”

“Umm, assuming it wasn’t Marquis Parzeth, then the regional commander ordered it, which would mean the commander is breaking the rules?” I guessed.

“That about covers it.”

No matter what Will said, I still thought it was possible Marquis Parzeth was just trying to protect himself.

“Have you met Marquis Parzeth before?”

Both of them answered my question in the affirmative.

According to Will, Marquis Parzeth was a deeply loyal man who never failed to greet him at important court functions. When it came to the territory he ruled, he would go head-to-head with the various department heads at the palace if necessary.

But all the aristocrats come up to greet him at court functions, don’t they? “How do you do?” and all that...

“Marquis Parzeth is just one of those genuinely *good* people. Even when Father makes troublesome requests of him, Marquis Parzeth never complains and delivers results exceeding expectations every time,” Ralf added.

Hmm, I don’t really get it, but it seems like they both consider him a trustworthy person?

“But that said, it would be foolish to jump to conclusions either way. There might be a good reason, and even if not, we can’t do anything about the regional commander until Father gets back to us,” Ralf said.

Oh, that’s right. Papa promised to send us a letter of authorization from Grandpa Gouche and all the information he could gather about the regional commander.

Since the royal guards haven’t said anything, it must not have arrived yet.

Small-scale transportation magic was fairly common. Because the magic circle was small, you couldn't send anything more than a foot long, but it didn't require much magic, and you could carry it around with you.

A creature similar to a silkworm had the ability to weave elemental power into its cocoon. It didn't have any magic itself, but to elevate its likelihood of survival within the cocoon, it unconsciously drew in elemental power from the surrounding environment and wove it into the cocoon.

Humans would use these cocoons to create a thread from which they wove magic circle tapestries. This method was also adapted for other types of written spells. Apparently, Mama first put it into practical use. At the age of ten, no less.

Thankfully, she did, or we couldn't get our mail nearly as quickly!

The postal guild had been established as a result.

In addition to the postal guild, each unit of the royal guard and royal knighthood was issued one of the magic circle tapestries as well.

It was simple to use.

All you had to do was place the item you wanted to send on top of the tapestry and let magic flow into it. It didn't matter what type of magic you used; the tapestry would automatically convert it to pure, non-attributed magic. Each tapestry had its own "address;" you simply had to chant the address of the tapestry you wanted to send your item to, and it would teleport there immediately.

Although the practice was relatively normalized, it still hadn't pervaded the homes of the lower class, most likely due to the fact that the magic circle tapestries were costly.

However, the postal guild offered their services at a price that made sending mail accessible to the average person, and the guild even delivered posts directly to the recipient's home.

That part, at least, isn't terribly different from the Japanese postal service!

Even if you didn't know the recipient's address, if you hired the postal guild to deliver something, they would move heaven and earth to make sure it made it.

For this reason, the postal guild was famous for being full of strong people.

According to rumors, they even delivered them to the elven lands and the continent of Wazhite, where the demons lived. They'd sure have to be strong to accomplish this.

When we reached the entryway, Marquis Parzeth and a person I assumed was the regional commander greeted us.

"Your Highness Prince Wilhelt, Lord Ralfreed, thank you for honoring us with your presence."

"Thank you for coming out to meet us. You may rise," Will said to the two men who were paying homage before him.

What, are they just gonna ignore me completely?!

"Marquis Parzeth, you look pale," Ralf said. "Have you been sleeping properly?"

"Oh, how embarrassing... The kobolds have been getting more active lately, and I..."

"Lord Parzeth, perhaps we should show His Highness and his companions to the guest parlor and continue our conversation there?"

Marquis Parzeth reminded me of an honor roll student. Or maybe a student body president.

The regional commander was more like...a raccoon? He had a reasonably attractive face, but I got the feeling he could be hard to deal with.

"Of course, forgive me. This way, if you please."

Parzeth ushered us into a guest parlor that was nothing short of decadent.

An assortment of random knick-knacks were placed willy-nilly all over the place, and expensive-looking but not particularly beautiful paintings covered every inch of the walls. The knick-knacks were all gold and silver, and gold and silver embellished the furniture at every opportunity.

I was used to the tastefully understated decor in our home, so this was like an assault on my senses.

Our home incorporated a moss green theme throughout in accordance with Mama's taste, and the chandelier was lit with warm orange lights, creating a relaxing atmosphere.

Only a tapestry decorated our guest parlor that had been a family heirloom inherited from Mama's side of the family. It depicted the creation of Asdyllon. God was there, with a dubious air of solemn divinity about him, as was the Goddess Cresiolle, embracing the world lovingly.

Elves created it, an elusive species beloved by the elemental spirits, and I'd heard that the Church of Divine Creation had been incredibly persistent in attempting to buy it.

The furniture in our home was all custom-made out of high-quality materials, but engravings decorated it rather than gold and silver embellishments.

According to Mama, as a "fellow artist," she was drawn to pieces the creator had poured their heart and soul into while making them. I'd wanted to point out that Mama's job made her more of a technician than an artist, but I wisely kept this observation to myself.

This guest parlor, however, was enough to make me dizzy. Marquis Parzeth seemed uneasy as well.

That makes sense; this is the mayor's house, not his.

"So, what do you plan to do about the kobolds?" Will asked.

While I'd been distracted by the décor, the others had already begun the discussion.

"We can't handle this issue with only the knighthood's forces, so we've sent requests to the adventurers' guild and the mercenaries' guild for additional troops and are assembling a punitive force."

"Meaning you plan to end this in one fell swoop?"

"Exactly. The longer we let this continue, the more casualties there will be. The cost of living is already skyrocketing here in the Osphe Province. Before long, it will spread to the royal city as well..."

The Osphe Province was poor compared to the other provinces. Without any

primary industry, disasters like these hit especially hard.

Well, even if we had a primary industry, if it were affected, the people would be in even more dire straits...

“How long until you’re ready?”

“Once Red Hlaada arrives, that will be everyone.”

Huh? Hlaada is the name of an insect similar to a dragonfly, isn’t it? “Red Rank Dragonfly” doesn’t sound impressive, but if everyone in their party is red rank, they must be pretty strong.

All guilds adopted the practice of attaching a person’s rank to their name when introducing themselves.

For example, let’s pretend I was a white rank member of the adventurers’ guild. I would introduce myself as Adventurer Nefertima the White.

It would be rather unpleasant if I got to the highest rank and had to call myself “Nefertima the Black,” though. It sounds like the name of some kind of villain. Well, I suppose it’s not something I have to worry about since there’s no way I’ll ever attain black rank anyway.

“Hlaada, huh... I’ve heard of them,” Will said. “Although, I think they were still Blue Hlaada back then.”

Whoa! That means their party is famous enough that even the crown prince has heard of them! But is that a good thing? If they’re as strong as they seem, they might wipe the kobolds out entirely...

I need to make contact with them before that party arrives! But how? No one’s figured out the kobolds’ location, and it would be dangerous for me to go out looking by myself...

“Since it appears we have some time, it wouldn’t be a problem for us to look around the city, would it?” Ralf asked.

Oh, that’s it!

“Brother, we should also inspect the area outside the city so we can report the situation to Father properly!” I chimed in.

Even if Papa wasn't here, we could use him and the inspection to our advantage. And if we happened to run into some kobolds while inspecting the area, all the better!

"But it's dangerous outside the city walls."

"It should be fine if we quickly look around right outside. Elite members of the royal guard and the knighthood are accompanying us, as well as the holy beast, Lars," Will said.

And if that's not enough, Ralf and Will are high-level magic users, and we have Shinki and Sol, too.

Will's forceful insistence may have had something to do with it, but it looked like we'd be allowed to go outside. But first, since everyone was starving, we were going to have lunch before setting out.

Since this was still an emergency situation, lunch consisted of simple palases.

Prosciutto-like meat and a crisp, leafy vegetable that reminded me of lettuce filled them. They may have been simple, but they were far from plain!

The rich and intensely salty prosciutto and *sauda* sauce provided a punch of flavor, offset perfectly by the freshness of the greens and the slight sweetness of the bread. As you ate it, each of the flavors stood out individually but also balanced one another, resulting in a symphony of flavor.

The *sauda* sauce had a hint of sourness, and the seeds were pleasantly spicy but not overwhelming. It was a common seasoning in the Kingdom of Gaché, similar to soy sauce and miso in Japanese cooking.

The word "delicious!" wasn't strong enough to express how good it was!

Once our bellies were full, I wanted nothing more than to take a nap, but instead, we got back in the carriages and headed toward the city center.

We caught sight of an unusual number of seedy-looking people throughout the city, and the number of shops currently open for business was sparse. As the focal point for trade along the highway, the city was probably incredibly lively under normal circumstances, but it reeked of abandonment right now.

"I guess this area is faring better because the knights are patrolling it?" Ralf

said.

“Yeah, probably. What we need to see are the slums,” Will responded.

Even in a “peaceful” country like the Kingdom of Gaché, there was a stark contrast between the lives of citizens of different classes.

The slums in the royal city were relatively safe, but the same couldn’t be said of the provinces.

We parked the carriages on one of the main streets and proceeded on foot down a narrow alleyway. Compared to the city center, the houses here were huts made of mud-based cement and shoddily cobbled-together wooden shacks.

These buildings had obviously been made not by magic users specializing in engineering and architecture but by amateurs replicating what they saw as best they could.

A few children playing around the communal garbage area in the alley stopped to gawk at us.

“The children don’t appear to be well-nourished,” Will observed.

“Not at all. At the very least, we should distribute emergency rations,” Ralf said.

Unlike the children in the royal city, these children were little more than skin and bones. If things continued like this, they were in serious danger of dying from nutritional deficiency.

Prices had skyrocketed since the merchant caravans were avoiding this area due to raids. Marquis Parzeth had been sending supplies, but it looked like the people in power in this city had just been using them to get rich.

Ralf vowed that he’d have this matter looked into immediately.

“Yelp!”

An animal crying out in distress came from further down the alley.

“Ralf!” I shouted, then set off running in that direction.

Reacting quickly, several knights also ran and overtook me in moments.

Hey! Don't leave me behind!

"Shinki!"

As soon as I called his name, Shinki instinctively understood what I wanted. He picked me up and dashed toward the commotion.

"What do you kids think you're doing?!"

When we caught up to the knights, they were surrounding a group of children.

"It's got nothin' to do with ye—mind yer own business!" the oldest-looking boy and apparent leader of the group barked at the knights.

He can't be more than ten years old...

He looked slightly better nourished than the other children.

An animal crouched on the ground behind this boy.

Did we happen upon the scene of a fight?

"What did you do to that poor creature?!" I shouted.

I got Shinki to put me down and stepped out in front of the knights.

The boy sneered even harder—if such a thing were possible—at me. It was obvious from a glance that I was a child of the aristocracy.

How rude!

"Pa says the enemy are a bunch o' dogs! What's wrong wit takin' down an enemy, eh?!"

Umm, I think by "dogs," he's referring to the kobolds, not regular old dogs!

"Does that little pup really look like an enemy to you?" I asked. "And even if he *were* an enemy, you should be ashamed of yourselves for attacking a defenseless creature that's not even fighting back!"

"Shut yer mouth, pip-squeak!"

As if he'd seen red, the boy raised his fist and lunged toward me.

The boy's fist swiftly approached, but I didn't budge.

I didn't have to—I had Shinki and the knights watching my back.

One of the knights immediately grabbed the boy by the arm.

I hadn't thought it possible, but this punk was even more despicable than I'd thought. What kind of man would he become if he thought it was acceptable to go around striking women and hurting animals?

The way he struggled and shrieked, "Lemme go!" reminded me of the leader of a gang of delinquents that had roamed the neighborhood I'd grown up in my past life.

"You must not turn immediately to violence," I said. "Your strength is a gift to protect those weaker than yourself."

Although their leader had been captured, the other children merely stood around, watching warily. Were they not doing anything because they feared anything they did might make the situation worse? Or was it simply that they'd already given up?

However, several children looked genuinely concerned about their leader's wellbeing.

"We're not going to punish you. Just give us that poor creature."

Once I said this, the children surrounding "that poor creature" stepped back.

Watching the children warily out of the corner of my eye, I scooped up the cowering animal. He was in a worse state than I'd imagined. I was speechless.

I need to get Ralf to use his healing magic on this poor little guy!

"What is it that you want to protect?" I asked the boy. "Isn't it those children behind you? The strong tyrannizing the weak doesn't protect anyone."

Even if they were just children, they should be able to understand that violence does not equate to strength.

The victim was an animal this time, but what if it had been another child? Where I came from, such violence would be called bullying. It was all the more important in the world of children, where adults couldn't easily penetrate, that those in a position to protect others understand this. Because this world wasn't nearly as safe as the world I came from.

In response, the boy ground his teeth hatefully. "A pampered rich brat like ye 'as no right to talk to us as if ye understand anythin'!"

I guess he's rebellious and doesn't know when to quit while he's ahead? I have to give him points for having guts, at least.

"Strength isn't just about power," I said. "If you stay on the right path, falling prey to neither cowardice nor subservience, and emulate even one facet of the strength these knights can boast, then you may grow into a strong man who can protect what's precious to you."

"I'm Belgar, son of Adventurer Guy Crius the Red! I'm gonna become strong like me pa. Then I'll be able to protect e'ryone, just ye wait!"

"I'll remember you, Belgar Crius. My name is Nefertima Osphe. When you believe you've become strong, come find me and let me see for myself."

It'd be interesting if he became an adventurer and we met again via Project Shiana. But enough about that; we need to heal this poor little guy!

After instructing the knights to release the boy, I hurried to my brother. Ralf and the others had been waiting a short distance away, watching everything unfold.

"Ralf, please heal him!"

The tiny dog in my arms struggled to draw each breath. Based on his size, he was just a puppy.

"...He's in bad shape. Even his organs are damaged."

Ralf gathered magic into his hands, then whispered a prayer to the Goddess Cresiolle. Normally, he would just use an incantation, but praying to the Goddess first would make the spell more powerful.

It looks like the puppy's going to make it. Thank goodness.

...Come to think of it, where is his mother?

"Where's this puppy's mother?" I asked.

The puppy whined pitiably, clearly still terrified.

"I'm so sorry that those humans did such a horrible thing to you. Do you know

where your mother is?”

The puppy yipped and turned its gaze longingly toward the forest on the other side of the city walls.

“...She’s in the forest outside the city?” I guessed.

How on earth did he get in here?!

“Miss, you don’t seem to have noticed, but this is a baby kobold,” Shinki informed me.

“Huuuuh?!”

We all said that in harmony just now, didn’t we? It was so perfectly harmonized that I’d be impressed if I wasn’t already numb with shock!

I, Will, and even Ralf had reacted in a manner unfitting for high-ranking members of the nobility.

Shinki’s revelation had been *that* earth-shatteringly monumental.

He looks just like a Shiba Inu...

The puppy had bright, chestnut-brown and white fur and a pert little up-turned tail. His ears were a bit droopy, maybe because he was still a baby.

“...What should we do, Ralf?” I asked.

“**Sigh**... Sometimes I don’t know if you were born under a lucky star or if God himself chose you, Neema...”

You’re right about that. There’s no doubt about it; he’s messing with me again. I bet he’s sitting up there having a grand old time, smirking while watching this all unfold. I’ll have the elemental spirits deliver my grievances to him later, mark my words!

“If we try to return him to his parents, the kobolds will likely attack us the moment we make contact.”

“Even if he’s with us?” I asked.

“They’ll probably misunderstand and assume we kidnapped him.”

Hmmm. Now we’re in a bind. I’d like to avoid fighting if possible, but...

As if he'd picked up on the uneasy tension in the air, the puppy—who was *not* a puppy but a baby kobold—let out a sad-sounding keen.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’ll find some way to get you back to your mom.”

I stroked the baby kobold’s head, trying to soothe him. Even his fur was glossier than it had been before. Ralf’s healing magic was incredible!

“If Lars goes with us, I bet the kobolds will hesitate to attack,” I said.

Even monsters respected holy beasts.

God also created monsters. So they viewed the holy beasts, vessels for God’s power, with reverence and awe. Shinki had told me it was engraved into their deepest instincts.

Well, Shinki didn’t act any differently when he met Sol or when he met Lars. But maybe he’s an exception since he also possesses special abilities.

“That might work... What do you think, Lars?” Will asked.

“Growl.”

“...You really have a soft spot for Neema, don’t you?” Will chuckled.

Are you gonna translate that, or are you planning to leave me hanging here?!

“What did Lars say?” I asked.

“He said that it goes without saying that he’ll grant the request of a beloved child.”

“I love you too, Lars!”

Lars’ words moved me so much that I threw myself at him, hugging him with all the power in my weak little arms.

A wave of gratitude struck me for the fact that I could do what I wanted and felt I needed to do, thanks to the kindness of the people around me.

I need to thank them by making Project Shiana a success no matter what! And the first step is the kobolds.

Full of determination, I hurried Ralf and the others back into the carriages.

I wrapped a blanket around the baby kobold to hide him. Even if someone

saw him, I doubted anyone would assume him to be anything other than an ordinary dog, but better safe than sorry, right?

All right! Everyone's in their positions, so let's go. To the forest!

5 - Around the Same Time, Back at the Osphe Household... (POV: Karnadia Osphe)

“AND you just left Neema there?!”

“Ralf is with her, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

If the speaker of these flippant words had been anyone other than my own father, I would’ve lobbed a spell at them.

“Father, you remember Neema is only five years old, right? Do you truly understand how dangerous it is to let her leave the confines of the royal city?”

“I made the decision knowing the danger full well. Neema has the fire dragon and Lars to protect her. Not only that, but she’s picked up a few more companions in addition to Nox, so I’m sure nothing will happen that they can’t handle.”

Oh goodness, what kinds of strays did Neema pick up this time? I love my sister, but why does she have to be such a mischievous little tomboy who’s always getting into trouble?!

The Osphe family—descended from one of the founding heroes—held the rank of duke, had inherited royal blood, and served as prime minister generation after generation.

Although our great-grandfather had been the then king’s younger brother, marrying our great-grandmother had elevated his rank even more among the other dukes. Their story was so famous that it had been the inspiration for theater performances. My grandmother took me to see one once, long ago.

Neema hadn’t been born yet, and my grandmother was still healthy. I was devastated when she passed; it was like a dark cloud had settled over the entire household. Shortly after, Mother learned she was pregnant, and we all agreed that this child was a gift from Grandmother.

I’d looked forward to her birth with barely contained excitement, and I

decided even before she was born that I would shower her with love.

When Nefertima was born, her eyes were black, and from what I was told, her facial features resembled our great-grandparents more than our parents.

Father sometimes lamented that Neema got her personality from our great-grandfather, too, so maybe she just had a higher concentration of royal blood than the rest of us.

But if they think that means I'll stand by and let them marry Neema off to that horrid prince, they've got another thing coming! I want Neema to find someone she loves and who loves her in return.

I know in this world, where politically arranged marriages are the default, being a duke's daughter will make this difficult. But it's my duty as her older sister to protect Neema!

"I wonder what kind of trouble she's getting herself into this time..." I sighed.

"By 'trouble,' I assume you're referring to the way she always seems to get involved in other people's business?"

Obviously.

Neema's innocent and happy-go-lucky actions were always bringing about unexpected effects. Her popularity among the dragon knights and beast knights, who were our country's pride and joy, was the talk of high society.

Come to think of it, I'd recently heard that, at some point, even the merchants' guild had benefited from Neema's antics. I bet Mother had something to do with it. Her ability to win people's hearts was seriously frightening.

"It's Neema, after all. Without Mother there to keep her on a tight leash, I can picture her running wild even more than she does here in the royal city," I said.

Unfortunately, I can't be with her. I would be infinitely more useful to Neema than that black-hearted prince.

"...Hmm. I'm going to be very busy for a while, so I'd be really grateful if you and Cerulia could help out," Father said.

Well, this is certainly rare! It's not unusual for him to request Mother's help,

but he seldom includes me... Could the situation be more dire than I realized?

Once Mother joined us, Father explained the current state of the province, his concerns, and Neema's plan.

Mother and I were dumbfounded, taking it all in.

An unprecedented number of monsters had appeared in the Osphe Province. That shocked me, and learning that it was suspected to be due to intentional human interference frightened me.

Monsters, too, were a creation of the God of Creation and had a vital role in the ecosystem of our world.

This was a teaching from a group known as the Ancient Divine Creation Faction. They were mostly elementalists, and although they were human, it was said that they could sense the God of Creation close to them. Because of this, the present Supremacist Faction was determined to suppress them at all costs.

Due to my experiences with Neema, I related more to the teachings of the Ancient Divine Creation Faction. They resonated more with me.

What would happen if humans used the creatures created by the God of Creation for their self-serving purposes...? Just imagining it was terrifying, but a part of me also wanted to shout, "You'll get what's coming to you; just wait!"

But Neema was a kind-hearted child. That was why she couldn't abandon any creature she saw in trouble, even if they were a monster.

"Karna, you're making the same face Dayle always makes when he's thinking something evil. It's good to be honest with yourself, but you mustn't let your thoughts show on your face."

Oh, silly me! I got so caught up in my thoughts that I lost control of my expression.

"My apologies, Mother."

But still, do I resemble Father that much? That's a little disappointing.

"So Neema wants to create a monster ranch in the Osphe Province?" Mother asked.

“I’m not sure ‘ranch’ is quite the right word, but...”

“But it’s not wrong, is it? You will care for and protect the livestock, increase their numbers, and train the ranch hands, right?”

Leave it to Mother... Only she would have the guts to compare adventurers to ranch hands. According to Mother, the monsters aren’t all that different from the other beloved pets Neema’s always collecting...

“When you put it that way, I suppose you’re right.”

And now Father’s getting in on it. If you say that in front of Neema, she’ll hate your guts, you know?

“Very well, I will take on the task of gathering staff for the ranch. I’ll approach each guild with the idea and recruit any promising individuals I encounter along the way,” Mother declared.

There was the staff’s compatibility with Neema to consider, but I figured Mother would be up to the task, well-connected as she was.

In that case, what should I do? I wish I could speak to Neema directly and ask her how she wants things to be. If I understood her vision, I could gather the necessary materials and prepare.

“Father, I’d like to meet with Neema.”

“I wish I could grant your request, but with His Highness there, the guards are already at capacity.”

That black-hearted prince really is a thorn in my side!

“Mother, is there any other way?”

“Hmm. Well, if you don’t mind waiting two days, there *is* one way...”

“I’ll take it.”

I didn’t care what it took; I’d do whatever I had to if it meant I could see Neema.

“Hey now! Who did you inherit such recklessness from, eh?”

Father moaned this while clutching his head, but everyone agreed he was the one I most closely resembled. I’d heard stories from Mother and Grandmother

of all the trouble he'd gotten into when he was younger, after all.

"Karna is the spitting image of you, Dayle," Mother said.

"That makes me worry more that she'll do something reckless and end up in danger."

I have a firm understanding of my own abilities, you know!

Even though I know how to fight using my magic, I don't have any practical combat experience, so I can't rely on it too much. And if I get too close to soldiers, they might mistake me for an enemy and attack.

One day, I'd like to join the adventurers' guild and become an adventurer. I wonder if Mother will allow it?

"I'm well aware that with my lack of practical fighting experience, I won't be much use in battle," I said.

"Well, for the sake of their futures, I *would* like Ralf and Karna to gain some experience suppressing monsters..." Father allowed.

"Right. There may be situations where we find ourselves in danger and need to protect ourselves."

In short, it was likely that we'd find ourselves targeted by the enemy due to our father's actions. That sounded kind of fun to me, honestly.

"Cerulia, am I correct in assuming the method you have in mind is to hire a few adventurers to serve as Karna's bodyguards?" Father asked.

"Yes. It's perfect timing; I just received a letter from Phillip the other day. They'll arrive in the royal city tomorrow and would like to meet since it's been so long."

Oh! Uncle Phillip's coming here?! I don't think we've seen him since Neema was born.

Uncle Phillip was an adventurer who worked primarily in the Kingdom of Gaché and was a good friend of Father's.

When Father was young, he worked as an adventurer to gain practical fighting experience, and Uncle Phillip was his close associate at the time. Apparently,

the life of an adventurer had suited Uncle Phillip so well that, in a nearly unprecedented move, he'd petitioned the king to allow him to renounce his status as an aristocrat so he could become an adventurer full-time.

It had paid off in the form of honing his skills because Uncle Phillip had attained purple rank in the adventurers' guild, an honor few managed in their lifetime.

"Uncle Phillip and his party will act as my bodyguards?" I asked.

"They were saying that they want to meet Neema, and if we're lucky, they'll agree to help her with her mission as well," Mother said.

Leave it to Mother to use anything she can to get ahead; even Father's old friendships aren't safe from her ambition. But, if I remember correctly, wasn't Uncle Phillip one of the men who proposed to Mother before she and Father were married?

"Phillip will be the perfect person to entrust with teaching Ralf and Karna. Neema will probably have him wrapped around her little finger before long, though."

Father was grinning, probably imagining Uncle Phillip being dragged into Neema's antics. His expression reminded me of a child watching a prank he'd planned turn out exactly as anticipated.

"For now, Karna, please prepare for the journey," Mother said. "I'll assign Marjace to escort you to the market, so please purchase what you'll need. Especially when it comes to your weapons, it will be pointless if you don't select them yourself."

Mother was right about that. Choosing my own weapon would give me more confidence about handling anything that might come my way, so I had no objections.

"Yes, Mother. But will the manor be all right without Marjace?"

"It will be fine. This is a good chance for Paul and Josh to get a taste of the responsibilities they'll have as fully-fledged butlers."

Their daily tasks usually consisted of babysitting and running errands for

Mother and Father's personal butlers. They could use some experience honing their butler-ly skills. This was especially true for Paul. As Marjace's son, he was the primary candidate for the role of steward once his father retired. He'd need to work hard to fill those shoes.

So, my wish was unexpectedly granted.

I just needed to get everything ready before Uncle Phillip and his party arrived.

I began by summoning Marjace and having him prepare the carriage. I explained the situation while he worked.

"Is that so? Very well. Today, let us focus on weapons, armor, and magical items. Those are items you must select personally, Lady Karna. I will speak with Sir Phillip and prepare the other necessary supplies before your departure."

That's right. I don't want to unnecessarily burden Uncle Phillip and his party, so we should ask him first what exactly I'll need and how much to get.

"Thank you, Marjace. I will leave it in your capable hands."

The next issue was whether to bring a maid with me.

I could take care of my basic needs by myself, but at some point, there might be a situation where I needed to present myself as a noble lady. I would need a lady's maid if that happened.

But if I dragged her along on an adventure, she'd need the appropriate skills...

"What do you think I should do, Marjace?" I asked.

"If I may be so bold, I suggest you choose Shell to accompany you."

Shell wasn't a lady's maid. *She's one of the lower-ranked maids in our household, if I remember correctly.*

"May I ask why?"

"Certainly. Shell possesses the abilities and experience of a blue rank adventurer. She has skills useful for camping out, and the housekeeper who oversees all of the maids has extensively praised her mastery of etiquette. She hasn't had the opportunity to serve you in the past, but I believe she's the ideal

candidate for this situation.”

Is there anything our servants can't do?!

“Very well, I will ask Shell to accompany us,” I agreed. “Please prepare the things she'll need as well.”

“Certainly, my lady.”

Marjace and I went into town to buy the things I'd need for the journey, and it was more fun than I'd expected. While we were at the armory shop looking at magical items, I got curious about how the magic worked and asked the shop staff a bunch of questions. I might've gotten a bit carried away with my unladylike level of enthusiasm.

I'm just so excited to leave the confines of the royal city that I can't maintain my composure! Of course, I'm a little nervous since neither of my parents will be there, but I'll just have to deal with it in order to see Neema!



“DAYLE! How've you been, my friend?!”

Uncle Phillip swept into the manor with the force of a hurricane.

The exasperated-looking members of his adventurer party filed in after him.

If memory serves, the swordsman in front is Shou, the spearman is Erid, the man in the back is a high-level magic user specializing in fire and earth magic named Colenan, and the last member is a healer named Eligeena.

They all look exactly the same as the last time I saw them. It's almost suspicious how similar they all look, considering how many years it's been since we last met.

“Phillip! Glad to see some monster hasn't made you its dinner yet!” Father said in a booming voice.

I know they're happy to see each other, but two middle-aged men passionately embracing looks stuffy, not heartwarming!

“Cerulia said in her letter that you want us to teach Ralf and Karna?”

“Yeah, I'll explain the situation to all of you now.”

We all moved into the guest parlor, where Father explained the situation. When he got to asking them to guard and train me, the entire group readily agreed.

That's a relief!

"If I turned you down now, I get the feeling that not only would you not let me meet Nefertima, but you'd also cut me off for life!" Uncle Phillip laughed.

Yeah, Mother probably would; she has a merciless streak.

"But is it really okay? Once we leave the royal city, I can't guarantee your safety, Karna. All the more so if we head into monster-infested lands. And I won't go easy on you in battle training..."

I'd never seen Uncle Phillip look so serious. I supposed this reflected how seriously he was taking this.

"That's what I want," I said. "In order to stand with Neema, I need to become stronger."

"...My impression of sweet little Nefertima is falling apart bit by bit."

I was sure Uncle Phillip mumbled something under his breath, but I pretended I hadn't heard anything.

After all, once he meets Neema, he'll be captivated by her cuteness!

"Uncle Phillip, Mr. Shou, Mr. Erid, Mr. Colenan, and Miss Eligeena, I'm sure I'll only slow you down, but I promise to do my best, so please teach me all you can." I bowed respectfully to the group, which spooked everyone but Uncle Phillip.

"You don't need to humble yourself before us! Think of us as friends," Shou protested bashfully.

"You were only a tiny thing the last time we met, yet you still remember our names. That makes me so happy! I'm sure we'll get along just fine." Erid smiled sheepishly.

"From one magic user to another, feel free to ask me any time there's something you don't understand," Colenan kindly offered. I'd heard he graduated from the Royal Academy, so I was sure he'd prove to be a wealth of

knowledge.

“Finally, another girl in the group!” Eligeena was the youngest member of the party. She was clearly favored by the Goddess Cresiolle because just being around her was soothing.

We all ate dinner together, and the party regaled us with tales of their adventures.

From time to time, I caught Father looking jealous as he listened.

He really wanted to continue adventuring, didn't he? But, you know, Father... Raising Neema is its own adventure, so you have plenty of fun to look forward to.

We'd be setting out early the next morning, so we turned in early.

My first adventure... I'm excited but also a little nervous. Goodness, I'm just a walking contradiction, aren't I?!

But this is all for Neema's sake. I'll do my best!

6 - We've Got a Long Way to Go

THE first one to notice something was off was Healran.

"The time signals aren't sounding."

"...Now that you mention it, I haven't heard them sound once since we entered Lenice."

Apparently, Will and Ralf had noticed as well.

The knights examined their watches.

"It's only just reached light-water, so it should've sounded..."

At times like this, I was grateful for how convenient things were on Earth.

From the calendar to units of measurement, things were fairly standardized on Earth. Of course, there were some countries that used yards, pounds, and Fahrenheit, which were a little confusing to us Japanese. On the other hand, some units of measure were unique to Japan, so I couldn't say it was *completely* standardized, but still.

Here in Larshia, on the other hand, they used the elements to express time. They did have the words "morning," "noon," "evening," and "night," of course, but the time from when the sun rose until it set was called "light," and from the time the sun set until it rose again was called "dark." Similar to AM and PM.

They divided each period into four even chunks, naming the "hours" fire, wind, water, and earth. Assuming 24 hours were in a day here, the same as on Earth, a 3-hour period would be called light-fire. This much was the same in every country on the continent of Larshia.

But when it came to expressing the time in smaller increments within these 3-hour periods, it differed depending on the country.

In the Kingdom of Gaché, we divided the 3-hour period into six even chunks, named after the six auspicious colors: white, red, green, blue, yellow, and black. Each color represented a 30-minute period.

Each time the element changed from fire to wind, wind to water, water to

earth, or earth to fire, a time tone powered by magic would sound.

In the daytime, colored flares were set off, and at night, the royal palace's illumination would change color to show the time. Of course, this was only in the royal city. Other places relied entirely on colored flares or used bells.

There were, naturally, people in charge of keeping time: time mages. They were part of the Magical Research Center's Astrological Department.

When I first heard this, I couldn't help but associate them with Japanese onmyouji.

I wondered about one thing, though—whether or not this world was round. In the images of the Goddess Cresielle holding the world in her hands, it was always depicted as an orb, and there were stars in the night sky, so this world also had outer space.

In that case, it would make sense for this world to have an equator with northern and southern hemispheres, just like Earth. Assuming these all existed, the length of daylight should differ depending on the location and the season, but I'd never heard anyone mention it before and hadn't experienced it myself.

When I got a chance, I'd ask the folks from the Astronomical Department. But first, I'd ask Uncle Gene about other countries and continents as a preliminary investigation. If this planet orbited in a perfect circle and its axis was vertical, then maybe the length of daylight wouldn't change?

Oh, and the clocks were different, too. They were round, just like Earth clocks, but had one hand on the left indicating the element and another on the right indicating the color. As such, the clock could only show half a day at a time, but it was designed so that once it got to the end, it would automatically reset to the beginning.

Expensive clocks always had incredibly elaborate detailing on the clock face.

Mama's pocket watch, for example, had elemental spirits playing with each element on the left, and the right side depicted delicate blooming flowers in each color.

One more piece of interesting but ultimately unimportant information while I'm at it...

The person who invented the clock was Old Man Salzar's mentor, Mama's great-grandfather. That would make him my great-great-grandfather. I bet Mama inherited her interest in research from him.

Back to the topic, though: it was strange for the time tone not to sound because it was mandated by law. In even the smallest villages, the mayor would be issued a clock by the government and would use it to ring a bell to announce the time. Of course, this wouldn't be a priority during an emergency, but Lenice wasn't in such an urgent state they couldn't sound the time tones. They were sitting around waiting for adventurers to arrive.

"My lady, I have a feeling this city is hiding something," Healran said.

"Hiding something? Like what?" I asked.

"I haven't figured that out yet. All I can say is my gut is telling me something's not as it seems."

Healran's gut has gotten a lot of experience on the job with ferreting out the truth.

But I didn't like the idea of leaving him behind on his own. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that the city was currently full of ruffians.

"It'll be dangerous for you to go off alone," I said.

"Don't worry, I'm good at blowing the lid off people's secrets."

That speaks to a considerable character flaw if you ask me...

Well, if it's the city's secrets, he'll probably probe the residents and knights stationed here for information. And we still haven't received that letter of authorization from Grandpa Gouche. Maybe I should ask Shinki to have some wind spirits accompany him?

"Mr. Healran, promise me you won't do anything reckless. And you have to keep the short sword Father gave you with you at all times, okay?" I stressed.

The short sword had our family crest engraved on it. It would serve as a form of identification.

Our family crest was a butterfly and a giant tree.

The only five houses permitted by the royal family to use a butterfly in their family crest were the families of the four cabinet members and the general.

At the time of the founding of the country, when the five families were determining what images they would use for their family crests, they got together with the royal family to discuss how they would contribute to the country's prosperity and chose symbols that reflected that determination.

The giant tree in the Osphe family crest represents wisdom. It reflected the determination to apply all one's wisdom to the role of prime minister to make the country bountiful.

The Wise family to the east had a butterfly and a mallet in their crest. The mallet represented the determination to support industry with blacksmithing. The Mieuxga family to the west had a butterfly and a ship in their crest. The ship represented the determination to use transport and trade to support the economy. The Dierta family to the south had a butterfly and an ear of wheat in their family crest. The wheat represented the determination to farm crops and livestock to feed the country. The general's family had a butterfly and a sword in their crest. The sword represented the determination to use military force to protect the country.

It was said no one in the Kingdom of Gaché didn't know the meaning of the butterfly in all of these family crests.

I suppose that's because the story of the first king is a popular tale for kids.

So, if Healran showed someone his short sword, it would prove that he was employed by and under the protection of the Osphe family. Normally, that would motivate anyone to treat him with the utmost courtesy.

I doubted anyone *wanted* to make an enemy of our family. They'd be too afraid of Mama.

But I really am worried. Healran's hot-blooded—he's the type that, when the blood rushes to his head, he runs wild, leaving his better judgment behind. Maybe I should ask for water spirits to accompany him as well?

"I'll leave the matter of the city up to you," I said. "If you find yourself in trouble, tell the wind spirits. They'll convey it to Lars, who can tell Will."

In times like this, it was convenient to be able to communicate with the elemental spirits.

Imagine all that Will and the elemental spirits could accomplish if they joined the espionage department!

“I don’t know much about elemental spirits; will it still work?” Healran asked.

“It’s fine!” I insisted. “Just whisper, and they’ll hear you and convey your message to us.”

I asked Lars to ask the wind spirits to accompany Healran and covertly asked Shinki to recruit some water spirits to accompany him as well. The water spirits were to stop Healran if he lost his cool and to protect him if something went wrong.

And so, Healran broke off from our group, careful not to draw attention to himself, and set off on his solo mission.

The rest of us conducted a survey of the area around the city, then set off toward the forest where the kobolds were.



SOMETHING unexpected happened.

Gratia was incredibly fond of the baby kobold.

He was sitting on the kobold’s head, looking happy as pie.

At the moment, we were searching through the forest for the kobolds, with the baby kobold sniffing for scents and Gratia pointing in the direction.

The baby kobold obediently followed Gratia’s instructions. Did that mean they’d become friends since they were both baby monsters?

I feel kind of left out...

Following Gratia’s lead was fine, but we’d left the road behind long ago. There wasn’t even an animal trail for us to follow.

I was wearing a simple A-line skirt, not a bulky dress, thankfully, but even so, I sorely regretted my lack of foresight in not changing into pants.

This is a pain in the butt—I can hardly walk through this thick underbrush! I’ll

get Shinki to help me.

Shinki carried me while I carried the baby kobold. We must've made an amusing picture.

Ah, this is much better!

The baby kobold wagged his tail happily. It must've been fun for him to be so high up and where he could see everything.

We followed the path that wasn't a path for about an hour, by my reckoning.

This forest is huge!

"Woof, woof!"

The baby kobold suddenly barked.

He seemed to be reacting to a threat.

Nox, flying agilely through the trees, swooped down to warn me of danger.

I urged the baby kobold to stop barking, and once he did, I heard another creature crying, *"Mew, mew!"*

The edge of desperation in the creature's voice was concerning, so we went to look.

We pushed our way through the rustling underbrush toward the source of the cries. The sound of something moving in the thick brush and the mewing cries became louder.

"Mew?!"

I came face to face with a mysterious lifeform.

"Brother, *what* is that?" I asked.

"Uhh... Isn't it obvious? It's a slime."

Wahoo! I got to meet a classic monster! But this is nothing like any slime I've ever seen before!

When I thought of "slime," the first thing that came to mind was the blue water droplet-shaped slimes in a certain famous RPG. The creature here was milky white and elliptical-shaped. It looked like a giant meat bun.

The meat bun began to hop, skip, and jump toward us.

“Mew! Mew!!”

The meat bun—I mean slime—was frantically trying to tell us something. Unfortunately, it was so worked up that I couldn’t understand anything besides the fact that it was panicked.

“Calm down. Do you understand what I’m saying?” I asked.

“Mew! Meeeew, mew!”

Umm... I think it wants us to help someone, but I can’t make out the details.

“Shinki, do you understand what it’s saying?” I threw the proverbial ball to Shinki, hoping that, as a fellow monster, he’d have better luck than me.

“It’s saying something’s wrong with its companion and wants us to help them.”

Whoa! Shinki’s our official monster translator from now on! Come to think of it, I don’t know how Shinki learned Larshian in the first place!

“Ralf, Will, is it okay if we see if we can help?” I didn’t think it would be dangerous, but I figured I’d better run it by my temporary guardians first.

“Proceed as you see fit,” Ralf said. “If it becomes dangerous, we’ll protect you.”

“Way to answer for me without asking my opinion, Ralf.”

“Don’t worry—I was referring to Lars, not you, Will.”

“We’re kind of a package deal!”

Is it okay if I laugh at this ridiculous banter? I have a feeling Will would get angry if I laughed... I’d better ignore it.

“Thank you, Ralf!” I said with a grateful smile before turning back to the slime. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to help, but can you take us to where your friend is?”

“Mew!” As it replied, the slime shook its body, which jiggled like pudding, then hopped into the woods.

There are so many things I'd like to say right now, but... A jumping slime? It would be cute if it made a bouncy noise as it went, but it's more of a plopping noise... Such a waste of a golden opportunity.

"Sorry, little guy," I said to the kobold. "We're making a quick detour, okay?"

"Woof!"

Such a lively response! Very nice!

But you know, this slime sure is fast! It moves at the same speed as a power-walker! Where are its eyes? It doesn't appear to have a mouth or vocal cords, so how does it make that mewling sound?

And, most importantly, I really want to try touching its round, jiggly body! I want to see if it feels anything like the slime we made in science class back in elementary school. I have a hard time believing it would feel like that borax-based slime, but... The more I look at it, the more I think it really is a mysterious lifeform.

We followed after the slime for about ten minutes until...

An even more mysterious lifeform appeared in front of us.

"Brother, *what is that?*"

"...I don't know."

"Does anyone know what it is?" Will asked, looking around at the knights and royal guards.

"I've never heard of one appearing in this province, but they're common in the south."

I shouldn't have been surprised that the unit leader, as the oldest member of our group, would know. Although he was the oldest person present, he was still only around his mid-thirties.

"It's my first time seeing one in person, but I'm fairly certain it's a 'parent slime'..."

Who was in charge of this uncreative naming?! I swallowed my words before I blurted something out.

In the first place, slimes were only ever spotted in the south because they were weak against the cold. I'd heard that in areas experiencing an outbreak of large numbers of slimes, it was common to find a giant slime as much as twenty times the size of a normal slime. Because giant slimes could produce countless tiny slimes, people called them "parent slimes."

And the creature in front of us was one of these parent slimes.

But this parent slime looked way bigger than twenty times the size of a normal slime. It had to be almost three feet in circumference. Around the size of a balance ball, I guess?

It was semi-transparent in color, but a multitude of colorful red, blue, yellow, green, purple, orange, and brown things were inside it.

I've got a bad feeling about this...

"Is it about to give birth to lots of little slimes?" I asked.

And if the colorful things inside of it were the little slimes?

Just imagining it gave me goosebumps.

It wasn't just ten or twenty slimes we were talking about. I did *not* want to see all those things popping out of the parent slime.

Oh man, what should we do?!

The parent slime shook.

Are they going to come out? Please don't tell me they're going to come out!

"Wait, wait, wait! You can't have those babies here! It's cold and dangerous, so hold them in!" I demanded.

"Pew, pew!"

The parent slime made a noise! Well, the little slime made a noise, so it only makes sense that the parent could, too.

"It said it can't move," Shinki translated.

"Why? Because it's about to give birth?"

"No, once parent slimes enter the reproduction phase, they can't move from

that spot. They become parasitic once they become parent slimes, so they can't move around on their own power."

Whaaat?!

Slimes were becoming more and more mysterious lifeforms by the minute.

"What should we do...?" I groaned.

Oh no, don't shake like that! I'm telling you, you can't have those babies here!

"Growl."

"...No, that's too extreme..."

Lars had an idea, but whatever it was, Will recoiled in shock.

"What did Lars say?" I asked.

"Apparently, if the parent slime parasitically inhabits someone, it won't reproduce while it's inside them."

...No, no, no. Slimes are so freaking weird! By "inhabit," he means physically enter the body, right? Will the person melt in the end?!

"If you inhabit someone's body, will you eat them?" I had to ask.

"Peeew, pew."

"It says if it likes the person, it won't eat them," Shinki translated.

So that means if it doesn't like the person, it will eat them!

"And, hypothetically, is there anyone in our group you would promise not to eat?" I asked.

"Pew, pew!"

"It says you, miss."

Of course. I had a feeling this might happen. Are you playing a sick game with me, God?!

"What about Shinki?"

"Peeeeew!"

No luck. Sigh. He's a first-rate hottie, you know! Shinki's probably the most

attractive out of all of us. I suppose looks don't matter much to a slime, though...

"Pew, pew, pe-peeew!"

"I see. It says that once it inhabits someone, it receives nutrition from the host and, therefore, no longer needs to release excrement," Shinki explained. "It also says that it will protect the host."

What?! Are you telling me I could eat as much as I want and never gain weight? ...But if it only takes nutrition from me after I've absorbed all the calories, it'll be useless...

Wait. If I asked the slime to take its share as soon as the food entered my stomach, I could gorge myself as much as I wanted without consequences, right?

"Due to the slime's nature, it's almost entirely impervious to physical attacks and immune to certain magical attributes as well. That might benefit Neema," Will said.

"That's true; she's always getting hurt," Ralf agreed.

Hold on, you two! Can you stop offering people up to be invaded by parasites, please?! At least leave the final decision to me!

Well, if it means we can add slimes to Project Shiana, then I might not mind... Of course, eating as much as I want without gaining weight has nothing to do with my motives!

"If you inhabit me, you might encounter many hardships. Are you sure that's what you want?" I asked.

There's no "might" about it; this slime will definitely encounter hardships if it inhabits my body! My words sound hollow, even to myself...

"Pew!!"

"Very well. My name is Nefertima Osphe."

The truth was, I'd already decided on a name for the parent slime. When I tried to think of a word that described a slime and could be a name, one thing immediately came to mind: the Japanese word for "water droplet."

“Your name is ‘Shizuku.’ Let’s travel together to search for a safe place for you to have your babies.”

Shizuku giggled happily, and the now-familiar mark appeared on the very top of it.

That’s not its forehead, is it? I’ll pretend it got the mark there because it doesn’t have a face. It would be creepy if that is its forehead.

Oh, and although I’d named it Shizuku, it wasn’t water droplet-shaped but meat bun-shaped.

Oh well, it’s fine.

I approached Shizuku and eagerly reached out to touch it.

It’s not as firm and springy as I was expecting; it’s more soft and squishy.

The closest thing I could compare it to was a woman’s breast. Not small, firm breasts like Mama’s and Karna’s, but soft and pillowy like those on a woman with a bit of meat on her bones—the kind that fills your whole hand.

I’d had a friend like that in my past life. Once, while we were all out at a bar drinking, I jokingly fondled her breasts. All the men in the group looked jealous and teased us about it... Apparently, I had the mentality of a dirty old man.

I’m sorry... I regret my actions!

In any case, Shizuku felt really nice. Touching it was soothing.

However, Shizuku didn’t have much time, so I stopped dawdling and quickly let it inhabit my body.

If you’re wondering how that went...

Shizuku enveloped me, but it didn’t feel suffocating. I was afraid, so I squeezed my eyes tightly shut.



Next, water filled my mouth, and I reflexively swallowed it down. That was Shizuku. Somehow, all of Shizuku entered my body with one gulp... Slimes really were mysterious.

I could feel Shizuku inside of me.

The little white slime must've been linked with Shizuku somehow because I could sense its feelings as well. I'd bound Shizuku to me by naming it before it inhabited me, so I must've inherited some of its abilities and knowledge.

The white slime was essentially a clone of Shizuku. Apparently, it would become the next parent slime.

I named it while I was at it.

"Your name is 'Haku'!"

Naming it a variant of the Japanese word for "white" might've been glaringly simplistic, but there was a reason behind it.

The little slimes inside Shizuku were all different colors.

So, my plan was to name all of the little slimes after colors once they were born, too!

"Mew!"

Haku seemed to like its name, which was good enough for me.

All right! Time to get back on track!

Shinki picked me up, and we all walked through the woods once more.

I wanted to play with Haku, but Will stole it from me.

He seemed to enjoy the soft and squishy sensation because he kept squeezing Haku gently.

This softness must hold some kind of magnetism for males. Even Ralf looks jealous.



HMM, something strange is going on here...

We'd walked quite a distance by this point, but there was still no sign of our

target.

The baby kobold seemed confused, too. Although he could smell his companions, we couldn't get any closer to the pack, no matter how much we walked.

Maybe there's magic at play, making it so we can't get close to them?

"Brother, do you sense anything?" I asked.

"Not really... If it's a perception-altering spell, it's not one I can detect," Ralf replied.

Perception spells were classified as non-attributed magic and worked by creating illusions that deceived the senses. The spell also cloaked the use of magic that powered it, so people strongly affiliated with any one element would have a hard time noticing it.

"Do the elemental spirits know anything?" I asked.

"What do they say, Lars?" Will checked.

"Growl," Lars responded in an irritated-sounding voice.

That did not sound promising...

"Apparently, they said it's a secret," Will interpreted.

In short, the elemental spirits knew something but didn't feel like telling us.

At least give us a hint, will you?!

"'Magic isn't the only force at work. The world is brimming with the power of the God of Creation.' That's what the elemental spirits are saying, at least, but it's too abstract for me to make much sense of," Will explained.

Hmm... But they said it's not magic, right? The power that God gave to the world is either magic or elemental power...

It was possible that some other power existed, but I'd never heard of it before. What kind of power could that be?

The world is full of it, huh? I know that God loves this world of Asdyllon a whole awful lot... When I met him before I was reborn, he said the creatures of this world were precious to him. He made all of the species, from great to small,

and didn't want to see any of them wiped out.

...Is that it? Could it have to do with the creatures living in this world? Maybe some creature other than humans is involved?

It's not an elemental spirit or a holy beast, and since Shinki and Shizuku don't know what it is, it can't be a monster. The forest animals are hiding, but they're not maliciously interfering.

Which left the residents of the forest—the elves and the beastpeople—as possible suspects. But that didn't make sense if this wasn't magic.

In that case, only the least likely explanation remained. ...Although, considering God, I supposed it was possible.

It felt like God was throwing things at me as they struck his fancy. He was probably giggling with glee like a little kid whose prank had gone according to plan.

"Hey, Lars..." I whispered a question into Lars' ear. He periodically flicked his ear in an adorable way as if my breath tickled.

"Growl."

"Did you figure something out?" Will asked. "The elemental spirits are acting differently."

Oh, that's right. I forgot that Will can see elemental spirits.

"Umm, well, I'm not certain, but I think there might be something in this forest," I said.

With Lars leading the way, we went even deeper into the woods. Well, the wind spirits were leading the way, and Lars followed them.

"What kind of thing?"

"Some kind of... guardian, of the forest?" I ventured.

It was incredibly rare, but cases where a long-lived being gained special powers and evolved into a guardian that would protect their territory existed. These guardians could be anything from an animal to a plant. Or even a monster.

“A guardian, huh... I’ve never heard of a forest with human involvement having a guardian before, though.”

That’s true...

As far as we knew, a guardian had never appeared in a forest this close to human settlements. For the most part, they were usually in harsh terrain where only adventurers dared tread.

All of the well-known guardians resided in places where humans would struggle to survive, such as deserts, thick forests, deep valleys, and all-but-impassible mountains.

The most famous example in our country was a giant worm named Helstreia, who lived in the Gaezal Mountain Range in the north. Helstreia was discovered over a hundred years ago and had been spotted looking as healthy as ever as recently as two or three years ago.

According to Sol, Helstreia “Just appeared at some point,” so it seemed likely she was over 300 years old. By the way, the average lifespan of a giant worm was around twenty years. They were the weakest species of dragon and had the shortest lifespans.

“But if it is a guardian, that matches what the elemental spirits were saying, right?” I said.

“Well, yeah, but...”

The fact that Lars was able to lead us meant there was doubtlessly a guardian in these woods.

I’m looking forward to seeing what kind of beings they are.



THE dense forest suddenly opened up into a wide-open meadow. In the center of it stood a single tree.

I knew upon seeing it that this was the guardian of the forest.

The presence it gave off, similar to that of the crisis cherry, where young elemental spirits dwelled, was what alerted me.

It reminded me of a sacred tree at a Japanese shrine.

“Lars, is it okay for me to get closer?” I asked.

“Growl.”

Well, I suppose it's not going to grab me and eat me. But I'm a little scared, so come with me, Lars.

And so, bringing the baby kobold and Lars with me, I approached the guardian. I left Shinki and Gratia behind to be safe since they were affiliated with a different forest.

“Be careful, Neema,” Ralf said.

Ralf, you really do support me in all my decisions!

Given how sternly Papa had lectured him, I'd been worried he might try to stop me.

“I love you, Ralf!” I exclaimed.

I need to show my gratitude with action! Even so, I feel like I'm falling ever deeper into Ralf's debt.

“I love you too, Neema.”

Will gaped, flabbergasted, as Ralf and I hugged affectionately.

You're just jealous that we get along so well!

“...Your sister-complex is approaching crisis level,” Will said, exasperated.

Come on, Lars, abandon Will here, and let's go!

Okay, then. We need to make a good first impression.

“Greetings, guardian of the forest. My name is Nefertima Osphe. Please pardon our intrusion today, stomping noisily around in your forest.”

I executed a bow that, among the many gestures practiced by the nobility, was used to express repentance to someone you deeply respected. Using my right hand, I folded the hem of my skirt forward and bowed approximately 20 degrees.

Aristocrats had different bows for different situations, each with

predetermined positions where you should hold your hands and degrees to which you should bow. Frankly, it was exhausting remembering them all.

“There is no need to apologize, young lady.”

The guardian’s voice was gravelly, like that of an elder. The way it reverberated directly inside my head, like telepathy, surprised me.

“However, what a strange group you make. A holy beast, a child of royalty, and even a monster accompany you... What manner of person are you, young lady?”

Now that you mention it, what am I? Indeed, I travel with a colorful band of companions, including princes and knights, holy beasts, and monsters. The more I think about it, the harder it is to answer! I suppose I’m God’s co-conspirator?

“Um... Well, our family’s title belongs to Father, so I guess I’m just ordinary Nefertima?”

I couldn’t say I was God’s co-conspirator or reincarnated. Even if I did, I’d probably be met with pity. All that was left was my name.

Oh, I suppose you could also say I’m Sol’s (future) bonded master!

“A most unusual child, indeed. And what business do you have with me?”

Am I being treated as a weirdo? Hmmm, I’m not sure how I feel about that, but the guardian of the forest seems amused, so I’ll go with it. I’m not a weirdo, though!

“We’re looking for this baby’s mother,” I said. “Do you know where the kobold pack is?”

“What do you plan to do with that kobold?”

“...Bring him back to his mother?”

“Even though he’s a monster?”

“That doesn’t matter. He’s in trouble, so I want to help him. That’s all.”

If things go well, I am hoping to recruit the kobolds to join Project Shiana. But I won’t force anyone into anything they don’t want to do. I’ll leave it up to God to see things through! And besides, I’m friends with Shinki, Gratia, Shizuku, and

Haku, who are all monsters, too. Oh, and not to mention Suzuko and Touki!

...Wait a minute. Does that mean my only animal companion is Nox? That won't do! If I don't add more animals, this will turn into "Nefertima and the Merry Band of Monsters"!

Once we finish with the kobolds, I'm going after animals! My goal is to find a feline. Lars is already taken, so I'll have to find my own feline!

"Humans have relentlessly pursued the kobolds. They were in a terrible state when they reached this forest. I took pity on them and have been hiding them from human eyes."

Oh crap! I was so caught up in my own thoughts I completely forgot about the guardian's situation!

"The kobolds are going to be subjugated for attacking humans. You're in danger as well, guardian," I explained.

"I know I won't be able to keep them hidden forever, but..."

In the first place, sheltering nearly a hundred kobolds in this forest was pushing it. Kobolds were omnivores. It would eventually deplete the forest if they sourced all their food from here. However, strangely enough, I saw no signs of this beginning to happen.

That could only mean that the kobolds had been attacking humans to support themselves without throwing off the ecosystem of the forest.

This certainly poses a problem. Assuming we succeed in scouting the kobolds to join Project Shiana, where will we house them, and how will we feed them in the interim until it's up and running?

I hadn't considered this at all!

Goblins were like raccoons; they could and would eat absolutely anything, so temporarily leaving them where they were hadn't been a problem. According to Shinki, they were naturally resistant to starvation. If they weren't receiving adequate nutrition, they would even resort to eating weeds and tree bark. Though, before it came to that, goblins would happily eat bugs.

Although kobolds were omnivores, their primary food sources were nuts,

berries, fruit, meat, and fish, and they could also eat vegetables and roots.

...We'll have to add farming to Project Shiana after all! Maybe we could establish an area off-limits to adventurers that we can use to farm. Our first crop should be the good old, all-mighty potato. I wonder if they have sweet potatoes in this world?

In any case, I'd better stop avoiding the matter at hand.

It wasn't as if there was no way to resolve the issue of provisions, but before anything, we'd need to speak to the kobolds and hear their opinion on the matter.

"The proxy lord has already put things into motion, so it might be impossible to avoid fighting at this point, but I want to do everything I can to prevent bloodshed," I said. "Will you please lead us to the kobold pack?"

"...Very well. I will believe you, young lady. However, if I learn you were lying to me, you won't leave this forest alive."

"To be completely honest, I suspect we'll only be able to save around half of the pack. If that's okay, then I'm willing to vow upon my name."

The punitive force had already been gathered.

And it wasn't as if we could take the kobolds and immediately flee, either.

Assuming fighting was unavoidable, if we were lucky, we would only be able to save maybe 70 percent of the pack. If things went badly, that number might be cut to as little as 20 percent.

"That won't be necessary. If things are already set in motion, the future of the kobolds is in the God of Creation's hands now."

If things go "well," it will probably be due to interference on God's part. God has been messing with me almost nonstop, so although I can't be sure, I have a strong feeling that, at the very least, he is watching.

Considering the circumstances that had brought Sol, Shinki, and Gratia into my life, I bet he'd do something if only for his own amusement, this time as well.

"That's certainly true. May the blessings of the God of Creation and the Goddess Cresiolle be upon us all."

"I will have the elemental spirits residing in these woods guide you."

"Thank you, guardian."

I executed a bow of gratitude lower than my previous bow at approximately 30 degrees.

"When things have settled down, please visit again sometime."

"I'd love to!"

It seems we've broken through the first barrier, at least!

After saying goodbye to the guardian of the forest, we set off again, following Lars through the forest. It seemed we still had a long way to go before we'd reach the kobolds.

7 - Meeting the Kobolds

IT seemed as if it was somehow easier to walk through the forest after we'd gotten its guardian's permission. Of course, that could've just been my imagination.

However, we still didn't encounter a single animal.

Is it because of Lars?! It makes sense for all the forest animals to run away and hide when such a huge tiger is prowling around. The knights are also more than a little intimidating.

I was lost in my thoughts when Lars and the baby kobold started growling.

Everyone instantly took up fighting stances, and Ralf and Will stepped in front of me to protect me from the unknown danger.

Nox landed on a branch nearby and gave a short cry as if saying, *"Be careful!"*

To be safe, I had Gratia crouch down in his usual spot atop my head and hide in my hair.

"...Where is it?" I asked.

Lars, the baby kobold, and Shinki all seemed to know what was going on, but the human members of our group all seemed to be in the dark.

Hearing my whispered question, Nox cooed in what I assumed was disbelief.

Hold on a minute, Nox. Humans don't have very good eyesight, you know?! You can't compare us to you rain hawks, who can see perfectly in light and darkness!

While I was making excuses silently to myself, Nox got the gist of what I was thinking from my reproachful glare, gave up, and declared me a hopeless cause before leaping into the air.

I watched closely, trying to figure out what he was doing. Nox turned toward a specific tree and assumed a hunting pose.

With his wings outstretched above him, he thrust out his legs. Nox's slightly dulled talons weren't ideal for attacking, but he was able to grab onto the tree trunk.

Then part of the tree peeled off. No, wait—it was something clinging to the tree that moved.

I looked *very* closely at the movement and finally made out the figure of a creature that looked like a giant grasshopper.

"An insect?" I asked unsurely, and my brother answered without turning around.

"It's a mamushi. This one is pretty weak, though."

Ralf, don't you know anything?! Mamushi look like snakes! I wanted to point it out, but I kept my mouth shut.

Lars slowly approached the mamushi. The air around us stirred, and then, with a slicing noise, the mamushi was torn to pieces.

Whoa, nice razor-cyclone action, Lars!

"Miss, may I have the mamushi's corpse?" Shinki requested.

"Uh... Sure, but what do you want it for?"

"I'm going to eat it."

Huuuuh?! Shinki, you want to...EAT...that?!

A quick glance confirmed that everyone looked just as stunned as I felt.

"It tastes good if you grill it. Wanna try?" As he said this, Shinki snapped open the hard exoskeleton of the dismembered mamushi so he could remove the meat inside.

I bet you could sell the exoskeleton as a raw material for crafting. Hey, be more careful with that thing, will you?!

Shinki placed the mamushi meat on top of a large leaf and used fire elemental power to grill it.

A savory scent filled the air, causing my stomach to growl in spite of myself.

Nox and Lars gathered around Shinki, eagerly waiting for the meat to be ready.

“Here, this big one’s for you, Lars,” Shinki said, plopping a large chunk of meat in front of Lars.

These two are unexpectedly friendly, huh?

Then Shinki chucked a smaller chunk of meat to Nox. He caught it nimbly with his talon and opened his mouth wide, tearing pieces off and gulping them down.

Lars and Nox ate with such gusto that I could only assume the mamushi meat was delicious.

“Will you have some, Miss?” Shinki asked.

Hmm... It’s probably okay, right? With Shizuku inside of me, I probably don’t have to worry about food poisoning or anything like that...

“Okay, I’ll try a piece.”

I received a piece that was more of a morsel than a full bite and chowed down.

“It’s really good!”

The texture reminded me of shrimp. The tantalizing scent the meat gave off while cooking didn’t disappoint either—the more I chewed, the more the flavor intensified in my mouth. The taste of the meat reminded me of white fish; it wasn’t bland, exactly, but it wasn’t strongly flavored, either.

I thought the mamushi meat would make an excellent side dish to eat while drinking alcohol if you grilled it with soy sauce. There wasn’t any soy sauce in this world, though, so maybe plain salt or a bit of sauda sauce would probably do the trick.

Gratia started appealing to Shinki for a serving. He repeatedly leapt into the air, reaching a height many times the length of his body. I’d assumed he wouldn’t be able to jump very high because of how large his mother had been.

He jumped up and down, up and down, pestering Shinki. He agilely twisted his front legs and thrust them forward in a clear and adorable gesture for “Gimme,

gimme!”

Gratia was rewarded with a chunk of meat about the same size as his body, which he used his sharp fangs to tear into pieces. However, no matter how closely I looked, he didn't appear to be chewing, just swallowing each bite whole.

You know, it's funny to think that, despite how many people are terrified of spiders, most species aren't actually dangerous at all. The only ones you really need to worry about are the gigantic ones, like tarantulas, and the small, poisonous ones, like redback spiders.

But it's Gratia we're talking about. One day, he'll grow up as big and strong as his mother. When that happens, I hope he'll let me ride on his back! Come to think of it, will he shed his skin in the future? I'll need to look into that.

“There isn't any poison, so it's safe for you guys to try if you want?” I offered it to Ralf and the others.

The absence of poison was information I'd gotten from the slime inhabiting my body. Shizuku was turning out to be pretty nifty to have around!

Apparently, Shizuku could tell things about the food I ate, such as if it would replenish magic reserves or whether it contained poison. Shizuku also insisted that it could counteract the effects of any naturally occurring poisons. Even so, I had no intention of taking my chances by intentionally ingesting poison!

“Sure, why not? I'll give it a try.” Will was the first to rise to the challenge.

Although he seemed hesitant, Ralf also accepted a piece.

“It doesn't have much flavor, but I bet if you seasoned it right, it would be pretty good,” Will said.

“I like it like this,” Ralf replied. “It has a good texture and a delicate flavor.”

Apparently, the boys liked it.

The knights and royal guards also enjoyed the mamushi meat. They were digging in.

Hmmm, I could use this!

According to Shizuku, mamushi meat was pretty high in nutrition; each mamushi produced a decent amount, and as an added bonus, they were relatively easy to catch.

Mamushi might be the solution to our food supply problem! And if we sell the exoskeletons as raw materials for crafting, we could use the money for overhead costs, killing two birds with one stone!

“Lars, if you see any more mamushi, please catch them all!” I requested.

“All of them?” Will asked.

“For the kobolds to eat. Not only that, but I bet we could sell their shells, too, don’t you think?”

I doubted they would understand the word “exoskeleton,” so I erred on the side of caution by calling it a “shell” instead. I wasn’t sure if this creature was an insect or a crustacean, so perhaps shell was the proper term to begin with.

“Yeah, both the adventurers’ guild and the mercenaries’ guild use armor made out of mamushi shell.”

“I wonder if shell-type mamushi would fetch an especially good price?”

Here’s another new word for me.

During the years I’d spent at home, I’d read as many books as I could to gather information about this world, but there were still many things I didn’t know.

“What’s a shell-type?” I asked.

“It’s a variety of mamushi with an especially hard shell, naturally adapted for self-preservation. The mamushi we just caught was a jumping type, a variety that is known for its speed and ability to jump. The ones that can fly are called flying-type, the ones with sharp talons at the end of their appendages are called blade-type, and the ones with poison are called illusion-type. I think that covers all the varieties?”

“They don’t have individual species names?” I asked.

Even monsters like goblins and kobolds had individual species names, so it seemed unfair that mamushi were only classified based on their characteristics.

“No, because of how fast mamushi evolve. They quickly adapt to the conditions of their environment and develop new evolutions, so it would be a mess trying to name all the new varieties.”

Whoa! That evolutionary speed would blow away Darwin! If we get the chance, I'd love to breed mamushi as part of Project Shiana! I bet we could create a variety of mamushi that's strong against the cold!

Project Shiana is really starting to take form, huh? Heh.

In any case, we should probably get moving again. We need to get back before night falls.

Along the way, we caught several more mamushi. I rode on Lars' back so Shinki could drag the mamushi behind us. Easy-peasy!

“Woof, woof!”

The baby kobold in my arms began to raise a ruckus.

“What is it, little one?”

The baby kobold was looking straight ahead, barking with all his might.

Could this be...?

“I think someone's come to pick you up, baby.”

However, I couldn't detect a trace of the kobolds' presence.

Lars, Shinki, and Nox, however, knew where they were.

“Excuse me, kobolds, do you know where this baby's parents are?” I couldn't see them but spoke as if they were there.

Aaaand there's no reaction whatsoever.

“We've received the guardian of the forest's permission to come here. We would like to speak to your leader,” I added.

A threatening growl came from between the trees somewhere in front of us.

Translation, please, Shinki!

“They say they can't trust you.”

Of course not. Maybe we can win them over with a gift?

“We’ve brought you some mamushi meat as a present. It’s very delicious, isn’t it, little guy?”

“Woof!” the baby kobold agreed, wagging his tail enthusiastically.

Nice response! But let’s calm down a little, okay? Good boy.

The appearance of the meat seemed to cause an uproar among the group of kobolds.

“Growl.”

“They’re going to go ask their leader,” Shinki translated.

This looks promising. Who can resist the lure of delicious food? Let’s wait and see.

The baby kobold, probably because he could smell his companions nearby, wouldn’t settle down.

“Woof!”

“It seems that the leader agreed to speak with us. They say to follow them,” Shinki said.

Thank goodness! We can finally meet the kobolds! Let’s go, Lars!

We set off once again on the path that wasn’t a path, struggling to carry the mamushi until, at last, we reached the kobold pack.

Heh. Hehehehe... They’re here! There are so many of them! My face probably looks lopsided; I’m grinning so hard!

Imagine if all the different breeds of dogs on Earth were together in one place, walking around on two legs... Yeah, I can see how it might sound a little creepy, but... right before my eyes, dozens of dogs, each as adorable as a stuffed animal, were walking around upright on two legs!

I want to bring one home with me!

My first impression after looking forward to meeting them for so long was that the kobolds reflected many different breeds of dogs.

There were Siberian Huskies with remarkable bluish-gray coats holding spears. Fierce-looking Boxers were larger than all the other kobolds and, for

some reason, carried shields. Stern-faced Dobermans with toned bodies covered in glossy black fur were armed with pointed brass knuckles.

The Afghan Hounds were more attractive than the other kobolds, with long, amber-colored fur, large droopy ears, and extra-long eyelashes, wielding magic wands like you'd see a wizard using. Were these supposed to be modeled after some kind of shaman-like fantasy monster?

I wanted to bring all of them home, but my first choice was probably one of the super-fluffy, all-white kobolds. They might've been Samoyeds or maybe Great Pyrenees? I couldn't be certain without examining them more closely.

And I *really* wanted to pet them to my heart's content! Dee was short-haired and not nearly as satisfyingly fluffy as these guys.

Fluffy, soft fur is the best! I was more determined than ever to draw the kobolds into Project Shiana, no matter what. *I'll use this special ability God gave me for all it's worth! You better be watching, God!*

With that decided, all that was left to do was find our target: the leader of this impressively diverse pack. Fighting desperately not to fall victim to the siren call of the fluffiness all around me, I searched the crowd.

Where is their leader?!

In a large clearing that appeared to have been made by cutting down and removing several trees were a number of broken-down old covered wagons, though I couldn't fathom how the kobolds had gotten them here. It appeared the children and elderly slept inside these wagons.

"What business does a human child have with us?"

The speaker was a woman who could only be described as captivating.

However, this "woman" had dog ears and a tail. She resembled a beastperson, but her facial features were not quite right for a beastperson, and a fine sheen of ultra-short fur(?) covered her voluptuous body like a pair of tights.

I'll just come out and say it—she's a Dalmatian! Oh, I see. If they're ultra-short-haired, it's almost as if they're wearing full-body tights. The Dobermans I

saw earlier were wearing leather armor, so I didn't notice.

"Hello. My name is Nefertima Osphe. We found this little guy in the city of Lenice and wanted to return him to his mother."

"...Indeed, he is a member of our pack. Why did you go to the city, child?"

"Woof, woof!"

"What?!"

Huh, what is it?! What did he say that made her so angry? Come on, Shinki! Fill me in here!

"The baby said he went into the city with several other kobold children, but they left him behind," Shinki explained.

Oh no. Is this a case of picking on a weaker child or exclusionary bullying? Hmm, but I suppose in nature, it's normal for the weakest members of the species to be weeded out...

"Children! You lied to me!"

This beauty sure was intimidating when she was angry. Even the baby kobold we'd brought home trembled.

You're not the one in trouble!

Adult females dragged the five or so young kobolds before the leader, whom I assumed were their mothers.

Time for a big scolding! But where is this baby's mother?

"Where is your mother?" I asked.

"Whine, whine," the baby kobold cried entreatingly.

After a moment, I heard an answering *"Woof!"* from somewhere in the distance.

A female kobold pushed through the crowd gathered to watch their leader scold the children. Although she initially made her way toward us, for some reason, she stopped a short distance away.

Oh! She must be afraid of Lars!

“Sorry, Lars. The baby kobold’s mother is afraid of you, so could you please go stand with Will?” I requested.

Once Lars moved away, I set the baby kobold down on the ground.

The baby kobold bounded toward his mother with a roly-poly gait, and no longer held back by her fear of Lars, she dashed toward him as well.

Thank goodness. It looks like that’s one problem neatly tied up. Now, we have to figure out what to do about the leader. She’s on a rampage, scolding those kids.

...Maybe she’s extra grumpy due to hunger?

“Excuse me, Miss Leader?” I intervened. “What would you like us to do with this present?”

The children, who were being harshly scolded, were crying loudly. I took pity on them and threw them a life preserver.

“Now’s not the time for that...” the leader said.

“No one can think properly on an empty stomach, right?” I argued. “You can ask the children to explain themselves after you’ve all eaten. Just...don’t yell at them, okay? If you yell, the children will get so upset they won’t be able to say anything.”

“Hrmmm...”

“Come on, let’s prepare the food.”

Without waiting for an answer, I asked Shinki to remove the meat.

Don’t forget to be careful with the shells!

And so, we lit a fire in an open space to the side and cooked the mamushi meat in batches. We passed it out to the kobolds as soon as it was ready, feeding them all.

Wow, they’re really going at it. I wonder if there will be enough meat... I’d better ask Shinki to catch a few more mamushi. If we don’t resupply, I might get eaten next!

“Here you go, Miss Leader,” I said, offering her some meat.

The leader watched her people with a troubled look on her face.

Don't you know you've gotta get some while you can, or it'll be gone?

"What is your objective here?" she asked me.

"Our first goal was to return that baby to his mother. We also want to investigate why your pack came to this place."

"In order to subjugate us?!" A frigid air rolled off of the leader.

Yikes! This is a killing aura!

Sensing the change in the atmosphere, Gratia crawled out from his hiding spot in my hair. He clicked his fangs threateningly, but I doubted the leader could even hear him.

Well, if his hearing is the same as a dog's, it's more sensitive than a human's.

"It's okay, Gratia. Don't threaten Miss Leader!" I stroked the top of Gratia's head, trying to calm him down.

"...A monster?"

"That's right. Shinki's a monster, too, and I'm currently the host of a parasitic parent slime!" To convince her of my goodwill toward monsters, I cheerfully introduced each of my monster companions.

Shizuku can't come out and say hi, but Haku's here, so that's fine. Huh? Now that you mention it, where did Haku go?

"Haku! Where are you?!" I called.

"Meeeeew!"

A plop-plop noise heralded Haku's sudden appearance.

I wonder where it was.

"This is Haku, one of the children of the parent slime inhabiting my body."

"Why...?"

"They were in trouble. I couldn't just turn my back on them. When I first met Shinki, he'd been driven out of his home; Gratia's mother died, leaving him an orphan; and Shizuku and Haku needed help to find a safe place for Shizuku to

have its babies.”

Thanks to God’s interference, I was surrounded by a swarm of monsters.

Once we resolved the kobold problem, there was every possibility I’d be drawn off on some other mission. Although I’d *really* like to find a suitable location for Project Shiana!

“Shinki’s clan is in almost as bad a situation as your pack, so we’re searching for a safe place for them to live...” I said.

“They were driven from their homes? And you are looking for a safe place to live...?”

“Well, maybe not *entirely* safe... Shinki’s greatest wish for his people is to be essential to the survival of the forest, so we came up with a plan...”

The leader patiently listened to my explanation.

I passionately laid out everything, explaining how I’d met Shinki, everything that had happened since then, and the details of Project Shiana. I hoped I wasn’t so worked up that my story was incoherent.

She related to Shinki’s feelings of wanting to be necessary to the survival of the forest. At several points, the leader interjected questions of her own.

All right! I think we’re on the same page; this seems to be going well.

“Shinki said that monsters are weak,” I said. “In that case, they should become stronger. No one has any complaints if it’s a fair case of strong-eat-the-weak, right? Monsters will kill the humans if they’re weak, too.”

I’m not exaggerating, either.

Life was not valued as highly in this world as it was back in Japan.

That’s how dangerous the world was. Just traveling from one city to another, bandits, monsters, or aggressive wild animals could attack you. And that wasn’t even mentioning natural disasters, accidents, or crime.

To earn a living, one had to expose themselves to danger. In this way, the workings of man were no different from the strong-eat-the-weak rules of nature.

The strong would be able to feed themselves and protect themselves from danger. However, strength took many forms.

For the elves, strength took the form of elemental power and growing wise due to their long lifespans. For the beastpeople, it was harnessing their bodies' animalistic strength and reflexes.

What about humans, then?

Some were physically endowed, and others were intellectually endowed. Some had powerful magic, and some had powerful skills of manipulation and persuasion. It could be said that possessing a variety of strengths was the strength of mankind. The world of men was complex, but at its roots, it was a world that favored the strong.

I truly respected my parents and the cabinet members' roles, fulfilling their duties as aristocrats in such a world.

"What do you want to do, Miss Leader?" I asked.

"There are many things I need to protect. Of course, there's the pack, but there's also my little sister."

"Your sister?"

"We're not related by blood, but she's a precious member of my family all the same. Our family was wiped out; she and I are the sole survivors. Many different families were attacked, and the survivors flocked to me because I was a priestess, forming this brand-new pack under my leadership. I couldn't turn a blind eye to people in need..."

A priestess has appeared!

But...who ever heard of a monster being a priestess?

I'm going to casually sit and listen to the rest of her story...

We must've talked for at least an hour.

She seemed mentally at the end of her rope, so I lent her Haku.

Not even the leader was immune to the lure of the slime's addicting squishiness. While periodically squeezing Haku, she slowly told me what had

happened to the kobolds.

Haku, too, seemed to like being squeezed because it drifted off to sleep in the leader's arms.

I see... If you like being squeezed that much, I'll squeeze you as much as you like later!

To summarize the leader's story, the kobolds had also been pursued by humans, just like Shinki and his clan had been.

Kobolds naturally lived in groups called "families" consisting of blood relatives.

For example, the leader's family—the Star-Reader Family—were Dalmatians. As their name suggests, they had the power to read the stars. When she foresaw disaster in the stars and warned the other kobold families of the danger, they started calling her a priestess. The power to read the stars was passed down only among females, so the Star-Reader Family was matrilineal.

There was also the Philosopher Family of Afghan Hounds that could use magic and the Hunter Family of shield-wielding Boxers. Under normal circumstances, each breed lived in its own family group, each with its own specialization.

To me, this seemed incredibly unsuitable for a hunting lifestyle.

When they went out hunting, they were a party of all swordsmen or a party of all wizards, right?

"Isn't it difficult to hunt when everyone uses the same weapon?" I queried.

"I've never felt that way... Our sense of smell tells us everything we need to know about the prey, so the actual hunting isn't terribly difficult."

Is that how it is?

I got the feeling it would've been *more* difficult to fight with a single-specialization party than with a mixed-specialization party in the famous hunter game I used to play in my old world... Maybe that was because the "prey" was always some kind of massive and powerful dinosaur-like creature? In this world, it would be like trying to hunt a primordial dragon.

Going on even a single hunt would be a serious risk to your life!

Enough about video games! In any case, the kobolds were skilled hunting monsters. And there were various families, each specializing in a different weapon or ability... If they got together, they could form a formidable army.

The hundred or so kobolds present included many young and elderly members who couldn't fight, so that wasn't a possibility for them, unfortunately.

When things calm down, I'd love to form a survival game hobby group with them.

I've got so many things I want to do that it's getting hard to keep track of them all. I'm having fun, though, and that's what matters.

"And what will you do to protect the things precious to you?" I asked. "You must know the humans are preparing to come and wipe you out, right?"

"What can we do but fight? Honestly, I'm a little surprised we've continued on like this for this long, but we can't continue imposing on the Guardian of the Forest..."

The fact that there weren't many monster attacks in the Osphe Province probably had something to do with that. The merchants weren't as careful as they probably should've been.

There wasn't any snow around Lenice, but if you went a bit further north, there was still snow this time of year. In Arsenta, spring was still a ways off, maybe due to the geography of the area. The only monsters that could survive here were those naturally adapted for snow and cold or those with natural fur coats like the kobolds.

"And after that? You can't possibly be planning to let yourselves be exterminated?" I pushed.

"Of course not! We'll have to find some way to head south and search for a forest where we can sustain ourselves without upsetting the ecosystem."

"What if you joined Project Shiana?"

"I don't know..."

I suppose that even if she's the pack's leader, she can't make such a

monumental decision by herself.

“Try discussing it with the others and see what they think,” I suggested. “Even if you don’t join Project Shiana, I’ll do everything I can to protect this pack.”

I’d promised the Guardian of the Forest as much. Besides, I couldn’t bear to see the baby kobold I’d gotten so close to being put in danger.

“We’re going to go home for now. We’ll return tomorrow!” I promised.

Before we left, though, we indulged in a mamushi barbecue with the kobolds.

8 - Time for a Strategy Meeting!

THE following day...

Healran never joined us again.

We asked the elemental spirits following him where he was, and they told us he was hiding in a sketchy inn somewhere in the slums. I had no idea what he was doing there, but I figured he would probably be fine.

Oh, and we received a letter from Papa. It included a letter of authorization from Grandpa Gouche.

Let me see what it says...

...Oh my. Is this country seriously okay?

The letter from Papa contained a report on the regional commander's personal history and informed us that Karna would be coming to meet up with us.

All three of the Osphe children in one place? This is a recipe for disaster.

As for Grandpa Gouche's letter of authorization, it sounded so much like him I could practically hear his voice in my head as I read it.

To summarize, he wrote: "Will is carrying out a review, so all members of the knighthood, regardless of division or rank, are to obey his orders."

The real problem was the final page.

It was a royal decree declaring the implementation of a special review of the royal knighthood and temporarily endowing Will with the power to make arrests.

That's right, a royal decree. From the king!

The letter also encouraged Will, telling him this would be a nationwide, consecutive crackdown and not to lose to the other officials. It also said he

could use the watchdogs with him as he saw fit.

Is ferreting out corruption a competition now? And, anyway, is this really the best time for this?!

No, hold on...

From here on out, Papa and the other key players who formed the backbone of the country would have to split their time between their day-to-day duties and dealing with the monster problem and Runohark.

If there were weak links within the knighthood—the natural first line of defense against the monsters—it would only be a hindrance.

This is a calculated preemptive strike before things get troublesome later!

“Father’s really planning to wipe Runohark out!” I cried.

I can just picture Papa’s eyes sparkling with determination! In that case, we’ll help! I nominate Mr. Healran for the role!

“What makes you say that?” Ralf asked. I explained what I’d deduced.

“Father must also have thought it was amus—I mean, *important*—so he left this task to Will, don’t you think?”

“You! You were just about to say *amusing*, weren’t you?!” Will growled.

I was, but if I come out and say that, you’ll torment me, so I’ll feign ignorance to the bitter end!

“No! But now you can stay with us until this is resolved, right, Will?”

It was convenient, for sure, that Will now had an official reason to accompany us and see this through.

The regions that required the most thorough investigations would probably be assigned to professional investigators, but this would still be a valuable experience for Will to prepare him for his future role as king.

We really are killing two birds with one stone!

“Tch!” Will clicked his tongue. “I see what you did there, Pipsqueak. Fine, I’ll let you get away with it this time. As long as I do a proper investigation, I can probably take leave from the palace for a while without anyone complaining.”

What kind of noble-born prince clicks his tongue like a ruffian?!

“Anyways, let’s head back to the forest again today!” I said in a singsong voice.

Truthfully, once we’d returned the previous night, Marquis Parzeth had told us he was worried for our safety and asked us not to leave the city again.

I felt bad because I could tell that he was genuinely concerned, but surprisingly, the raccoon-like regional commander had taken our side. I got the feeling he just wanted us out of the way so he didn’t have to worry about us sniffing around in the city. Everything he said sounded insincere, and Will’s artificial smile made an appearance for the first time in a while.

Unlike Ralf’s polite but not heartfelt smile, Will’s artificial smile sent shivers up my spine. If I never saw it again, it would still be too soon.



TODAY, apparently, the elemental spirits would guide us to the kobold pack.

We made our way through the forest with Lars in the lead. Shinki stopped several times along the way to catch mamushi, but even so, we arrived in less than half the time it took us the day before.

“Hello!” I called out.

The instant we entered the pack’s clearing, a bullet hurtled straight toward me.

It was an incredibly roly-poly bullet.

The bullet slammed into me with a gentle impact, making a *thump!* sound.

“Woof, woof, woof!”

It was the baby kobold we’d rescued the day before, wagging his tail so enthusiastically that his entire body shook with the momentum.

Oh, I see. You’re just so happy to see me!

...Then again, why does your gaze keep straying to the mamushi Shinki’s carrying? I’m less important than the food?!

The other kobolds regarded our group without fear, seeming curious to see

that we'd returned.

Then, a crowd gathered around Shinki and the mamushi...

Fine, I get it, food wins.

"These are for everyone to eat, so please help us cook them!" I said.

As if they'd been waiting for an invitation, the sword-wielding kobolds began butchering the mamushi.

The magic user kobolds prepared a campfire to cook over.

The fire magic users lit the fire, and the wind magic users fanned the flames and carried the smoke away. Water magic users waited nearby to prevent the fire from raging out of control.

It was an impressive show of teamwork.

The hand-combat kobolds skewered the mamushi meat on sticks and set them up around the fire.

Watching them work, the difference between kobolds and high kobolds quickly became apparent.

All kobolds differed in size depending on their breed, but the high kobolds were larger than other members of the same breed. High kobolds reached nearly seven feet tall when walking on two legs.

If not for its droopy ears, the Saint Bernard high kobold would look just like a bear. Saint Bernards were members of the Green Family, known for being skilled at cultivation.

The quickest way to identify a high kobold was that they could speak Larshian.

I wondered why, although kobolds all spoke in dog sounds, high kobolds could speak Larshian.

Suzuko was a goblin, but she could speak Larshian. Yet the leader of the goblin clan Shinki had encountered in Cass was a hobgoblin who couldn't communicate that way.

It seemed unbelievable, but I had to consider the possibility it was totally up to God's whims.

In any case, once the meat festival was underway, I was finally able to make contact with the super fluffy kobolds.

It was the baby kobold who presented the opportunity to me.

The super fluffy kobolds were the Healer Family. Apparently, theirs was the second most respected after the Star-Reader Family. The family included healers with healing magic and were heavily relied upon by all the other kobolds.

Not all members of the Healer Family could use healing magic, but everyone could study the non-magical (medical) healing arts.

Even the Goddess Cresiolle loves fluffies!

I always assumed she would favor the righteous-prince type like my brother and pure, beautiful maidens, but... Unlike God, I think I could get along just fine with the Goddess!

An especially fluffy member of the Healer Family—a young man, judging by his voice—spoke to me.

“Thank you for saving the Herbs’ youngest child, miss.”

“Herbs?” I repeated.

I’m guessing that by “youngest child,” they’re referring to the baby kobold, but what do herbs have to do with him?

“The kobold you saved is the youngest child of the Herb Family’s family leader.”

The young man attempted to explain, but I didn’t understand what he was saying.

“What kind of kobolds are the Herb Family? Is a family leader more highly ranked than the Star-Reader Priestess?” I asked.

Based on the title, I had a rough idea of what a “family leader” was but didn’t want to jump to conclusions without clarifying first.

“Sorry, miss. I should’ve guessed you might not be familiar with that word.”

“My name’s Nefertima, but you can call me Neema.”

I didn't want him to have to keep calling me "miss," so I introduced myself. I hoped he'd give me identifying information about himself in return so I could stop thinking of him as "the especially fluffy young man."

"Pardon me again, this time for not introducing myself. I'm the son of the Healer Family's family leader. My name is Hanley."

"You have a name?!"

I was a little surprised.

Maybe having a name also influenced the ability to speak? Shinki had said that having a name made a person an individual in the eyes of the world or some such thing.

But Gratia can't speak, so that must not be right...

God, throw me a line here! This is going to eat at me until I figure it out!

"Do you know what it means to have a name, Miss Neema?"

"Shinki explained it to me, but this is my first time meeting a named monster."

I was Shinki and Gratia's name-giver, and Gratia's mother hadn't been in any state to introduce herself to me when we met.

"This Shinki you speak of has a name, doesn't he?"

"I gave Shinki his name. I may not look like much, but I'm actually the goblins' boss!" I said proudly.

It was easy to forget, but I was technically the boss of Shinki's clan.

Hold on, this conversation is getting way off track!

"More importantly, what does the Herb Family specialize in?" I asked to get us back on track.

"You're returning to *that* after making such a shocking statement?!"

"Various circumstances led to me unintentionally becoming the goblins' boss. Hanley, please tell me everything there is to know about kobolds!"

And so, Hanley taught a lesson on kobold biology.

Ralf, Will, and I were the only students, though.

Shinki and Haku were off somewhere playing with the kobolds, so they didn't join.

Kobold families were generally divided into two categories: hunting families and lifestyle families. Hunting families were gifted with weapons and physical abilities, and lifestyle families with production and support skills. The families would trade goods and services to help one another make up for areas the others weren't skilled in.

"Kobolds can walk upright on two legs by the time they are full grown. Children haven't yet developed the musculature necessary, so they walk on four legs while building muscle in their legs and shoulders." Hanley dragged over an idle-looking kobold and pointed out the muscle groups and range of joint movement required for walking on two legs.

Personally, the only "explanation" I required for this was the fact that we were in a fantasy world.

When I was invited to touch our gracious model, I got the impression the kobolds' joints were thicker than those of an Earth dog.

The kobolds' musculature was very different from the canine animals in this world. Even compared to the active animals who worked with the Beast Knights Legion, the kobolds won hands-down in muscle mass.

Furthermore, Hanley's fur was just as fluffy as it looked!

The top layer was soft and light, similar to Dee's fur. But when you dug your fingers deeper, the underlayers were thick and warm. And, perhaps because it was protected from wear and tear, the dense undercoat felt sooo silky to the touch. I could only imagine how wonderful it would feel to hug him—just like cuddling a giant stuffed animal!

"Ralf! Let's make a stuffed animal that looks like Hanley!" I said.

"Where did that idea come from all of a sudden?" Ralf asked.

"You'll understand if you touch him! If we could recreate the texture of his fur, our stuffed animals would be a hit!"

I wonder if Ralf can use his magic to do it? Maybe this is the Goddess' true purpose in bestowing him with her favor!

"I don't know about that..." Hanley protested dubiously, but Ralf and Will's faces lit up the moment they touched him.

"I can't deny I've never felt anything like this before."

"Yeah. But I think it would be difficult to replicate."

"I think it might be possible if we shaved a sample of his fur and used 'Construct,' don't you think? We'd need to experiment a bit to get the right density, though."

"But that wouldn't make it into a fabric... Maybe we could use 'Form' to make it into a fabric."

That's it. When we get home, I'm buckling down and learning about magic. I have no idea what the two of them are saying right now. But if they can make a Hanley-replica stuffed animal, we can mass-produce them and sell them to help fund Project Shiana!

"It might take a while, but let's try," Ralf said. "Once Karna gets here, she might be able to help us formulate a spell that will work."

In this world, magic was divided into "chanted spells" and "written spells." But it was further classified into "simple spells" and "compound spells."

Well, written spells were cast using high-level magic and a magic circle, so they were technically *all* "compound spells."

As for spoken spells, around half of all low-level spells were "simple spells." Simple spells were the power endowed in the elements by God and were considered a naturally occurring phenomenon. The stronger the individual, the greater the power they could command. And by combining spells together, it was possible to create new spells.

However, not much was actually known about the origins and inner workings of magic, so this was all based on conjecture.

Even the simple spells currently known to mankind number in the thousands.

For example, "Fire" was a simple spell, and "Throw Fire" combined the non-

attributed “Throw” and the fire-attributed “Fire” spells, so it was a compound spell.

Combining multiple simple spells to create one compound spell required the foresight to avoid components that would counteract one another and assemble them in an order that would best stabilize the power being invoked.

Simple magic was all assigned elemental runes, so you would convert it to runes and then remove incompatible elements such as fire and water or strong and weak.

It was impossible to directly combine multiple types of elementally attributed magic, so non-attributed magic would be used to cobble them together. This process was known as “formulating” a spell.

As such, the majority of newly created spells were useful spells classified as non-attributed magic. Non-attributed magic was not a fifth category separate from the other elements, but rather a pure form of magic that could be used regardless of attribution.

It was easiest to think of formulating magic as the process of knitting together magic “words” to form a “sentence.” In this example, elementally attributed magic would be like nouns, and non-attributed magic would be like verbs.

Even someone like me, who couldn’t use magic, could comprehend the basics of simple formulation. However, the higher-level spells incorporated components that could be likened to adjectives and conjunctions, which made it much more complicated and confusing.

Karna was really good at formulating magic, so she’d be able to figure out a way to recreate Hanley’s fur!

The three of us were petting Hanley to our hearts’ content when the Dalmatian from yesterday approached us.

“Hanley, sorry to interrupt, but would you mind if I borrowed the human girl for a while?”

“Only if you promise to take the boys as well.”

How heartless, Hanley!

I'm sorry for invading your personal space, but your fur is enticing my most basic instincts! Please let me pet you just a little more!



“Are you two the young lady’s brothers?”

“I’m her elder brother, Ralfreed.”

“My name is Wilhelt. I’m not her brother, but I suppose we’re distant relatives.”

Oh, that’s right; Will’s full name is Wilhelt. I’ve completely forgotten! And I suppose we are related... Albeit very distantly!

“I see. I’m the leader of this pack. My name is Sicily.”

Come to think of it, I never learned her name.

Sicily was the perfect name for a member of the Star-Reader Family; in Larshian, Sicily meant “Star.”

“I’d like you to explain what we discussed yesterday to the leaders of each family,” she said.

Oh, that reminds me!

“But Hanley still hasn’t explained about the family leaders and the Herb Family!” I cried.

“In that case, I’ll have each family leader introduce their family directly.”

And so, Sicily led me to where the family leaders had assembled. Of course, Ralf and Will accompanied us.

Hanley seemed relieved by our departure.

Don’t worry. Once we’re done, I’ll come back for more pets!

A clearing, created by cutting down trees, was a short distance from where the barbeque was still in full swing. Kobolds of various breeds gathered there, sitting on the stumps left behind after clearing the land.

It looked almost like a prize-winning dog competition.

Many of the kobolds appeared to be elders whose sex was not apparent at first glance.

It’s not my fault that I can’t tell; their bodies don’t have any identifiable shape! Where are the boobs?!

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Sicily said. “These humans saved the youngest child of the Herb Family and have proposed a plan for our continued survival.”

Heh. Time to turn on the charm!

“My name is Nefertima Osphe. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.” I lifted my skirt slightly and smiled.

This was a standard noblewoman’s greeting for situations where you found yourself among a group of individuals of equal status. They probably didn’t understand the significance, but I chose this gesture to express that I saw them as my equals despite the difference in species.

“I’m her older brother, Ralfreed.”

“And I’m Wilhelt.”

Wait a minute! If you say it like that, they’ll think you’re my brother too, Will! I don’t want to be associated with a brother like you!

“I believe you’ve heard the basics from Sicily already, but please allow me to explain the plan again in more detail.”

- First, it has to be in a forest, but otherwise, the location hasn’t been decided yet.
- The kobolds and goblins will inhabit the same forest but live separately.
- Once everything is sorted on the human side, we’ll let in adventurers.
- When encountering adventurers, the hunting families are requested to engage them in battle.
- Lifestyle families, elders, and children are permitted to engage or not at their own discretion.
- When fighting, there is the possibility that both humans and monsters may die.

That was as much as we’d decided, and it was all tentative. We wouldn’t know how it would turn out until we discussed it with the king and the adventurers’ guild.

Ralf had mentioned that it might be possible to create a magical item that would allow both parties to fight without anyone dying. We’d need to discuss the matter with old man Salzar to see if he could develop such an item.

We also hadn't decided what the protocol would be if the kobolds captured an adventurer alive.

Apparently, it was possible for kobolds to reproduce with humans, but according to kobold custom, they didn't have children except with their lifemate, which made them different from goblins.

I felt guilty for how much of this plan was still undecided.

The discussion also illustrated how simple and primitive the goblins really were.

"Hrmph! If we capture a human, the only thing they're good for is the festival!"

"Um... Which family are you the leader of, mister?" I asked.

"I'm the leader of the Fighter Family. We're a battle-ready family. Our entire bodies are a deadly weapon."

Oh, right! They're the Dobermans I saw carrying brass knuckles. The leader has long ears and a long tail, so I didn't recognize his breed.

"And what do you mean by 'the festival'?"

"The inexperienced youngsters from each family will hunt the humans down, of course. They don't move like animals and come up with attacks that wouldn't even occur to us. There's nothing that gets your blood rushing with excitement like chasing down a human who's desperate to escape!"

They may look cute on the outside but are carnivores on the inside. They're monsters, after all. They have different values.

"I'm an old man now, but back in my day, I caught humans faster than anyone during the festival."

I feel bad for those humans! They must've been so frightened being chased by a group of kobolds.

"The hunting families might be okay with that, but we lifestyle families would like to use the humans' dexterity."

"And who are you, sir?" I asked.

This kobold had a square face and long hair on his cheeks, around his mouth, and on his brows that made him look elderly, but his voice was young.

He was short but muscular, and a thick layer of wiry fur covered his limbs.

He's got to be a Schnauzer!

"I'm the leader of the Carpenter Family."

The name reminded me of a certain old TV program about improving one's home.

Based on their name, I assumed they built things like houses and furniture.

I *was* surprised to learn that Schnauzers—who were popular guard dogs—were doing manufacturing and production work. I would've assumed they would be a hunting family rather than a lifestyle family based on their physical build.

"You're saying you'd like to use the captured humans as laborers?" I deduced.

"That's right. And not just the Carpenter Family—I bet the Green Family and Furnace Family could use the help, too."

The Green Family were Saint Bernard farmers, and the Furnace Family were Bulldog blacksmiths.

They gave off the aura of incredibly stubborn craftsmen.

"If we're going to live in one place permanently, I doubt our family alone will be able to tend to all the crops we'd need."

The speaker's relaxing tone of voice and appearance resembling a huge teddy bear gave him a warm, almost cuddly impression.

I want to give the leader of the Green Family a kotatsu and stewpots as a present to complete the peaceful and relaxing atmosphere!

"We'd like to get our hands on some humans as well. It's not as if absolutely anyone could do our job, but they'd probably still be better than if we recruited the other families to help."

More than half of the lifestyle families wanted to use the captured humans as laborers.

“In that case, does everyone agree to let the captured humans decide between participating in the festival or becoming a bondsman?”

Bondsmen and bondswomen were the closest thing they had to slaves in this world.

In general, slavery was illegal in every country.

However, by vowing upon one’s name, it was possible to enter into a period of indentured servitude that would last until predetermined requirements were met.

A nationally recognized organization known as the covenant brokerage was in charge of overseeing these contracts, and all organization members were required to take vows to the leader of their country—in the case of our country, to the king.

These vows were to protect the bondsmen and included clauses such as faithfully upholding the bondsmen’s contracts, defending the bondsmen’s rights, and not mistreating them, among many others.

But it was because they always, without fail, kept these promises that the covenant brokerage was deeply trusted.

If we adopted this system into Project Shiana, we’d need to permanently station an agent from the covenant brokerage there.

An adventurer captured by the kobolds would be given three options: First: ransom. If they could pay the ransom, they’d be released immediately.

Second: participation in the festival. If they could escape, they’d be free, but if they were caught, they’d be imprisoned like prisoners of war.

Third: becoming a bondsman. The kobolds would assign a monetary value to the bondsmen’s labor, and they would be released once they reached a certain amount.

The “wages” for the bondsman’s labor wouldn’t be paid with physical money but calculated to measure how far the bondsman had worked toward the price of their freedom. Any bond lord (the “master” with whom a bondsman had formed a contract of servitude) who attempted to fudge these numbers would

face severe punishment from the covenant brokerage.

It would also be possible to participate in the festival and then choose to become a bondsman if you failed to escape. Although, to me, it seemed unlikely anyone who'd been captured by the kobolds in the first place would escape during the festival.

"The next order of business is to determine how we'll deal with the punitive force."

Originally, the unit leader had estimated a force of around 300 soldiers. But, based on what we'd seen in the city of Lenice, it seemed closer to 200. And among those, only between fifty to seventy of the soldiers were members of the royal knighthood.

If things went well, we might be able to use the information Healran gathered to immobilize the members of the knighthood completely, but with so many factors still up in the air, we'd decided not to count on that.

If it came to pass, we'd count it as a lucky bonus.

We faced the challenge of not knowing how the punitive force would proceed, but using the elemental spirits as our clever spies could remedy that!

The commanding officers in the royal knighthood were mostly graduates of the royal academy, which meant their battle strategies would be fairly predictable. Ralf and Will's insider knowledge would prove vital in identifying their blind spots.

As for the nitty-gritty of the battle plans, we divided our forces into three groups, each with its own strategy: close-quarters fighting, mid-range attacks, and long-distance attacks.

Close-quarters fighting would center around the shield-wielding kobolds, with assistance from those who specialized in sword fighting and hand-to-hand combat. The mid-range attack group would mostly consist of archer kobolds, with some assistance from mid-level and lower-level magic users. Long-distance attacks would fall to the higher-level magic users providing fire support. A group of healers would be stationed at the rear with the long-distance group to assist the injured.

The knights will be able to follow orders precisely, but the real question is: how will the motley assortment of adventurers of different levels be able to keep up? Not very well, is my guess.

“Unit leader, I’d like you and your men to infiltrate the adventurers’ ranks,” I said.

During the battle, they would spread incorrect information to throw the enemy soldiers into confusion.

“And Will, I want you to gather intelephant... *intelligence!*”

There I go, mispronouncing complex words again! I want him to gather intelligence—what is an “intelephant” anyway?!

And what do you think you’re doing, shaming an innocent child for a teeny tiny little mistake by laughing so hard you have to hold your stomach, you demon prince?!

“Haha. What is it you want to know?”

“Hm, well, to start the punitive forces’ formation and the battle commander’s personality?”

“I understand the formation, but why do you want to know the battle commander’s personality?”

“It should tell us something about how the troops will move, don’t you think?”

If Will were the battle commander, he’d use a variety of underhanded moves to annoy the crap out of the enemy. As a result, surprise tactics wouldn’t be advantageous against him—after all, he’d be especially on guard against underhanded moves being used against his own troops.

If Ralf were the battle commander, he would probably take a frontal approach and adapt his strategy based on how the battle was going, moving his soldiers as necessary to avoid leaving any openings for the enemy to attack.

It was so unlikely that Karna would ever be a battle commander that it almost wasn’t worth considering, but *hypothetically*, if she were, I bet she would lead with a concentrated frontal attack backed by a small contingent of elite magic

users.

If I were the battle commander, I would have to rely on my geeky knowledge.

Let's reference the famous literary classic *The Art of War* for a moment.

The overarching message of *The Art of War* is that knowledge is crucial—knowledge of the enemy, of your own forces, and about the environment and topography of the location where the battle will take place. Spies are essential for gathering this intel.

As for the battle commander's personality, *The Art of War* also mentioned the "Five dangerous faults that may affect a general." This principle refers to character faults that are likely to spell disaster for an army if possessed by its general.

Let's consider the famous example of the Sengoku-era shogun Shingen Takeda's *fūrinkazan* battle flag, which referenced a passage from "*The Art of War*," which reads, "Let your rapidity be that of the wind, your compactness that of the forest. In raiding and plundering, be like fire; in immovability, like a mountain."

Apparently, this quote was trying to express that ideally, military troops should be flexible enough to adapt to any situation, but let's apply this to actual battle strategies.

Two annotations follow the passage of *The Art of War* phrase quoted on the *fūrinkazan*, the first of which reads, "Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night."

In our case, our "dark and impenetrable" (aka *secret*) plans would probably refer to traps. We'd have to make them as terrible as possible to crush the enemy's will to fight.

"Your compactness that of the forest."

We would slowly but steadily thin the enemy's ranks. We'd capture the adventurers stationed around the perimeter of the army, focusing on the long-distance magic users.

"In immovability, like a mountain."

We'd set ourselves up as a decoy to lure the enemy in. We could create a pitfall trap in their path and have our mascot, Haku, waiting inside. Haku would give them the gift of being tied up and paralyzed. Apparently, Haku was capable of inducing the paralysis and HP down debuff status effects. It also possessed the typical abilities inherent to all slimes: it could eat anything and melt things on contact. This made Haku the ideal candidate for stopping enemies in their tracks once they fell into the pitfall trap.

"Let your rapidity be that of the wind."

We'd use the kobolds' dog-like speed to charge at the enemy and knock out the "In raiding and plundering, be like fire" bit while we were at it by lighting them up with fire magic!

As for the second annotation, which reads, "And when you move, fall like a thunderbolt"... I couldn't think of anything in our situation that corresponded to this bit of wisdom.

We could use magic to create lightning as our signal to retreat?

We would flee in the direction from which the enemy had come—in short, toward Lenice.

We'd let them see us fleeing toward Lenice, and once we were out of sight, we'd change directions and escape from the Parzeth Proxy!

For this to work, we'd need to set up a rendezvous point near the city of Lenice and have everyone incapable of fighting wait there with our supplies so that when the time came, we could all flee together and head west.

As an insurance plan, we'd spread rumors among the enemy troops that the kobolds were seen fleeing east and north.

"What do you think of this battle plan?"

I explained what I'd come up with, leaving out the bits about *The Art of War* and *fūrinkazan*.

"Where did you learn so much about battle strategy?" Will asked.

"There are loads of books in Father's study; you can find information about anything!"

That excuse would deceive the majority of people.

“You can already read such difficult books?” Will asked.

“I read a lot, so I’ve learned many words!”

“Way to go, Neema!” Ralf praised me.

...That was way too easy. Don’t be so easily fooled, Ralf!

To be honest, there were hardly any books about warfare in Papa’s study. Most of the books were about law and economics. I’d been surprised to find that, among the older books, quite a few were self-help books about how to win a lady’s heart.

Papa, what exactly happened before you married Mama?!

“I think it might be difficult to thin out their numbers, but if we use traps and lure a few enemies away from the main force, we could probably immobilize at least some of them that way.”

“What kind of trap could we use to lure people away from the main force?” I asked.

“It’s not a trap exactly, but a phenomenon known as ‘elemental spirits playing pranks.’ We set off a large trap, and while they’re confused, we’ll have wind spirits push some away from the group. Well, the wind will mostly just cause them to stumble a few steps out of line, but even so, it’ll create an opening for us. Earth spirits can cause the enemy’s legs to sink into the dirt, fire spirits can make them desperately thirsty, and water spirits can momentarily cloud their vision.”

Whoa, although none of these things actually cause any damage by themselves, those are irritating pranks!

Your legs sinking into the ground would make it difficult to move, and if thirst overcame you and you had to stop to take a drink out of your flask, it would leave you exposed to attack briefly. Not to mention having your vision obscured—this could be a death sentence on the battlefield!

“None of their forces can see elemental spirits, so they won’t be on the lookout for them playing pranks, either,” I said.

“Right. I don’t know if we can create a large enough trap to distract them, though...” Will replied.

Oh, don’t you worry about that. We’ve got skilled builders on our side!

“I’ll ask the Carpenter Family to work on that,” I said. “It should be no problem for them.”

“That’s a good idea. As professional craftsmen, they would likely be able to come up with something that would work,” Will said.

“I bet we could devise several different varieties of traps as well,” Ralf added. “The Carpenter Family can build wooden traps, and the Furnace Family can make deadly metal traps. Are there any families that deal with weaving or ropes?”

Just what is Ralf scheming up? Is he planning to drop a net on the enemy? Or maybe tie it up between two trees?

“I’m the leader of the Weaver Family, but there’s another family, the Knitter Family, who handles rope-making.”

The Weaver Family were Collies, and the Knitter Family were Border Collies. Which would mean they were originally one breed.

Madam family leader, please let me pet the beautiful fur on your chest later! I’m not trying to fondle your breasts; I just want to touch the fluffy chest fur Collies are famous for!

...If I said this out loud, I’d be mistaken for a pervert. I’d better be careful.

“In that case, you’re in charge of making nets,” Ralf said.

*Ralf plans on dropping a net on the enemy, doesn’t he?! Anyway, when it comes to booby traps, there must be landmines, right? You know, those bombs buried underground that go off with a deafening **BOOM!** and an impressive spray of dirt in movies.*

...Hmmm. What if we set off all the traps at once, along with a loud noise? No one would know what was going on, which would cause them to panic. And what if, on top of that, we obscured their vision with smoke? Even if it didn’t result in mass pandemonium, it would at least catch some of the less

experienced adventurers off-guard.

“Ralf, is there a spell that would produce a loud noise and smoke?” I asked.

“You want to create a noise, not amplify one?”

“Yeah. The noise of an explosion, **BOOM!**”

“In that case, I think Air Strike would be the best bet.”

“What?!”

Don't tell me he intends to drop bombs from the sky?! No way, calm down! It's okay; gunpowder doesn't exist in this world.

“It's a spell that creates a fireless, air-only explosion,” Ralf explained. “What kind of spell did you misunderstand it for just now?”

“Um, some kind of spell to rain fire down from the sky or something?”

“That would be a Meteor Strike, but the fire isn't all that powerful...”

It does exist?! And how could a spell with a name like Meteor Strike possibly be weak?! A meteor is a natural phenomenon—er, an extra-terrestrial phenomenon—powerful enough to wipe out the dinosaurs!

“As for smoke, the spell I recommend depends on how much smoke you want to produce,” Ralf said.

“Enough smoke to obscure our opponents' vision!” I declared.

“In that case, Smoke Screen should do the trick.”

Yup, that would do it.

“Can you make a trap combining those two spells so that once they go off, the other traps all engage simultaneously?” I asked.

“Hmm... It should be possible if they share a single trigger, but it will be quite difficult to configure the mechanism just right...”

“You and the Carpenter Family can figure it out, Ralf!” I said.

“Will's good at those kinds of things; let's have him think it over.”

“Leave it to me!”

Wait a minute, Will, don't you know you're a prince?! Princes aren't supposed to brag that they're good at setting up booby traps! Our poor country, to be saddled with such a deviant crown prince...

The only thing left now is to see how long we can stall. I'd really like at least two more days to prepare. When in trouble, call Sol! ...No, I mean, the elemental spirits!

"Lars, can you please ask the elemental spirits to delay the adventurers still making their way here?" I requested.

"Growl."

I got the feeling he was casually replying along the lines of "You got it."

The elemental spirits seem fond of pranks... I wonder if the adventurers will arrive at all once the elemental spirits get done with them!

"Everyone, don't let that human deceive you!"

A pretty young girl burst into the clearing.

Her ears stood straight up from the top of her head, and she had a fluffy tail swaying behind her as she moved. Her shimmering silver eyes flashed with what appeared to be anger.

Most eye-catching was her hair, which was the same color as the fur on her tail. It was styled uncommonly short for a girl with a dark blue hue, like the color of twilight, highlighted with a mesh of silver streaks that called to mind shooting stars traveling across the night sky.

"Sister, this is a gathering of the family leaders," Sicily said. "Furthermore, I will not allow you to disrespect our guests."

Oh, so this is her younger sister. She's younger than I expected.

Sicily appeared to be in her twenties, so I'd been expecting her younger sister to be in her mid-teens.

Hold on—that is not what I should focus on right now!

Sicily is a werewolf, so she looks similar to a human, but her younger sister should still be a kobold. Or, at best, a high kobold, right?! But she has an

otherwise entirely human body with animal ears and a tail... Which means she's a beastperson, right?!

I think I can see where this is going...

9 - It Was Foretold That a Savior Would Appear. Wonder Who It Will Be...

“SICILY, your younger sister isn’t a kobold?”

I normally found it uncomfortable to ask about other people’s family situations, but since she’d previously volunteered that they weren’t blood-related, I didn’t think she’d mind.

“Yeah, she was abandoned. As you can see, her coloring is different than the other wolf tribes, so they tossed her in the river to drown...”

“That’s enough; you don’t have to explain!” I rushed to say. “I’m sorry for asking such a private question.”

What the actual... They threw her in the river to drown?! I’m going to start crying if I hear any more!

“Could she be a member of the Star Wolf Tribe?” Will asked.

I’d been wondering the same, but... It couldn’t be, could it?

In modern times, only three types of wolves were confirmed to be living on the continent of Larshia: forest wolves, who lived in forests; land wolves, who lived in fields and rocky plains; and snow wolves, who lived in the snowy mountains.

There were also three wolf tribes of beastpeople: the Forest Wolf Tribe, the Land Wolf Tribe, and the Snow Wolf Tribe. Supposedly, God created the wolf tribes of beastpeople in the image of their animal counterparts, but if you asked me, he was probably just too lazy to come up with original material.

In any case, the Star Wolf Tribe had star wolves.

According to written records, they had fur the color of the night sky with silver highlights that looked like shooting stars. The star wolves had been hated and feared by humans due to their almost entirely black coloring. Eventually, they were hunted to extinction. The Star Wolf Tribe was likewise persecuted

and believed to be extinct as well.

“I can’t say for sure if she’s a member of the Star Wolf Tribe, but I believe her birth was a result of sudden evolutionary development,” Sicily said.

Sicily called it “sudden evolutionary development,” but this looks more like ancestral genetic traits reappearing to me. Either that, or maybe God decided to bring them back to life? Perhaps this is a test of faith?

Hmm... Does that mean God’s trying to tell me to recruit this pretty girl to my cause?! Or maybe that’s my subconscious talking, wanting to add more female energy to the group.

Everywhere I look, I’m surrounded by men. That’s no fun. At least it’s a smorgasbord of delectable dishes? I suppose it could be worse.

Karna’s beautiful too, but she’s more “pretty” than “cute.”

Personally, I think Queen Relena is the most attractive. She has an air of childlike innocence about her that is adorable, but she’s also a bewitching, mature beauty. She might be the ideal woman.

But the cutest of all was Ralf when he was younger! He was so cute it was almost a shame that he was born a boy! Nowadays, he’s become more manly. He’s gotten taller, and his voice is deeper.

Although, compared to Will, Ralf still comes across as cute. Will has grown up way too fast!

Gasp!

While ruminating on my brother’s cuteness, I snapped back to my senses.

“Excuse me, Sicily’s sister... What makes you think we’re trying to deceive everyone?” I asked.

“You humans are all the same! You’re greedy and cruel. You’re the reason we’re in this situation in the first place!”

She has a point. But it’s tricky to put it into words... Wanting for anything at all is, at its root, a form of greed, and I doubt any creature of any species doesn’t have something they desire. Even I have many things I want right now.

And humans are not the only ones whose desires lead to cruelty.

Desires rooted in the will to live give rise to the willingness to inflict cruelty on others to survive. Monsters, too, attack and even kill humans to survive.

That isn't unique to humans.

"Have care how you speak, sister," Sicily warned.

"Sicily, didn't I tell you before not to scold children so harshly?" I intervened. "Your sister has the pack's best interests at heart, so what she has to say is important, too."

Not to mention, you're really scary when you get angry, so for my own sake, stop!

"So, Sicily's sister... Do you have any ideas about how the pack can survive this situation without our intervention?" I asked.

"Well..."

"Anything is fine," I urged. "This is your chance, so say what you're thinking; don't hold back."

"...We children can fight too, you know. They won't tell us anything because we're just kids, but I want to do something to help my pack!"

I see. Is this a case of lashing out due to feeling alienated, as often happens in adolescence? Like how kids often act up to get their parents' attention?

In my past life and this current life, I've always been the youngest child, so I don't know how it is for the oldest or middle children, but I'm familiar with wanting your parents' attention at all costs.

She's lonely. She's acting out because she's lonely and wants someone to pay attention to her.

"I see. You want to fight alongside your sister," I concluded.

The younger sister's eyes were brimming with tears.

Eep! I know I'm not responsible for making her cry, but I still feel bad...

"There, there, it's okay. In that case, how about you and I work together?" I suggested.

I would be present at the battle, naturally. And amidst the fighting, the safest place would probably be right next to me.

Sol and Lars had asked the elemental spirits to watch over me. If worst came to worst, I could borrow Sol's power. Not to mention, I had the ultimate bodyguard, Shizuku, inside of me, so if things got dicey, Sicily's sister could use me as a shield.

Although I imagine Shinki would do something before it got to that point.

And, anyway! I might not get another chance to pet such a beautiful girl! Her hair looks so silky, I want to touch it!

If we become friends, maybe she'll even let me touch her ears and tail!

"Will it help my sister?"

"Of course! Right, Sicily?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. But..." Sicily sounded unsure.

"If she sticks close to me, everyone will help protect her," I promised.

After a moment of reflection, Sicily made a proclamation. "Little sister, this young lady is our Savior. You will stay by her side and protect her at all costs. Understood?"

"Yes!"

Whaaaaat?!

Sicily's sister must've been thrilled because a wide smile broke out across her face, and her tail began wagging vigorously.



She's so stinkin' cute! Girls really are adorable!

Hold on, why am I letting myself get distracted?! I need to slap back about being proclaimed a "savior"! Wasn't I the one who was supposed to be protecting her, not the other way around?! And when was it decided that I'm something as impressive as a "savior" anyway?!

C-Calm down! Deep breaths, in and out, in and out...

"What do you mean by 'savior'?" I asked after I regained my cool.

"Our misfortune was foretold in the stars," Sicily explained. "We were attacked before I could spread the news to all the packs, but the stars also foretold a savior would appear. I firmly believe you are one."

"But Ralf and Will are here too..." I gestured to the boys.

"Forgive me for saying so, but if not for your insistence, they might have overlooked our plight."

Oh... Yeah. That's probably true. If it was Ralf and Will, they would've probably decided that since they're monsters, they should be "dealt with." Though they would've left it up to the royal knighthood rather than getting personally involved.

"You're not wrong," Ralf said. "In the first place, if not for Neema, we probably never would have met you."

"Heh. If this is your savior, you have a tough road ahead of you," Will snickered.

What's that?! I'm going to save the kobolds; wait and see, naysayer! I glared at Will with my cheeks puffed up in ire, and an evil smile broke out across his face as he reached out to poke my cheek.

"All right, we don't have much time left," Will said. "Let's get down to business and finalize our strategy."

In response to Will's declaration, the kobolds all took on serious expressions.

I guess this is the power of charisma, eh?

First, we decided what kinds of traps to use. There weren't many types to

choose from that could be used against people.

Of course, we'd use pitfall traps; that went without saying. And maybe we could rig up some logs or stones to fall on the enemy and use nets to impede their movement?

It would only lead to more trouble than it was worth if we implemented deadly traps. If they killed humans, it would ignite righteous indignity against the kobolds.

We decided to cloud the enemy's vision before anything else so they wouldn't see the traps as they walked straight into them.

We would use the aforementioned Airstrike and Smoke Screen spells to surprise the enemy. Immediately following this, we'd drop the logs and stones. Some would drop from above, and others would be flung in from both sides.

Furthermore, we'd cast magically reinforced nets and let the elemental spirits "play pranks" on the especially powerful-looking enemies. Then, while they were distracted, we'd hit them with an airborne sleeping drug!

It was possible to put them to sleep using magic, but any powerful magic users and those who were especially strong-willed would likely resist the magical compulsion to sleep.

So we went with one of the oldest tricks in the book—get them to breathe in a powerful sleeping powder. The drug we chose wouldn't last long, but it worked quickly. As long as the enemy was out cold, we could tie them up while they were helpless, so it didn't matter if they didn't stay asleep for long.

Will pondered the issue of how to trigger the traps. In the end, he decided to make them manually triggerable. His reasoning was that even if they couldn't see, the kobolds would still know what was going on due to their excellent sense of hearing and smell.

Who will be in charge of immobilizing the captives?

I asked Sicily if any families possessed both agility and stealth.

"In that case, it's the Herb Family you want," she recommended.

...That reminds me, I totally forgot! I asked Hanley about the Herb Family, but

he never told me about them!

“Who are the Herb Family?” I asked.

“The Herb Family are skilled at gathering information. When they conceal themselves, even our sensitive noses can’t detect them. They have agility and endurance, are excellent at judging a situation, and more than anything, they have incredible nerve.”

Hmm, I wouldn’t guess it by looking at them, but I guess because their breed is the Japanese Shiba Inu, they’re the kobold equivalent to ninjas?

Or so I surmised, but I was mistaken.

When I later got to meet the Herb Family, they were a mixed group of several different Japanese dog breeds.

There were pure-white Kishu, several gray-striped Kai Ken, and even a rare brown-striped Kai Ken. The contrast between the brown-striped Kai Ken’s dark brown base color and its reddish-copper stripes was beautiful. There were also familiar Akita Inu and stern-faced Tosa, and even one that looked like an Ainu Ken.

Ainu Ken were known for having smaller ears than other Japanese breeds, and their facial features were adorably similar to those of Shiba Inu. The fluffy white spokesman for a certain cellphone company is an Ainu Ken, so most Japanese are familiar with the breed.

The Herb Family’s Ainu Ken was a light-yellow color, though, so unfortunately, they didn’t resemble the cellphone company mascot much.

Apparently, the Shiba Inu were the family leader’s immediate family. The baby kobold we’d rescued was the youngest of the family leader’s twelve children.

I shouldn’t be surprised; most canine species tend to produce many offspring.

What was most shocking to me was the news that the Herb Family was the only family that hadn’t suffered a single casualty. When the humans attacked, the Herb Family quickly fled silently and covered their tracks to meet with Sicily and her group.

They should change their name from the Herb Family to the Ninja Family!

So we'd leave the task of immobilizing the captives to the Ninja—I mean the Herb Family.

All right, time to divvy up the labor and prepare!

We'd have all the kobolds capable of carrying logs and stones to help gather them.

The Carpenter Family would work on the logs, trimming off any branches and cutting them to equal length, then sorting them by thickness.

We'd also need to construct wagons for fleeing. The wagons would be designed so the kobolds could pull them by hand, and there would be two types: one for the elderly and children and the other to transport water and supplies.

The Furnace Family would sharpen and repair the kobolds' weapons and create throwing knives and weights for the drop nets.

There wasn't a smithy here, so I asked Shinki to help them construct a makeshift furnace.

To withstand high heat, we pressurized the earth to create the bowl of the furnace. Once we applied Sol's fire-resistance magic to it, it was a pretty decent furnace, considering how quickly we'd thrown it together.

We asked a few fire spirits to control the temperature of the fires, which would hopefully make the Furnace Family's job a little easier.

The Weaver Family and the Knitter Family were in charge of producing a massive quantity of rope and making nets out of it. We also asked them to prepare bandage cloth for emergency first aid.

The Green Family and Philosopher Family were tasked with preparing the rendezvous points where the non-fighters would wait with the supplies, ready for our retreat.

We'd decided to create two rendezvous points with the intention that if something went wrong, it would be easier to minimize casualties if we regrouped in stages.

While Shinki and I worked on the furnace, Ralf and Will had a meeting with the Herb Family. They wanted to fine-tune the plan as much as possible today because we would also have to gather information from the punitive force once we returned to Lenice.

Apparently, Ralf and Will had made a lot of progress in their discussion with the Herb Family's leader because, when I joined back up with them, I couldn't even follow what they were saying.

I feel like such an outsider!

But I wasn't lonely. The family leader's children kept me company. Interestingly, the family leader's older children were high kobolds already, but their mother was still a kobold.

"Why is your mother still a kobold?" I asked.

"It's intentional. In each generation, one or two children choose not to receive names, so they will stay kobolds. It's easier to gather information when we can be mistaken for animals, and people will underestimate us that way. It may not look like it, but our mother is actually the most skilled infiltrator in our entire family."

The family leader's second-oldest child and eldest daughter, Filia, explained this to me.

I'd learned kobolds usually gave birth to between three and five children at a time. In the case of the family leader's children, the first four were the oldest litter, the fifth through ninth were the middle litter, and the tenth through twelfth were the youngest litter.

"I bet they'll have number five and number six tag along with you, Neema," Fika, the third son and fourth child overall, said.

What does he mean?

I tilted my head, confused, and Fika obligingly explained.

"They can serve as messengers in case something happens. They're nearing maturity and are the strongest members of the middle litter."

Kobolds received their names from the pack leader once they reached

maturity.

I asked why, when it must be troublesome to have to travel to meet with the pack leader just to receive their name, but was told that with the kobolds' strength, they could cover the distance in a single day.

A kobold first needed their family leader to acknowledge their physical development and abilities to say they'd truly reached maturity. And once they received this acknowledgment, they would journey to meet the pack leader alone.

Traveling alone proved the kobold's ability to act independently, and journeying to the pack leader's location was a sign of respect and goodwill.

I asked about the kobolds who reached maturity but were not given names. The pack leader asked each newly mature kobold if they wanted a name. Those who responded that they didn't need one would show their bellies as a sign of obedience.

Oh, that's something they have in common with canines.

According to Fika, receiving a name from the pack leader was a right of passage into adulthood and was a big deal among kobolds.

Due to the current emergency situation, all the families were gathered into one pack, but normally, each family had its own territory, and the family leaders all submitted to the pack leader's authority.

Depending on the pack, the number of families that made it up would be different, and it wasn't uncommon for young kobolds to leave their families after reaching maturity.

From what I'd heard, it seemed that in the case of the current family leader of the Herb Family, half of his siblings remained with his family, and the other half had left to start their own families or join other existing branches of the Herb Family in other packs. Those that remained would fortify the bloodlines of their family, and those that left would multiply and spread the bloodline elsewhere. That was why different branches of the same family tended to have good relationships.

Apparently, it was forbidden for branches of the same family to fight over

territory.

Heh, now Fika's picking up where Hanley left off, teaching me about kobold culture.

"Are there a lot of kobold packs?" I asked.

"Yeah. The Star Reader Family are the leaders of our pack, but some other packs are led by the Green Family or Philosopher Family. To my knowledge, there are somewhere around fifty different packs." He quickly added that he didn't know how many of those packs still existed.

After being doggedly pursued by Runohark and subjugated by the royal knighthood and the adventurers' guild, even using the ninja-like abilities of the Herb Family to attempt to contact their branch families in other guilds, all attempts to locate the other packs had been unsuccessful.

"But if we join your Project Shiana, I bet it will make it easier for the other packs to find and join up with us!"

You mean there's going to be even more kobolds?! I hadn't considered the other packs! Please—God, Jesus, Buddha, whoever—let us find the perfect place for our plan! Oh no, wait! If we rely on that God to bless our search for a suitable location, we're doomed for sure!

When Ralf and the others finished their discussion, I got them to explain it to me, but the wisdom of the *fūrinkazan* had apparently been cast aside.

Why?!

And, as Fika had predicted, the children of the Herb Family's family leader would accompany us—his fifth and sixth children, specifically, both sons.

"Let's do our best, Gou and Roku!"

In my mind, I loudly announced, *These are not their names!*

I was worried about what kind of mischief God would enact if he got it in his mind otherwise. It was just too troublesome to keep calling them "number five" and "number six." Using the Japanese numbers five ("go") and six ("roku") as nicknames would help me differentiate between the brothers. I went with Gou instead of Go for number five because it seemed more like a name to me.

Yeah, they're just nicknames! Not proper names!

Although Gou and Roku were nearing maturity, they were still children, which meant they were on the small side.

They're still too big for me to pick up, though.

Their fur was black with tan patches on their bellies, legs, and around their mouths, and adorable tan splotches above their eyes that resembled eyebrows.

Filia was brown, and Fika was reddish-brown. The other siblings were mostly brown or black-and-tan, with a few having rare white fur.

We were going to scout the area and decide where to initiate our battle plan. The idea was that we'd unleash the Airstrike and Smoke Screen spells once the punitive force reached the predetermined location.

We'd also decided to use water magic for the Smoke Screen spell. Normally, Smoke Screen was formed using a combination of fire and air magic, but that would interfere with the kobolds' sense of smell. Instead, we'd use water and wind magic to create a thick cloud of foggy mist. Once the enemy was temporarily blinded, we'd hit them with the log and stone traps.

In the ensuing chaos, the Herb Family would pick off the strongest opponents, focusing especially on magic users. By the time the fog cleared, the kobolds acting as decoys would be in a position to lure the enemy into the pitfall traps.

Next, the kobolds positioned on the front lines would pummel the enemies who made it past the pitfall traps.

Hanley and the other members of the Healer Family would be waiting at the rear. They could patch up just about anything short of a fatal injury. However, they couldn't reattach severed limbs, so our fighters were under strict orders to flee before they were gravely injured.

Will and I would fight with the kobolds, but Ralf would join the punitive force. That would make it easier to figure out the enemy's status, and having Ralf on hand with his healing magic would prevent unnecessary deaths.

Once we returned to the city, we'd need to convince Marquis Parzeth to allow Ralf to join the battle, which wouldn't be easy.

As for the lightning, to signal our retreat, it turned out that none of our magic users could create lighting, so instead, we would have Shinki handle it.

You needed air and water magic to control lighting, criteria for which only Ralf and Shinki fit. Lars couldn't create lightning, but he could harness it when it occurred, wrapping it around his body and using its power to electrocute his opponent.

It's so handy to have a super-powerful holy beast around!

It took us a while to survey the area and decide where to initiate the battle, but eventually, we discovered a convenient location where we could easily set our traps; there was a good amount of underbrush to hide in and impede the enemy's movements; and several natural animal trails to use when making our escape.

It was possible that the Guardian of the Forest had tweaked the topography of this area in our favor.

By the time we'd finished everything that needed to be done and set off on our way home, darkness was already beginning to fall.

And we still needed to do a lot once we returned to the city.

The most daunting task awaiting us was convincing Marquis Parzeth.

We also needed to check in with Healran and make sure he was okay.

Red Hlaada would most likely arrive the next day.

Come to think of it, when will Karna get here? It would make me feel more confident if she arrived before the battle.



WHEN we made it out of the forest and climbed into the carriage, Gou and Roku became highly excited. It seemed it had been a long time since they'd last left because they wagged their tails vigorously and breathed so heavily that they made little wheezes of excitement.

"You need to calm down a little, guys. You've got an important job to do once we reach the city," I reminded them.

The plan was to have Gou and Roku infiltrate the adventurers' ranks.

They looked like huge, adorable puppies. They'd have no trouble slipping into a group of adventurers, especially if any female adventurers were present.

Their job was to investigate the enemy's forces: how many fighters would be on the front lines, the number of magic users, and how many healers would be waiting at the rear, as well as anything else they could glean.

It would be wonderful to have a clear picture of the main force, the royal knighthood, as well, but we weren't even sure if they'd be fighting.

Just to be safe, I asked the elemental spirits to keep an eye on Gou and Roku as well.

Nox was currently taking a "walk" in the forest. He was probably having dinner while he was there. I planned to have Nox act as an emergency courier and deliver messages back and forth with Ralf during the battle.

Currently, Gratia couldn't contribute to the plan. He was still a baby, after all, and since we didn't know what kind of powers he might possess, we couldn't exactly plan an effective way to use them.

When we entered the city, the reeking aura of dereliction hovering over it was as strong as ever.

I had Gou and Roku sniff the knights and royal guardsmen accompanying us so that if something happened, they could use their scents to find them.

For the time being, we'd bring them with us to the manor where we were staying and show them the emergency escape route the royal guards had secured for us.

I called it an "emergency escape route," but it was nothing more than a spot out of the way and likely to go unnoticed where they'd busted a hole in the wall.

After that, the two young kobolds took off into the city.

"I hope they'll be okay..." I said.

"We'll help them if they get into any trouble," the knights unit leader assured me.

If anything happened to Gou and Roku, the elemental spirits would use their usual pranks to alert our unit of knights. Once the kobolds left, the five knights, including the unit leader, announced they were “taking a break” and would be heading out into the city for some fun.

That was just a cover that would allow the knights to disperse among the adventurers to gather information.

Do they even have plain clothes with them to blend in with the adventurers? I had no idea what kind of gear the knights brought while on assignment.

“Enjoy your break, gentlemen,” I said.

“We should go speak with the commander and get the latest update,” Ralf suggested, and the remaining members followed his lead.

Three royal guards broke off to gather information from the servants working in the manor, but even so, about ten people were still in our group.

Ralf led the way out of the manor, heading toward another manor directly beside it.

This manor was much smaller than the mayor’s, but it appeared to be the residence of a noble family. Apparently, it was being used as a temporary field office for the Parzeth District of the Royal Knighthood.

“Brother, the commander you were talking about, is he—”

“Yeah, it’s District Commander Noctis,” Ralf answered me. “He’s going to be the battle commander leading the punitive force.”

So it isn’t the raccoon-like regional commander after all, huh?

As we entered the temporary field office, the knights inside, apparently on break, jumped to attention and paid homage to Will.

“You don’t need to bow. Consider it unnecessary for the duration of my stay in this city.”

The confused knights hesitantly obeyed Will’s command and rose from their bows.

“Are you certain, Your Highness?”

“It’s fine,” Will said. “I’m just tagging along with these guys anyway.”

Commander Noctis was leading us to a guest parlor, but the short journey there was alarming. Although this was a noble family’s manor, the interior was a disaster, with clutter everywhere.

I don’t care if this is currently a glorified men’s locker room—be a little tidier, for goodness’ sake!

On the way, we passed a man out of uniform, which could only mean he was off-duty, carrying a stack of papers and looking suspiciously un-knightly.

Huh? I get the feeling I’ve seen him somewhere before...

I was staring at the document-laden man intently, when bowing respectfully, he covertly brought his pointer finger to his lips.

Is that the gesture for “shh”? He wants me to keep quiet...? Is that Healran?!

His hairstyle was different, so I didn’t recognize him at first, but those distinctive, sharp eyes, without a doubt, belonged to Healran.

What are you doing in a place like this, Healran?

Ralf, Will, and Commander Noctis didn’t seem to notice.

I probably only recognized him because when he’d bowed—most likely in an attempt to conceal his face from the others—it gave short, little me a clearer view.

As for Shinki... He definitely noticed.

“Report in tonight,” I whispered as quietly as possible so Commander Noctis wouldn’t hear.

Healran gave a slight, nearly indiscernible nod.

Thanks, wind elemental spirits!

Thankfully, the guest parlor was in a better state than the rest of the manor. Or rather, it felt like the room hadn’t been entered at all. They’d probably declared it off-limits so that it would be available to receive unexpected guests.

Once we’d been served drinks, Commander Noctis cut straight to the chase.

“So, what is the purpose of your visit?”

“I would like to join the punitive force,” Ralf said.

“That’s...”

Commander Noctis seemed to be at a loss for words.

But I can see the difficult position this puts him in. He can’t, in good faith, take the sole male heir of a duke into such a dangerous place as a battlefield.

“Ralf, you mustn’t put the commander in a difficult position,” I cautioned.

“I understand that Will and Neema can’t possibly join, but I think I might be able to help...” Ralf said.

“While it’s true that your magical abilities would be beneficial, if anything happened to you, the duchess would have my head,” Will interjected.

Mama *was* terrifying when she was angry. Not even the position of crown prince would save him from her wrath. And I would get it just as bad for not trying to stop Ralf.

“We can’t guarantee your safety in the midst of battle, Lord Ralfreed. As such, I would respectfully request that you remain in the city,” Commander Noctis said.

“I couldn’t show my face to my father if I sat by doing nothing simply because it’s dangerous,” Ralf countered. “Of course, my father has already begun preparing to send supplies, but even so, it would be an affront against the Osphe Family’s honor for me to be here in person and do nothing for the city.”

Our family’s primary directive was to protect the people. We believed we were endowed with our status so that we might use it to protect those below us.

Ugh, my ears hurt from listening to this. I understand the concept of noblesse oblige, but there’s not much I personally can do to put it into practice. Although I suppose everything I did yesterday was a good start.

“What if Ralf promises to stay at the rear and help heal the injured?” I suggested.

“You can use healing magic, Lord Ralfreed?” Commander Noctis asked.

“At an intermediate level, yes.”

Intermediate-level healing magic was still enough to heal pretty severe wounds. It was the highest level of healing magic anyone in modern times could produce. Supposedly, in the past, those known as “the Goddess’ Beloved Children” could use advanced-level healing magic.

With advanced-level healing magic, it was even possible to regrow severed limbs, but in the entire history of the continent of Larshia, there were only three confirmed cases of magic users with this level of power, leading the Goddess’ Beloved Children to be regarded as more of a legend or myth than historical fact.

As such, Commander Noctis was understandably surprised Ralf could use intermediate-level healing magic.

“I will allow your participation, Lord Ralfreed, on the condition that His Highness can spare two royal guards to protect you, and you agree to stay at the rear, healing the wounded.”

“What do you say, Danart?”

Will directed this question to one of the royal guards. Danart was the leader of the small contingent of royal guards currently assigned to guard him. His official title was Assistant Brigade Leader of the Second Brigade of the Royal Guard. In other words, he was Gwynn’s direct subordinate.

Come to think of it, I haven’t seen Gwynn lately; is he even still alive?

“I think it will be all right, as long as Your Highness and Lady Nefertima behave yourselves...”

“I can’t make any promises where Neema’s concerned... Maybe I should tie her to a chair?” Will said.

Whaaaat?! Don’t even think about it, mister!

“I can be a good girl if it’s for my brother’s sake,” I huffed, pouting in response to Will’s teasing. Ralf attempted to diffuse the situation by patting my head and calling me a good girl.

Just as the tense atmosphere eased, a knight ran into the room. He whispered something tersely into Commander Noctis' ear before dashing out again. I could hear a commotion outside through the open door.

Of course, we couldn't hear what the knight had whispered, but that was no problem for the elemental spirits.

"Several knights have been injured breaking up a fight between adventurers. One is gravely wounded."

If a knight was "gravely wounded" trying to break up a fight, the fighters must've been trying to kill each other!

"What's happened?" Will asked, giving no indication that he'd heard everything and already knew.

"Several of the knights on patrol in the city were injured in the line of duty."

"Shall I heal them?" Ralf asked.

"Well..."

At times like this, social status sure can be a pain in the butt.

"Commander Noctis, you'll be astounded when you see Ralf's power in action!" I said.

Come on, you know you wanna see it with your own eyes!

"I'm sure you're right, my lady. If you're certain you wouldn't mind, Lord Ralfreed?"

"Of course. Will you please have all the injured knights gather together? I will heal those with minor injuries as well."

The knighthood had its own healers, but they rarely attended to minor injuries. Their magic was limited, so, unfortunately, they had to save it for serious injuries.

The gravely wounded knight was in the entry hall, so we rushed there. I knew what to expect, but it was still a horrible sight. The scent of blood hung in the air, and the pained moans of the injured knight echoed across the room. The voices of the healers chanting and the other knights praying fervently

overlapped with the injured man's pained cries.

Three healers desperately cast magic on the man, but his wound didn't close.

The other knights were praying to strengthen the healers' magic, even if only a little. Among the various types of magic, healing magic belonged to the Goddess, and prayers gave it power.

However, the injured knight was in a horrific state.

He had a wide gash across his stomach. The bloody wound was deep enough that it exposed severed muscle and fat. I wanted to believe I didn't also see his organs peeking out. And his limbs were covered in countless wounds. Those on his arms appeared to be scratches, but round holes peppered his legs.

These injuries looked familiar.

They were injuries made by carnivorous beasts.

When a carnivorous beast leapt at someone, the victim would instinctively guard their face with their arms. The other beasts would take this opportunity to attack the person's legs. And the gash on his stomach appeared to have been caused by wind magic.

There's no way he ended up like this by simply breaking up a fight between adventurers!

"He's in a bad state." Ralf hurried to the knight's side and chanted the strongest healing spell in his arsenal.

Figuring it couldn't hurt, I began to pray as well.

I'm sure the elemental spirits will deliver this prayer to the ears of the Goddess.

"You'll be okay now."

I didn't see the healing process because I was so absorbed in prayer, but the claw marks on the man's arms and bite marks on his legs were healed without so much as a scar. Shiny pink flesh covered the large gash on his stomach, but it also looked like it would fade with time.

"Everyone else who is injured, please gather over here," Ralf said.

Once the other injured knights gathered in front of him, Ralf began chanting again. It was a different spell from the one he'd just used.

"Seleite Dieusahé Cresiolle."

I didn't understand a single word of what he said other than "Cresiolle."

A warm, gentle wind blew over the knights.

This warmth was familiar after being subjected to it many times myself—it was the warmth of healing magic. If I remember correctly, Ralf referred to it as "the Goddess' Benevolence."

"My wounds are gone!"

"Even the burn I got on cooking duty the other day is healed!"

"...That funky rash I've been suffering from for *ages* is *finally* gone!"

The knight who said that had tears welling up in his eyes.

Hearing this, the other knights began exclaiming, "That's great!" and thumping the knight who'd shouted on the back encouragingly.

Don't tell me... a rash so itchy a person would cry tears of joy once it was gone... Did he have athlete's foot?!

"Will, by 'funky rash,' does he mean..."

"Yeah. A hazard of the job, unfortunately."

It really was athlete's foot! What a mood-killer!

Ralf looked so cool healing everyone until athlete's foot came along and took the wind out of his sails!

"Were the adventurers who injured these knights captured?"

"Yes, sir. They're being held in the dungeon below the mayor's manor."

"Why at the mayor's house?"

A district office of the royal knighthood was in this city. We were in a temporary field office, but a proper jail should be in the knighthood's district office.

So why would they hold their prisoners at the mayor's house?

And besides, why does the mayor have a dungeon beneath his manor anyway? Is that a common feature in aristocrats' homes? Maybe we have one at our house, and I don't know about it...?

"One of the perpetrators is a beastmaster. We needed to be able to confine the beast as well."

The knight who responded appeared to have been at the scene of the incident. His armor was in tatters.

By the way, the knights wore several varieties of armor, and those working as city guards or out on patrol usually wore predominantly leather armor.

The unit of knights accompanying us wore light armor. Apparently, this was commonly used for protective details or when on a mission to subjugate a moderate-sized group of monsters. The unit leader told me this.

I was right; those were injuries from an animal attack. A beastmaster, huh...?

I'd read about them in books before.

They were a type of warrior that used animals to fight, similar to a beast knight.

However, beastmasters didn't ride the animals. Instead, they used their animal partners' deadly fighting abilities and tracking skills as they adventured together. It wasn't unusual for a beastmaster to be among the adventurers gathered here for the upcoming battle.

But it was excessive to inflict such brutality on a knight who'd only been trying to break up a fight.

In short, the perpetrator was a criminal in the making, going around calling themselves an adventurer. The adventurers' guild probably had their hands full trying to control ruffians like this.

According to the laws of our country, injuring a knight who was on the job and in the process of enforcing public safety was a serious offense. The perpetrators definitely wouldn't get off easy.

If the beastmaster lost their ownership rights to their animal partners, I would consult with Ralf and Will about whether we could take them in at our house. I

could also mention it to Lestin—all it would take was a single word to him, and the issue would be resolved immediately. He may look cold and aloof, but his deep love for animals was second to none.

It looks like we're almost done here, but first, I have to say something to these knights.

“How many of you have suffered a ‘funky rash’ on your feet at one point or another as a casualty of the job?”

At least half of the knights raised their hands in response to my question.

...Even you, Commander Noctis?!

“The itchiness is due to sweat being trapped inside of leather shoes for long periods. It’s also highly contagious,” I informed them. “All of you need to be meticulous about washing thoroughly and drying your feet completely afterward.”

I’d never experienced athlete’s foot personally and was merely sharing common knowledge, but even so, it should help to reduce the issue at least a little.

“Everyone listen carefully: once you remove your shoes for the day, dry the insides out. You can use wind magic, or I’ve also heard that putting charcoal inside can be effective. And healers, please don’t brush off patients complaining of itchiness and give them proper medical treatment.”

It was said that warriors built up a tolerance for pain. But it was difficult to build up a tolerance for things like itchiness or pleasure. I wasn’t sure how one would even begin to train for such a thing.

Who would’ve thought I would come all the way to a fantasy world only to encounter something as mundane as athlete’s foot...

But athlete’s foot is a skin disease caused by a fungus, right? At least according to biological classification standards on Earth, that makes it an organism. If it’s an organism, might that mean that it falls within the parameters of my special ability?

They have bread here, so there must be something similar to yeast in this

world, too. I wonder if I can make friends with fungi? But if that were the case, my house would already be overrun with mushrooms and mold.

Now that I think about it, the existence of fungi, microorganisms like plankton, and single-celled organisms is crucial to maintaining the food chain in this world. I might not be able to see them, but they must exist.

But if my powers don't apply to them, does that mean God doesn't recognize them as living creatures? Maybe he thinks of them more as a mechanism of nature? How would the world change if God recognized them not as "things" but as living creatures?

Yeah, this could be my chance to finally trip up God. I'll add it to my ever-growing to-do list!

"That's all we need to do for the itching to stop?"

Oh, crap. I let myself get lost in thought. Right, we were talking about athlete's foot.

"I don't think it will eradicate the problem completely, but it should reduce the number of people suffering from it," I said.

The knights' expressions transformed from surprise to delight.

I feel bad for them if they were suffering that much from simple athlete's foot.

"Lady Nefertima, is what you say true?" the royal guard named Danart asked with a serious expression.

Et tu, Brute?!



NOT long after this encounter, special boots were invented that contained a magical item.

Originally, the magical item was designed to prolong the life of clothing, but it was adapted to contain spells to dry and dehumidify the boots. Once they could make the item small enough to attach to a boot, the "funky rash" that had been the shameful "casualty of the job" for so many soldiers was eradicated from the Kingdom of Gaché.

Nefertima would remain unaware of how the royal coffers swelled considerably by exporting this technology to neighboring countries.

10 - Finally Getting the Ball Rolling

ONCE the athlete's foot crisis was averted, we returned to the manor. It had been a busy day, so all I wanted to do was eat, bathe, and head straight to bed.

This young body needs more sleep than an adult's body, you know! I'll take my bath while Ralf and the others are "speaking with Marquis Parzeth," as they're calling the act of strong-arming him into complying with their wishes.

I still wasn't allowed to bathe by myself at this age, so I'd ask one of the maids to assist me. I'd asked for permission to bathe alone at home before but had been refused with the explanation that it was too dangerous.

As such, it fell to the servants to wash my hair and body for me.

It's a little off-topic, but Gratia loved taking baths. He didn't submerge himself in the water or anything, but he made what looked like a surfboard out of spider thread and floated on the water's surface, riding on the "surfboard" and paddling with his legs. The way he deftly maneuvered around with his legs reminded me of a water strider.

Isn't the bath a little too hot for a creature native to the snowy northern climates?

When it came to Gratia, the mysteries never ceased.

By the way, the bath wasn't a claw-foot tub. It was a tiled pool big enough to swim in.

Bathwater was heated using water and fire magic, and in the royal palace, there was someone whose entire job was tending the baths. They would clean the bathroom, fill the bath with water, and heat it. The water would be cleaned and reheated to the perfect temperature after each use. Apparently, getting the temperature just right was difficult.

When I got back to our rooms after finishing my bath, Ralf and the others had already returned.

It would seem they'd successfully strong-armed—I mean, *convinced* Marquis Parzeth. And for some reason, Healran was there, acting as if nothing were unusual about his presence.

How'd you get in here, Healran?! Well, whatever. I was the one who told him to check in, after all.

"Healran, are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine. I would never be careless enough to blow my cover."

"In that case, please explain what you were doing at the knighthood's temporary field office and what you've figured out so far."

"I began investigating under the suspicion some of the adventurers and knights were in on something underhanded together, but I got taken in for questioning by the knights," Healran explained. "I gave them the cover story that I was an adventurer who had struck out on my own after a fight with my party members and was looking for work. The knights were surprisingly sympathetic to my plight and gave me a job doing general office work, which has been incredibly helpful in infiltrating their organization for my investigation."

Whoa! Those knights are way too kind-hearted, giving a job to some rando without even looking into his background! But I'm impressed with Healran—by mixing a bit of truth with his lies, he created a believable cover story that inspired sympathy in anyone who doesn't know better. That speaks to his abilities as a former minor official in the royal palace.

But, you know, I've been hearing a lot of stories of people "falling on hard times" lately. I'll have to be vigilant not to be deceived when I'm listening to people recount their own backstories from now on.

In any case, the information Healran had brought us proved that the raccoon-like regional commander was thoroughly corrupt. His crimes included everything from stealing the emergency supplies Marquis Parzeth had been sending to embezzling funds and even taking bribes from the adventurers.

"He's been taking bribes from the adventurers? To what end?"

Honestly, I didn't see the merit of colluding with adventurers.

All the more so when they were low-ranked adventurers.

“To make the adventurers look good to the guild. If the adventurers in this large-scale punitive force pay his fee, he will overreport their participation. The client’s job completion report affects the adventurer’s promotion, you see.”

*I see. If the adventurers pay a little money, they can level up without breaking a sweat. And the raccoon-like regional commander just has to make a few false reports, and... **ka-ching!***

*The funds he’s embezzling from the knighthood are going straight into his own pocket... **ka-ching!***

*And if he sells off the emergency supplies that were supposed to be for the city... **ka-ching!***

What a piece of crap! I won’t let him get away with this!

“Have you been able to obtain definitive proof?” Will asked.

“I’ve not yet been able to completely trace the movement of money. Right now, I only have the testimony of a low-ranked knight who says he witnessed the regional commander taking money from an adventurer,” Healran said.

“We need physical evidence,” Will said.

“I will attempt to follow the money trail, but...”

“It’s going to be difficult,” Will shook his head. “The knighthood is famous for its sloppy management.”

“Really?” I asked.

“I’ve heard stories that the legion commanders stationed at the knighthood’s central headquarters in the royal city all get regularly chewed out by the people from the accounting department,” Will recounted. “Their allocation of funds is horrendous, and the regional headquarters in each province aren’t much better... Oh, that’s it!”

“They’re submitting inflated claims!” Healran finished.

Heh, Will and Healran are really getting into this. Somehow, they seem like kindred spirits.

“Yeah. The knighthood makes a point of always ordering extra supplies in case of emergencies. Including weapons, food, and armor,” Will said.

“We might find something if we investigate their orders and deliveries,” Healran suggested.

“This can’t just be happening here. Healran, I’m going to temporarily endow you with the royal crest. Make sure not to lose it.”

Will snatched a short sword from one of the royal guards and passed it to Healran. With this, Healran was now under the protection of both the Osphe family and the royal family, but it also meant he was in double the danger.

We’ll have to make sure he doesn’t end up em-body-ing the phrase “Dead men tell no tales.”

“Mr. Healran, once you get the proof we need, Will can take care of the rest,” I said. “Promise me you will prioritize your own safety and not do anything reckless.”

“I understand.”

“Elemental spirits, please watch over Mr. Healran,” I requested.

The elemental spirits would be Healran’s safety net.

As long as the elemental spirits were watching out for him, he probably wouldn’t actually die, at least. Not to mention, Healran was an intermediate-level magic user, so he could protect himself to a certain extent.

I’d leave the matter of the raccoon-like regional commander to Will.

With things getting this complicated, I couldn’t do much.

“If we’re done here, let’s try to get some sleep. I don’t want Neema to get into a habit of staying up late.” After saying that, Ralf picked me up and carried me over to the bed.

I don’t want to ruin my sleep schedule, either. A lady needs her beauty sleep! It’s not easy to maintain such perfect skin!

“I will take my leave for the evening,” Healran said.

“Healran, don’t do anything that would make Neema cry.”

“Yes, sir. I owe Lady Neema a great debt for taking me into her retinue, so I will serve her with faithful sincerity.”

Wait a minute! I never “took him in”! Don’t make it sound like he’s another of my unintentionally bound servants! Healran refused Papa’s job offer in the royal city, so I dragged him into helping with Project Shiana. That’s all!

“You’re one of us, Mr. Healran—a friend,” I insisted.

Healran’s eyes widened at this. It made his unique eyes with their small irises look a little scary.

“Thank you.” Healran smiled as he thanked me.

It was the first time I’d ever seen him smile. It increased his attractiveness by at least 30 percent.

While I was thinking that, a wave of fatigue crashed over me. I was the type to fall asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow. And, in any case, I had no desire to fight off sleep.

“Goodnight, Neema.” Ralf’s hand patting my head was so soothing that I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

“Good night.”

Gratia arranged himself into his sleeping pose, and I clutched my bunny backpack to my chest as I drifted off to sleep.

“She’s surprisingly obedient when it comes to going to sleep—and *only* that,” Will said.

“It’s a good thing to be highly adaptable,” Ralf said. “It’s her complete lack of the natural instincts for self-preservation that worries me.”

“Red Hlaada will be arriving tomorrow...”

“Yeah, starting tomorrow, everything will be set into motion. Neema is sure to face heartache...”

“It can’t be helped. She’s chosen this path. Even if it *was* mostly unconsciously,” Will said.



GOOD morning!

The weather outside is unexpectedly nice this morning.

Today, Ralf would be operating separately from the rest of us. He said the punitive force planned to move out the following day, so he would join the knights for their strategy meeting and help with last-minute preparations today.

I asked him to retrieve Gou and Roku while he was at it.

The unit of knights who'd gone into the city the night before to gather information had apparently completed their mission because they'd started coming back to the manor one at a time.

Ralf and Will listened to the knights' reports and discussed them between themselves for a few minutes, but they left me out of the loop.

Why are they always leaving me out?! Don't forget about me!

In any case, we set out before noon.

Will and I planned to join the kobolds in preparing the traps and fine-tuning our battle plans. However, by the time we arrived, most of the work was already done. Only a few last-minute adjustments remained.

It appeared the kobolds had been working through the night.

We would face battle the following day, so all the fighters were ordered to get some rest.

During the battle, my position would be at Will's side.

Of course, it is.

And Will would be joining the group overseeing the traps.

The trap group, which consisted entirely of members of the Herb Family, would take up positions on both sides of the punitive force.

The close-quarters fighters would be directly in front of the punitive force, flanked on both sides by the magic users, and the support group consisting of the Healer Family and Sicily would wait behind both groups. Any members of the lifestyle families capable of fighting would protect the support group. I was worried about their fighting ability, so I put the family leader of the Hunter

Family in charge of directing them.

We held another strategy meeting, with everyone included this time. We wanted everyone, including the children and those who couldn't fight, to know what was going on.

Sicily's sister was the de facto leader of the children, so I had her make sure they were all listening carefully.

"First things first, I'd like all of you to take it to heart that the primary objective of this battle is to allow the pack to flee to a safe location," Will said. "I'd also like you to keep in mind that we are assisting you because Nefertima requested it."

It was a Will-like thing to say, but I didn't understand why he was bringing me up now when things had already progressed this far. He continued on to explain the number of troops making up the punitive force and their assignments.

The royal knighthood would send 53 knights, and 2 healers would accompany them. As for the adventurers, there were 34 close-range fighters, 28 magic users, 10 mid-range fighters, 8 healers, and 12 scouts, for a total of 92 adventurers arranged in 15 parties. However, these figures didn't include Red Hlaada. We didn't have any information about them or our five knights, who would infiltrate the punitive force.

It was a sizable army to dispatch just to subjugate monsters.

Will then went into further detail, describing the identifying characteristics of the adventurers we'd need to take out first.

I was surprised by how much information he had!

As for our plans for the knighthood's troops, the common practice was to "aim for the general," but in this case, if Commander Noctis was immobilized, we ran the risk of things falling into total pandemonium, so we'd decided not to target him.

If the punitive force started taking too much damage, Ralf would urge them to retreat. If worst came to worst, he could use the authority of our family's rank.

As such, our objectives were to minimize damage to our own people as much

as possible while dealing a moderate degree of damage to our opponent.

This wasn't the most advantageous strategy for the kobolds, but Will had drawn up our plans, and he was, after all, the prince of this country. He couldn't very well give the kobolds free rein to slaughter the knights, who were, at the end of the day, his subjects.

Therefore, I also had to say something harsh to the kobolds.

"It's likely that there will be some deaths in the upcoming battle. I want all of you to prepare yourselves for this possibility."

I thought it was strange for me to be saying this. Me, a human, telling the kobolds to prepare themselves for death at the hands of humans.

But the kobolds merely nodded.

Everyone was burning with fighting spirit, eager to protect the pack and their own lives. The children watched the battle-hungry adults warily.

My chest ached to see this and know how harsh the reality I'd spoken of had been.

I made it through the rest of the meeting, plagued by a tangle of complicated emotions, and all that was left to do was wait for the next day.

On our way back to the city, I vented to Will.

"Is this really the right thing to do?"

"It's a little late now," Will snorted.

It irritated me how well this gesture suited him.

"Think before you speak. Heed my words—when those at the top are uncertain, we must never let it show. If the top falters, the bottom will fall into chaos. And never stop questioning yourself, asking if this is really the right thing to do. But once you choose your path, stick to it."

Each of his words struck me like a knife.

"Do you always do that?" I asked.

"Of course. Just who do you think I am? I'm the man who will follow in my father's footsteps and become king of this country, in case you've forgotten."

Will was speaking the stone-hard truth.

In general, Will never revealed his private thoughts and emotions to me. I had no idea what Will thought about the country and its people as their crown prince.

Words were cheap, after all.

“I’m always asking myself this: Will my choices betray the expectations others, especially the citizens, have for me? If I make decisions with this in mind, I can stand behind them with confidence,” he said.

Will took his role as crown prince seriously and thought about the country and the people here. His advice only added to my uncertainty.

I was the one who needed to strengthen my resolve, but I didn’t know how.



I still felt conflicted when we got back, and Ralf met us with more troublesome news. He said the beastmaster and the person they'd been fighting with were both released.

Apparently, the raccoon-like regional commander had ordered their release, saying that with battle looming, he wanted every fighter he could get on the battlefield.

According to Will, this was overstepping his authority as a regional commander.

Here, crimes were dealt with by investigators who looked into the incident, determined guilt, and meted out punishment to the criminals.

It was closer to how the criminal justice system in the Edo period handled things than in modern Japan. Back then, officials known as *machi-bugyou* played a role that encompassed the duties now spread out among police, judges, and the mayor, like in the kabuki play *Sakura Fubuki*.

The exam, which one needed to pass in order to become an inspector, was held once every two years. This exam was extremely difficult and tested whether the candidate possessed a high level of fighting acumen, conversational skills, and investigative abilities. Those who passed were then required to vow on their name to the God of Creation that they would always seek the truth and pass fair judgment. If they broke the vow, the mark of the fallen would appear on the person's forehead, and it was also believed that they would suffer divine retribution. It was not an occupation to be entered into lightly.

If they wrongly accused an innocent person, they would lose the eyes that had failed to discern the truth. If they knowingly leveled false charges, they would lose their faithless voice. And if they allowed themselves to be misled by enticing words, they would lose their fickle hearing.

The job was popular in spite of all of this because the salary was good, and the position commanded an image of righteousness. The occupation of inspector ranked first among the jobs young ladies looked for in a potential marriage partner. Second place was a healer, and third place was a knight.

It would seem that the women in our country idolized upholding justice and saving people. Even the position of “aristocrat” was only around eighth place in the ideal marriage partner rankings. Apparently, learning social manners and interacting with people in high society was intimidating. Of course, the aristocratic young men were still plenty popular with ladies whose hobbies included digging for gold!

By the way, when it came to the most popular jobs people wanted, investigator was firmly entrenched in first place, followed by knight and then maid.

In any case, there were laws about releasing criminals in spite of their crimes, and even in emergency situations, an investigator needed to be present, and the criminals would be required to vow upon their names to return and face judgment for their crimes once the emergency had passed.

In short, it would’ve been acceptable for these criminals to be released if an investigator had been present to have them vow upon their names. However, when Will asked the elemental spirits, they reported that the investigators hadn’t so much as received a report there were even criminals that needed to be dealt with.

Once a person had vowed upon their name to the God of Creation, elemental spirits constantly observed them thereafter. It was enough to make me a little apprehensive of the elemental spirits.

We decided to immediately remove the beastmaster and the person they’d been fighting with from the upcoming battle and hand them over to investigators.

That wasn’t the only news Ralf had for us, either. He also said that Red Hlaada had arrived.

Our unit of knights had immediately sprung into action to gather information about them and had already learned all about the members of their party.

Red Hlaada consisted of seven members: a swordsman and a shield-wielding beastperson as their close-combat fighters; one scout, an intermediate-level fire magic user, and an archer as their mid-range fighters; and a healer and an advanced-level earth magic user as their long-range fighters.

I was a bit confused that the archer was in the mid-range group rather than the long-range group, but the knights explained that this archer used a shorter-range bow that was more lethal.

I wonder if it's something like a crossbow?

The presence of an advanced-level earth magic user meant they might be able to render the pitfall traps obsolete, so we would need to quickly deal with them.

The swordsman was said to be more skilled than the average knight, and the beastperson was a member of the Ice Bear Tribe, making them a bear-type power fighter, so we would need to immobilize them quickly, or we'd find ourselves in big trouble.

But, if I was honest, I wanted to meet a bear beastperson and even touch them if I could. I was curious about their ears! They must be round, fuzzy, and adorable!

In any case, we were finally on the eve of battle.

My uneasiness hadn't diminished even a smidge. On the contrary, the number of things making me nervous had only increased. But at this point, there was no choice but to go for it.

It was the first time I'd ever experienced being afraid of tomorrow. I was scared and uncertain, but there was no turning back now...

God, what should I do?



RALF woke me before the sun had even risen, and Will and I set out to meet with the kobolds.

I hadn't slept a wink. Worst-case scenarios flashed through my head all night, and I felt like crying. If not for Nox and Gratia, I don't think I would've been able to hold it together.

Gou and Roku seemed tired, too, but they never left my side. Their adorable "eyebrow" patches soothed my frayed nerves a bit.

"Don't let the kobolds see you making that dumb face," Will said.

“Uggh...” I groaned.

“Just at the beginning, make sure they see you grinning like an idiot.” Will roughly rubbed my head, but I had bigger problems at the moment! “If you’re going to regret it, save it for when all’s said and done. For now, trust me.”

That was probably Will’s attempt at kindness.

But he’s right—I need to get ahold of myself! These are the seeds that I have sown.

I slapped myself hard on both cheeks.

A clap of determination shot through me.

“Okay! I’ve got this!”

Will I really be able to keep a smile on my face? This is my problem, after all. I dragged Ralf and Will into it, so I have to get ahold of myself, or I’ll cause trouble for both of them and the knights and royal guards helping us. And, more than anything, I can’t let the kobolds down.

It’s going to be all right; I’ve got this. I’m going to become stronger!



WE met up with the kobolds and held our final strategy meeting.

We explained what we’d learned about the beastmaster and Red Hlaada and made changes accordingly to the priority order of who to immobilize first.

Once the sun had fully risen, everyone moved into their predetermined positions.

Even if I’d made up my mind, I couldn’t deny that I was still afraid.

I clung to Lars, trying to fortify my emotions.

Lars’ fur must contain healing properties.

“They’re coming, Neema,” Will said.

We couldn’t see anything yet from our position, but the kobolds sensed them.

The fighters all took up fighting positions.

I took a deep breath and tensed, waiting.

“Are you okay, Lady Neema?” Sicily’s sister peered into my face, looking worried. Her ears, which normally stood straight up, were bent horizontally, and she looked down at me from just the right angle.

She’s so freaking adorable! I can’t even!

It was even cuter than that old commercial featuring the chihuahua!

“I’m okay,” I said.

I was definitely *not* okay, but her cuteness inspired me to act cool and tough.

All right, time to get my head in the game. First comes Smoke Screen and Airstrike.”

“Shinki, Lars, are you ready?”

Shinki would use water elemental power to create the dense mist that would cloud the enemies’ vision, and Will would cast the Airstrike spell, with Lars extending its reach. The magic to create loud noises was attributed to wind, so we’d put team Will-and-Lars in charge of the task.

“Good luck, Herb Family,” I said encouragingly.

The ultimate outcome of the battle would be based on how many of the enemy forces we immobilized at the onset.

We’d prepared large quantities of a volatile sleeping drug and instructed the elemental spirits to let loose with their prank-playing.

We were mere moments away from the start of the battle.

My heart palpitated inside my chest.

Ba-thump, Ba-thump!

“Shinki, Lars, get ready. Three... Two... One...” Will counted down quietly.

BOOM!!!

All at once, there was an explosion so loud that it hurt my eardrums, and my vision went white. Angry shouts came from the punitive force. A gust of wind rushed past me.

It was the Herb Family making their move.

“Gather up, men!”

“Damn it, I can’t hear anything!”

“It’s no use; I can’t dispel the fog using magic!”

Apparently, everything was going according to plan.

One after another, the Herb Family carried unconscious adventurers back to where the Knitter Family waited to tie their hands and feet with rope.

Most of the captives were magic users.

Our knights, who’d infiltrated the adventurers, should also be taking advantage of the poor visibility to get to work. They were also tasked with immobilizing the primary force. It would be ideal if they could work in concert with the kobolds, but that might be difficult given the situation. I at least hoped they’d be able to take down the beastmaster...

“Looks like they got the beastmaster,” Will remarked beside me.

I looked in the direction he’d indicated and saw a lone man being dragged toward us.

I don’t see his animal partners anywhere. I wonder what happened to them...

“...Ugh...”

The man started to stir.

“Crap, the sleeping drug is wearing off already!”

It happened while we were distracted by the man. Something leapt out from behind a bush. Something grayish in color almost seemed to melt into the misty whiteness of our surroundings.

It drove a kobold to the ground, baring its sharp fangs.

“No!” I shouted instinctively, but there was nothing I could do by myself.

Just then, something black jumped with a bouncy gait across my line of sight.

“Gratia?!”

Gratia leapt from his perch on my shoulder and landed on the gray animal’s back.

The animal collapsed.

But Gratia didn't return to my shoulder—instead, he leapt over to the man, and he, too, fell to the ground unconscious. Then Gratia came back to me.

“Are they dead?” I asked fearfully, and Gratia danced.

He shook both of his front legs back and forth.

Umm... I think he's trying to say no?

“It's okay. They seem to be paralyzed,” one of the kobolds called to me after checking on the man and the gray animal.

Thank goodness. But I guess this means Gratia has venom. Who would've guessed!

“The commotion gave us away. Let's move on to the next line of defense!” Will's announcement sent the kobolds scurrying into action.

The beastmaster and his animal partner were tied up tight like a package. I felt bad for the animal, but we didn't have a cage or anything to put it in, so we had no other choice.

When Will dropped his upraised arm, logs rained down on the rear guard of the punitive force one after another.

Pendulums covered in sharp spikes sticking out in a radial pattern swung toward the punitive force's frontal flanks.

Then came a consecutive projectile attack.

Not only stones but also throwing knives and boomerang-like tree branches pelted the enemy combatants mercilessly.

I still couldn't see well, but the screams of the enemy combatants echoed through the forest. Their moans and cries for help only added to the pandemonium.

“Push forward, men! We need to make it out of this fog!”

Urged on by the voice of someone I couldn't see, the punitive force proceeded through the barrage of oncoming projectiles.

Just beyond where the thick mist cleared waited a giant pitfall trap.

We'd made the pit large enough that it was impossible to leap over, but an earth magic user would probably be able to destroy it.

Haku was inside the pit, and digging it out again if it got buried alive would be a huge undertaking I'd like to avoid if possible.

"Whoa!" a voice called out, followed by a shuffling thump.

"Watch your step!" someone called out in warning, but the sounds of bodies tumbling into the pit continued.

"The wind is— Whoa!"

A localized gust of wind pushed the adventurers from behind, causing them to teeter on the lip of the pit before falling in.

"Help! It's gonna melt me!"

Screams drowned out the cries for help from the adventurers who'd fallen into the pit.

I thought we'd done a pretty good job inciting complete chaos, but then the faint sound of someone chanting a spell reached my ears.

"Tch! They're using the intermediate-level earth magic spell Central Pillar!" Will identified the spell immediately.

It was commonly used for building houses. As the name implies, the spell created a support beam—which, in this case, would push the adventurers out of the pit.

"Use Collapse! Hurry!"

Collapse was an intermediate-level, non-attributed destruction spell. The names of destruction spells differed depending on the elemental attribute. The fire destruction spell was called Blast, the water destruction spell was Disintegrate, the wind destruction spell was Shred, and the earth destruction spell was Crush. Furthermore, when using magic against magic, it needed to be either an opposing element or a higher-level spell to work.

According to the mechanics of this world, the opposing element to earth was fire.

Only non-attributed magic worked against all other types of magic.

However, not many people could use non-attributed magic. Those with strong elemental affiliations struggled to produce and control pure, non-attributed magic. When non-attributed magic was required, it was common practice to filter your magic through a magical item to transform it into non-attributed magic.

But the kobolds didn't have any of these magical items.

The most they could manage would probably be the low-level spell Break.

The wind spirits carried Will's command to the Philosopher Family, but would they be able to react in time? Even if I asked Sol for help, I doubted it would come in time.

If only Karna were here...

"Haku, come back!" I shouted to the dear little slime I'd personally named. I needed to get Haku to flee to safety before the adventurers caught it.

Physical attacks wouldn't harm Haku, but magic could damage it. Apparently, Haku would gain some resistance to magic once it evolved into a parent slime, but for now, it was vulnerable.

"They aren't going to make it. Here come the front lines!" Will said, muttering the first bit to himself and then raising his voice to warn the rest of us.

Some of the traps group leapt out of the bushes to engage in close-quarter fighting.

"The kobolds have appeared! Don't let your guard down, men!"

"The men who fell into the hole have been poisoned! Get them back to the rear where the healers can treat them!"

The punitive force soldiers were finally collecting themselves and breaking out of the chaos.

The sound of swords crashing filled the air. Occasionally, there was an explosion of what I could only assume was fire magic.

When Haku finally came back to me, it was in an incredibly good mood for

some reason. Haku had grown noticeably in size, and its exterior looked glossy.

I'd told Haku that it was fine to eat the adventurers' weapons and armor, but I had no idea this would be the result!

Did you turn into a metal slime when my back was turned?!

The glossy sheen on Haku's exterior looked decidedly metallic.

I was distracted examining Haku when a loud "**Roar!**" rent the air.

I turned toward the noise. A massive man swung an axe. He wore a broad shield on his back, leading me to suspect he might be the aforementioned bear beastperson.

The man's axe sent the kobolds flying. A swordsman slashed forward through the path opened by the axe-wielding man.

"They're members of Red Hlaada," Will said.

"...They're strong." Their presence was so overwhelming that the words slipped unbidden from my mouth.

One by one, the kobolds suffered casualties.

An arm lobbed off here, a sword through the chest there. The loss of life continued.

I can't watch.

"Don't look away, Neema," Will said firmly. "This is the path you chose. No matter who else may forget, you must not."

"...Yeah."

Will was right.

I had to watch as they marched to their deaths.

Because this was all my fault.

There must've been some other way, a plan that meant they could avoid losing their lives, yet I'd readily chosen the path that led to battle.

So I couldn't cry. I didn't have the right to cry.

Not when I was the one who'd ordered them to their deaths.

11 - The Great Kobold Subjugation (POV: An Adventurer)

“**GOOD** grief. There’s something fishy about this job, don’t you think?”

“Yeah! The closer we get to Lenice, the more obstacles we encounter.”

“It’s even more suspicious when you consider they *could* all just be coincidences.”

Looking around at my companions, who were long past being just a little scruffy and now looked totally ragged, I, too, found it highly unusual.

Starting around the time an unexpected downpour hit us while camping out, too many unusual things had happened to write them off.

Our food supplies were ruined by the rain, and the bindings holding our gear in place snapped. Each thing by itself was not unusual, but the unfortunate “coincidences” kept piling up. Whenever anyone went out hunting for food to replenish our supplies, they got inexplicably lost or didn’t encounter a single animal.

“We’re almost to Lenice now. Don’t let your guard down until we’re safely inside its walls,” I called out to my companions, hurrying along the road. We were running behind schedule.

This job had been recommended to us by the adventurers’ guild.

It was a large-scale monster subjugation on the outskirts of Lenice.

The pay wasn’t great, but we’d earn a lot of experience points. Since we were all red rank, we’d likely get placed at the front lines. And if we served as a rallying force for the other adventurers, it would probably make a favorable impression on the knights.

We’d made it this far and finally achieved red rank; next was purple. Knowing us, we could get there. Although, the legendary black rank was probably beyond our reach.

It was said a huge wall needed to be overcome to level up from blue rank to red rank. That was the “wall” of luck and chance, things we had no control over.

And this job was starting to look much the same.



WHEN we arrived in the city, the signs of ruin were everywhere.

How were a few monster attacks having such an impact?

We were received with fanfare by some fussy bigwig from the knighthood, but one of my companions, Luck, wouldn't let his guard down.

Maybe there really is something going on here...

“Yuga, there's something off about that guy,” Luck grumbled as soon as our magic user, Seira, cast a barrier around our room at the inn we'd checked into.

The barrier prevented anyone outside the room from hearing us so we could speak freely.

“By ‘him,’ do you mean that commander who looked like a ralga?”

“Ahaha! You're right; he really does look just like a ralga!”

“I don't want to hear that from you, Ice Bear. Don't you know you have the exact same ears as a ralga?” our healer, Charlene, snapped at Luck.

“What?! Obviously, my ears are more sensitive and have much better fur than a ralga's!”

Is that what you're focusing on with this comparison?! I wanted to point this out, but the discussion would get nowhere, so I restrained myself.

“More importantly, what about that ralga-like commander?” I asked.

“What could be more important?! I'm the pride of the Ice Bear Tribe!”

“And what did you glean about the commander, the pride of the Ice Bear Tribe?”

“The scent of money and greed.”

At times beastpeople, including the Ice Bear Tribe, could sniff out things about people's character. They said evil intentions and greed smelled foul,

whereas happiness, a sense of justice, and consideration for others smelled good.

Luck's nose had saved us more times than I could count. If Luck said so, we'd need to keep our guard up and be wary of the ralga-like commander.

"It's not just that ralga-like commander, though. Quite a few adventurers in this city are giving off an incredibly unpleasant odor," Luck said.

When it came to adventurers, there were good ones and bad ones.

Some had a deep-rooted sense of justice, while others were indifferently doing this line of work to get by and pay the bills, yet others used the job as a thinly veiled cover for outright criminal activity.

"You know," Seira interjected, "they might be in cahoots."

Seira had an easy-going personality and manner of speaking, but her mind was incredibly sharp. You might as well call her the brains of our party. According to Seira, there had been a problem with clients and adventurers working together to deceive the guild. Cases of notoriously problematic adventurers and low-ranking adventurers receiving suspiciously glowing reviews from clients were increasing.

Of course, the problematic adventurers hadn't turned over a new leaf and become upstanding—they were still up to no good. And the low-ranking adventurers hadn't thrown themselves into training to improve their skills—they were just as weak as ever.

The guild was looking into it, but no matter how many they caught, more would pop up.

Seira said that people trying to skate by without putting in any effort were all the more likely to show up during these times of peace.

"Just to be safe, let's keep our guard up," I said. "If it looks like he's going to get in our way, we'll run him off."

In this case, I meant physically. Personally, I'd prefer it that way.

"Even if it's just a bunch of kobolds, we can't afford to get careless on the battlefield," Seira said. "Our 'friends' from the punitive force might get in our

way, but if that happens, I'm sure Luck can help them quickly get back *out* of our way."

This female was downright vicious at times, but I felt a sense of kinship with her for it.

I breathed out as quietly as possible, trying to disguise what was really a sigh.

Come what may, tomorrow we go to battle. Let's rest today while we can.



THE sun had risen at last.

Dozens of adventurers crowded the city center.

It was finally time to set out on our subjugation mission, but the ralga-like commander was giving some boring and pointless speech about how some fancy-pants nobleman's son would be joining us and how he wanted each and every one of us to do our best for the sake of all those who'd been victims of the kobold raids.

Some aristocratic brat tagging along is just going to get in the way.

"Tch. I spot a disgusting waste of life," Luck grumbled angrily. I looked in the direction he was facing and spotted a beastmaster.

Now it made sense; everyone knew that beastpeople loathed beastmasters with a passion. Although, even if you weren't a beastperson, anyone with eyes in their heads would have ample reason to despise this particular beastmaster.

Beside the beastmaster stood what I believed was a toetail and a yargle. If I remember correctly, both were sub-species of the rye panther family of large felines.

However, these felines were so scrawny that the protruding outline of their ribs was visible through their skin, and they each had multiple bald patches in their fur. Likely, these were from injuries their owner hadn't bothered to bring to a healer to have treated, instead leaving them to heal on their own.

Both church healers and private healers in large cities would tend to animals. Of course, it wasn't free, but it was cheaper than the cost of healing humans.

For beastmasters, the animals they tamed were supposed to be their partners. This didn't seem like how a valued partner should be treated. This guy must be the worst kind of scumbag, using and abusing animals and then throwing them away.

"That guy might end up being an unfortunate casualty of battle," Luck remarked with a menacing smile.

I wouldn't be surprised if he took advantage of the fighting to wipe that stain off the face of Asdyllon.

"Just don't get caught," I said.

I probably should've tried to stop him, but in our world, a person couldn't get by without getting their hands dirty sometimes.

We couldn't afford to lose Luck, the backbone of our fighting force.

Without any one of our seven members, Hlaada would fall apart. So I wouldn't lose a wink of sleep over prioritizing Luck's mental stability over the life of a miserable piece of human waste.

"All right, guys, we're going to go with our usual formation," I said. "Luck and I will go in first; Yousef will cover Seira and Charlene; and Hein and Karl will provide support."

Seira—an advanced-level earth magic user, and Charlene—a healer, were both capable of close-combat fighting to a certain extent, but we needed them to focus on using their magic. So, as usual, Yousef would use his fearsome skills as a scout to protect them, while Hein used his intermediate-level fire magic, and Karl used his archer's bow to cover us from behind while getting in some long-range attacks.

We always used this formation when going into battle. When we were on investigation missions, Yousef would take the lead while I would bring up the rear, watching everyone's backs.

The punitive force entered the forest where the kobolds were believed to be hiding, but even after some time had passed, not only did we not find any monsters, we didn't even encounter a single animal.

Supposedly this forest was maintained, but the footing was horrible. It must be because the residents of the city had stopped coming here ever since the kobolds appeared.

“It’s too quiet.”

“You think so? I’m not surprised the animals are frightened away by the presence of so many people.”

My senses are no match for yours as a beastperson, Luck, but you know I’m not capable of sensing the presence of animals even under normal circumstances, right?!

“The enemy is a group of kobolds whose leader is a werewolf. Don’t even think about letting your guard down, men,” the battle commander, a man named Noctis, ordered.

He wasn’t the ralga-like commander’s direct subordinate but rather the commander of the Parzeth district office of the royal knighthood, and based on the fact that Luck had gotten a good feeling about him, it seemed he was an upright, hard-working person.

“Packs with evolved members are always difficult to defeat. If you find the werewolf, kill it on sight.”

“Are they really that different from regular kobolds?”

“Hey, hey, who got his ass handed to him that time we were fighting that clan of ogres, huh? Besides, the same is true of humans, isn’t it? Armies led by a skilled general are a force to be reckoned with.”

Now that he mentioned it, I had a vague recollection of such an occurrence, but I didn’t remember that ogre being evolved.

“I guess you’re right...”

“I am.”

I might not have been convinced, but I at least understood what he was saying. While I was bantering with Luck, we’d made our way even deeper into the forest.

Just as I was thinking that we’d covered quite a distance...

A thundering **BOOM!!!** rocked the air, and my vision went white.

“Gather up, men!” Commander Noctis shouted, but the only people to obey his command were the few knights close enough to hear him.

“Damn it, I can’t hear anything!” Luck cursed.

It seemed the loud noise had damaged Luck’s sensitive hearing.

I thumped on his back to get his attention. When he met my eyes, Luck grinned and nodded.

This was far from our first rodeo. Even if we couldn’t hear, we could tell what the other was trying to say and what they wanted to do from just glances and gestures.

From somewhere behind us, someone shouted that they couldn’t dispel the fog using magic.

That must mean this wasn’t a magic-made mist. Either that or an advanced-level magic user had used a written spell to invoke it! If that were the case, the mist wouldn’t dissipate until the magic circle was destroyed.

The sounds of chaos carried on without end all around us.

Just then, I heard a faint rustling and the sound of a child’s high-pitched voice.

I see, so they’re hiding in the underbrush.

They were so carefully hidden that even Luck hadn’t sensed them.

I was curious what a child was doing in a place like this, but I didn’t have time to worry about that.

I registered the screams coming from behind me just in time to see pendulums swinging toward us from both sides.

The pendulums, which had sharpened spikes sticking out of them in all directions, sent adventurers flying before pulling back for another swing.

Then, projectiles hurtled out of the bushes.

The knights didn’t take much damage, but the less-armored adventurers were accumulating injuries quickly. At this rate, even making their way to the healers at the rear to have their injuries treated would be dangerous due to the poor

visibility.

“Let’s press forward. We can’t tend to the wounded until we get clear of this mist!” I shouted.

Heeding my suggestion, Commander Noctis ordered the troops onward.

And, in an act of extreme foolishness, several self-serving adventurers broke ranks to run ahead. Apparently, none of them had considered the high likelihood that more traps awaited us in that direction.

“Be careful!” Luck shouted in warning, but the adventurers either didn’t listen or couldn’t hear.

Then, adventurers at the front disappeared from sight, leaving behind only screams.

“It’s a pitfall trap!”

“Watch your step!”

We tried to warn those around us, but it didn’t get through to those overcome with panic in the midst of all the chaos.

Although the adventurers and knights nearest to me were quickly taking in the situation and adjusting accordingly, many hadn’t gotten ahold of themselves and were disappearing into the pitfall trap.

And, as for those who’d noticed the pit just in time and only barely managed to stop before they fell...

“The wind is— Whoa!”

A gust of wind came out of nowhere, pushing those adventurers into the pit.

The kobold’s traps were incredibly well thought out.

Is this really due entirely to the werewolf’s advanced intelligence?

“Help! It’s gonna melt me!”

Melt? Is there something rigged up inside the pit? I guess we have no choice but to intervene.

“Seira, get them out of there,” I instructed.

Taking pity on the incredibly pathetic situation of the adventurers in the pit, Seira reluctantly began spellcasting.

Destruction spells immediately countered her.

However, Seira wasn't like other magic users. Even when using intermediate-level spells, she fortified them with her own original methods.

A pillar formed inside the pit, pushing out the adventurers who'd fallen in.

Some of them appeared to be under the influence of some kind of poison, while others were in a state of undress that made me want to ask if they were secret exhibitionists or something.

I understood now why they'd been screaming about being melted—several of the adventurers' armor looked melted right off in places.

However, I didn't see anything that explained how this had happened. I was curious about what exactly had been rigged up inside the pit, but then armed kobolds leapt into my line of sight.

"The kobolds have appeared! Don't let your guard down, men!" Commander Noctis fired off orders to the knights, directing the fighters into position.

"The men who fell into the hole have been poisoned! Get them back to the rear where the healers can treat them!"

The rearguard finally made it out of the mist, and the healers worked to treat the wounded.

At a glance, "the wounded" account for roughly one-third of our troops. Most of those will recover immediately and be able to jump right back into the fight. The more pressing issue is those who've lost their weapons and armor... We'll have to send them to the rear to act as support, but if we gather the magic users and form a defensive line...

"Adventurers with intermediate-level magic, protect the wounded and the healers!" I shouted over the noise. "Those with advanced-level magic, press forward! Commander Noctis, please assign five knights to guard the advanced-level magic users! Adventurers assigned to the front lines, let's go!"

Without waiting for Commander Noctis's reply, I gathered the adventurers

around me and leapt onto the front lines.

All around, swords flashed, and weapons collided.

The kobolds wielded a variety of weapons, and I could already tell we'd have our work cut out for us breaking in through the formation of shield fighters.

Luck roared, swinging his mighty axe, and one corner of the shield fighters' formation buckled.

Now's my chance!

I rushed into the fray of kobolds, striking down any that attacked me with my sword. Just as I defeated a kobold carrying a sword, another attacked me from the side with a spear.

Tch, I suppose it's too much to ask them to wait patiently to fight me one at a time?!

Somehow, I kept up with Luck, and with Hein and Karl covering for us, we were coming out on top.

"Hey, Yuga! Have you noticed that these guys reek of humans?" Luck called out.

"Stop speaking in riddles and spit it out, will you?!" I shouted back.

I stabbed the kobold in front of me through the heart, then turned my eyes to the next target.

"Their fighting style is too human," he said. "I don't know who it is, but these kobolds seem to have a human on their side."

Luck bashed in a kobold's head, showering blood all over himself.

You look absolutely terrifying right now; you know that, right? I wouldn't blame anyone for mistaking you for a demon risen straight from the bowels of hell.

Unbidden, I recalled the child's voice I'd heard earlier.

Was there more to this battle than met the eye?

"I'm no good at unraveling riddles—ask Seira, not me!" I said.

No matter how much I puzzled over it, I wouldn't figure it out.

Seira was the brains of our group; thinking was *her* job!

While we were fighting up a storm on the front lines, an explosion echoed from somewhere to the rear.

Shit! Did they aim for our weak point?!

The giant black burn mark on the ground indicated it had been the work of an advanced-level fire magic user.

It appeared that the gathered magic users, wielding defensive magic, had been able to minimize casualties.

One or more of the kobolds can use offensive magic? I hadn't even considered that possibility. If they push any further into our ranks, we'll be cut off from the rearguard and won't be able to reach them if things go south.

And even the knights are starting to show signs of exhaustion, probably due to how powerful the kobolds are. Maybe we should tighten our defenses and focus on healing?

I signaled to Luck, and we started pulling back.

Helping the other adventurers as we went, we moved the line of fighters backward. We joined up with Commander Noctis, and I suggested pausing to focus on healing.

"But we've only subjugated around half as many kobolds as planned," he argued.

"Yes, but it will be meaningless if we suffer massive casualties. Fortunately, it seems that thus far, no one has died, but..."

But, when you stop to think about it... They're putting up this much of a fight, yet not a single person from our side has died? Something fishy is going on. That seems too convenient to be just a coincidence. Could this be the work of the kobolds' supposed human ally that Luck was talking about?

I'd better find Seira and tell her what we've been thinking.

"This entire subjugation mission might be part of some kind of conspiracy."

Around us, people were having their wounds healed and jumping right back into the fray. The majority of them were knights... Where were all the adventurers?

I looked around and noticed that the number of adventurers had decreased significantly.

Did they run away?

Just then, people speaking in hushed voices a short distance away reached my ears.

Someone had approached Commander Noctis.

“They say he’s the son of Duke Osphe. He’s pretty good-looking, right?” Charlene told me, sounding excited. Even as a straight man, I had to admit he was a handsome guy.

“If we retreat now while we’re at a stalemate, we can make it out of here without loss of life.” He was wearing a gentle smile, but his words carried an air of subtle forcefulness. “It appears that many of the adventurers have deserted us, and as such, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the men and women you see here are the remainder of our fighting force. If we continue fighting like this, it’s likely we’ll soon suffer casualties,” the young nobleman continued.

“Right. Even though we have healers, once they exhaust their magic, that’ll be it. And we don’t have a clear grasp of how many kobolds we’re facing,” Seira interrupted. “Besides, don’t you think it’s a little suspicious that we’ve taken so little damage so far?”

“Do you mean to suggest that the kobolds are planning something?”

Commander Noctis’ eyes sharpened for just a moment. Did he have any idea what might be going on?

“Considering we don’t know our opponents’ true strength, it’s certainly a possibility. If I remember correctly, the final evolution of kobolds, known as werewolves, possess special abilities that differ depending on the individual. If this werewolf is able to use formidable magic, subjugation may prove difficult,” Seira said.

“Forgive me, I’m not very knowledgeable about monsters. Their evolution is that personalized?” the duke’s son asked Seira.

It was common knowledge for a red rank adventurer, but it made sense that a young lord, who’d probably never even encountered a monster, wouldn’t know.

Depending on the species, monsters were divided into those that evolved and those that didn’t. But even those that *did* had different numbers of evolutions depending on their species. For example, goblins only evolved once into hobgoblins, whereas kobolds evolved twice, first into high kobolds and then into werewolves.

Once they reached their final evolution, a special ability would present itself, but this differed depending on the individual. Some were super-strong, others were super-fast, and others had incredibly strong magic.

In summary, the identifying characteristics of a final-evolution monster included advanced intellectual ability, the power of speech, leadership skills, and the addition of a special ability.

When it came to subjugating a group of monsters with a final-evolution leader possessing wisdom and leadership skills, the level of difficulty jumped dramatically.

I’d wiped out my fair share of goblin clans led by hobgoblins, but back when I was weaker, there had been a few times when I thought I was a goner.

What seemed off about this case was the well-known fact that, among the various species of monsters, kobolds were the least likely to attack humans. I found it unlikely that a relatively peaceful species would become aggressive just because their leader had reached their final evolution.

However, seeing them in action, I was forced to admit that some were undeniably skilled fighters. For all I knew, those might be high kobolds.

“You know, amongst scholars who study monsters, it’s said that their evolution is a manifestation of the God of Creation’s benevolence,” Seira said.

She’s still going?

Seira was the type who never shut up once she got going.

“Which is why, to eliminate all concern, I think we should take down the werewolf!”

Before Seira could say another word, Commander Noctis let out a growl.

I agree!

The duke’s son sighed and muttered something, but I couldn’t hear what he said. Then, after a moment, he asked Seira to create a barrier.

“Commander Noctis and the members of Red Hlaada, will you vow upon your names to never reveal to anyone what I’m about to say?” the duke’s son asked.

We were all taken aback by his serious expression, and the topic was apparently so important it required a vow of silence.

“I, Dylan Noctis, vow upon my name to never reveal to anyone what I am about to hear.”

The rest of us glanced at each other, confirming we were all in agreement, and then one by one we vowed upon our names.

“Thank you,” the young nobleman said. “The truth is, there is something unnatural about the monsters’ recent movements, and there’s a high probability that it’s due to human interference.”

According to the young nobleman, monster attacks were occurring across the northern province. After initiating an investigation, he learned nearly all the monsters living in the Kingdom of Gaché had been gathered here in the northern province. He still hadn’t confirmed who or what their objective was but suspected a large organization was behind the nefarious activity.

Compared to the number of monster attack reports in the northern territory, the number of attacks in other territories had decreased.

I had to admit that, thinking back on the jobs we’d been receiving lately, almost all of them had been in the northern province. Typically, we’d take jobs anywhere in the country and even in other countries if the pay was good enough.

The young nobleman explained that, for the time being, he’d started referring to this unknown organization as “Runohark,” but we all grimaced as soon as we

heard the codename.

Couldn't he have come up with anything better than that?!

Runoharks were the sworn enemies of housewives and restaurant owners, the most repulsive of all insects.

In any case, the kobolds had also been driven to the northern province while fleeing from Runohark.

The young nobleman pointed out that since small packs of kobolds almost never attacked humans, simply reducing their numbers to a certain degree should resolve our problems.

“But there’s another human on the kobolds’ side, isn’t there?” Luck interjected.

“Another human?”

I took over, clarifying what Luck had been trying to say and mentioning the child’s voice I’d heard during the battle.

“Are you certain it wasn’t the voice of a female adventurer or one of the kobolds?” the young nobleman asked.

“When you put it like that, I can’t say for sure... And the explosion messed up Luck’s ears at the time, so he didn’t hear it...” I said.

“Whether or not there’s a human working with the kobolds, it doesn’t change the fact that we need to resolve this matter quickly. People are still out there fighting while we’re standing here talking.”

“It seems the decision is out of my hands. Given the usual circumstances, it may very well be that kobolds are not the only danger we’ll face. In which case, I can’t afford to exhaust the city’s entire fighting force on this one battle,” Commander Noctis conceded. I thought it was a wise decision.

If monsters were gathering in the northern province, it was likely that sooner or later, not only kobolds but also the more aggressive and brutal species like orcs and ogres would make an appearance.

“We’ll begin preparations to retreat immediately. Lord Ralfreed, could you please use your healing magic on everyone simultaneously?” Commander

Noctis requested.

“It won’t be a complete recovery, but I should be able to render a certain degree of healing and energy restoration to everyone.”

“That’s plenty, thank you.”

“Very well. Excuse me, lady healer? Would you please assist me by praying for my healing?”

“Of course!”

Don’t fawn over him like a lovestruck teenager, Charlene! It’s creepy! As if anyone’s going to believe your cutesy, innocent act for even a second!

“I would like to ask the members of Red Hlaada to cover the rear. We knights will take the lead, gathering the healers and magic users along the way.”

“Yes, sir! Leave it to us.”

We confirmed a few more details and then dispelled the barrier. After that, the seven of us held off the attackers while the knights facilitated the retreat.

Because we didn’t want to get separated, Charlene would join us at the rear, sticking with Seira for safety.

Once the young nobleman’s healing magic descended over us, my exhaustion evaporated instantly.

I had no idea it would be to this degree! That kid’s pretty powerful!

Since healing magic prioritized healing injuries and illnesses, it was commonly believed that it wasn’t terribly effective for recovering from exhaustion.

Even Charlene didn’t use it like that except in serious emergencies.

The kobolds noticed we were gradually pulling back even while continuing to fight.

What will they do now? Will they attack harder, seeing this as their chance for victory?

Just then...

A loud **CRACK!** filled the air, accompanied by a flash of light so bright I

couldn't keep my eyes open. A tingly sensation stole over my body, making me feel numb.

What was that?!

The bright light had temporarily blinded me, and despite straining my remaining senses, I couldn't even sense Luck, who I was pretty sure was right next to me.

A nervous sweat slicked my palms, almost making me lose my grip on my sword.

I had no idea how much time had passed. It felt like an eternity, but it could've been just a moment.

When my vision returned, all of the kobolds had disappeared.

"What was that...?"

"I think it was lightning."

"On a sunny day like this?"

"Do you think it could've been the hammer of God's righteous fury?"

"This isn't the time for jokes."

The kobolds never reappeared after that, and the punitive force was able to return to Lenice without incident.

As far as I could tell, not a single person had died.

However, the number of people missing totaled several dozen.

It was uncertain whether they'd fled during the battle and didn't dare to show their faces in Lenice or whether they'd been captured by the kobolds. The majority of those missing were magic users from among the adventurers' ranks, but several knights were unaccounted for as well.

The mission was ultimately declared a success, but it wasn't exactly a victory either, so the atmosphere in the city was heavy.

Apparently, the proxy lord would be holding a banquet to thank everyone who'd fought.

Maybe if I drink enough alcohol, these conflicting feelings will go away?

12 - After the Battle

I'D had no idea just how cruel battle was.

All around me, humans and kobolds were sliced open by swords and chopped to pieces by axes, their fresh, bright-red blood painting the ground like rivers.

This wasn't fiction; it was a real-life battle for survival between two living opponents.

The only battles I'd ever seen up to this point had all been on the other side of a television screen. They may have been news reports about true events, but they hadn't felt real.

Then, there was the difference between individual weapons like swords and mass-destruction weapons like missiles.

With just the push of a button, a massive explosion incomparable to simple fire magic could steal hundreds of lives. And the person pushing the button didn't even need to be close enough to see it happen.

All I could do was stand there, watching.

At my side, Sicily's little sister was crying.



I couldn't even imagine how painful it must be to be unable to do anything but watch as people who were like family to you lose their lives. And there was nothing I could do to help her, either.

Sicily's sister might end up hating me. Was it taking the easy way out to almost hope she *did* hate me?

"The front lines have started pulling back over there... Hold off on offensive attacks and stick to defense for the moment," Will called out.

Apparently, something was happening.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a familiar golden color.

It's Ralf! And he's safe!

Even knowing all the traps we had planned, I couldn't help but worry he'd get caught in the crosshairs. But far from being injured, his clothes don't even seem to have gotten dirty. I wonder if he cast magic on himself?

"It looks like Ralf's making his move. Shinki, get ready with the lightning. Kobolds, brace yourselves for the lightning. Make sure your vision and hearing don't get damaged. We've only got a split second to make our retreat," Will called out orders.

We waited with bated breath for the punitive force's movements to change again.

Based on the grim expression on Ralf's face, he was having a hard time convincing the commander.

Will muttered something at my side, but I didn't catch it.

Are his words being carried to Ralf by the elemental spirits?

Their discussion probably only took ten minutes or so, but as we all posed tense and waited to spring into action, it seemed at least twice that long.

Then the wind carried Ralf's voice to us. He spoke two quiet words.

"They're retreating."

At the same time, Red Hlaada moved to the front, and the knights pulled back.

Apparently, Red Hlaada was in charge of covering the rear.

Swords clashed over and over again as the punitive force slowly retreated.

Will watched their movements carefully, calculating the perfect timing to summon the lightning.

An indescribable tension filled the air.

Clearly sensing it, Sicily's sister had her tail drawn up between her legs.

I hugged her and waited for the lightning. My palms were slick with an anxious sweat, but she'd have to forgive me for that.

"Now!" Will shouted.

Sicily's sister squeezed her eyes shut. I closed my eyes and covered my ears. I tried my best to cover her head with my body, but even so, the sheer force of the sound was incredible.

A thunderous **CRASH!** blasted through the air, followed by a harsh flash of light and the crackle of electricity.

Are the kobolds okay?

It took a moment before I recovered from the impact of the lightning.

"Let's go, miss," Shinki said.

The crucial player responsible for creating the lightning was apparently unharmed. Perhaps due to Will and Lars' assistance, Shinki seemed perfectly fine.

With Shinki and the members of the Herb Family protecting us, we swiftly withdrew.

That's right, we were withdrawing, not retreating.

From the beginning, we'd gone into this battle merely intending to leave, not to win.

The kobolds had taken more casualties than anticipated, but that probably factored into the punitive force's decision to cut the subjugation mission short.

If they'd been spotted trying to leave, there was every possibility the kobolds

would've been annihilated.

The purpose of this battle was to avoid that happening.

But watching them fall one after another, I felt it had been a mistake.

I felt like our relationship with the kobolds would've been smoother going forward if I'd chosen a path that hadn't ended in fighting, even if it meant begging Will and Ralf for their help.

The kobolds would feel resentful toward us after this battle, for sure.

As planned, Sicily's group and the non-fighters waited at the first rendezvous point.

Next, with the uninjured members of the Herb Family protecting us, we headed for the second rendezvous point, where we'd join up with the fighters.

As for the enemies we'd immobilized, we left them where they were. Once they woke up, they could use magic or other means to cut their bindings.

Our unit of knights hauled off the beastmaster and the person he'd been fighting. It would be up to the investigator to determine what happened to them after this. I would only concern myself with the fate of the animals.

Sicily's sister had been so relieved that her big sister was safe that she cried herself to sleep.

The other kobolds were silent, and the wagon for transporting the wounded instead carried over a dozen dead bodies.

And this probably wasn't all of the deceased.

The fighters no doubt had a pile of bodies waiting with them at the other rendezvous point as well.

The only sounds were the crush of grass underfoot and the shuffle of armor as we walked.

A short while later, we joined the remaining group of fighters.

From here, they would travel southwest. Their destination was Mount Leitimo, on the border with Mieuxga Province to the west. The mountain didn't have a terribly high elevation, but the terrain was rough and convoluted,

earning it the nickname “the lost mountain” among the locals.

Every year, people went missing or turned up dead after venturing onto the mountain, so travelers went out of their way to avoid the infamous danger zone.

But before setting out for Mount Leitimo, it was time for a short break.

During that time, we would confirm the number of casualties and decide what to do with the bodies of the deceased.

In the end, 28 kobolds died, and 11 lost limbs or suffered severe injuries that would leave them permanently handicapped. These were wounds that even Hanley and the other healers couldn’t heal.

And the family leader of the Fighter Family was among the dead.

Several other seasoned warriors had also died. They’d sacrificed themselves to save a group of young, inexperienced kobolds who’d gotten into trouble.

Even now, the young kobolds were making quiet noises somewhere between crying and whimpering.

They’ve lost a huge portion of their fighting force. Will the pack really survive like this? In that case, I’d better help them find their resolve.

“Stop crying. It’s disrespectful to those who lost their lives,” I said.

“...You!”

“Yes, me. I set all this in motion. Which is why I won’t let you disparage their sacrifice.”

“How can you deny those who’ve lost a parent—a parent!—and dear friends the opportunity to grieve?!”

Damn right, I am! That’s not what they gave their lives for!

“I’m not saying not to mourn,” I replied. “But stop feeling sorry for yourselves! Are you saying that you wish it had been you instead? That they should’ve been the ones to survive? Don’t you see how selfish that is? Their deepest wish was for the future of the pack. For those whom they protected with their lives to be able to smile again. You have to live with all your might so

you don't dishonor their sacrifice!"

They say people cry not only from sadness but also from joy. Well, it was also possible to cry from anger.

Protecting someone with your life was not a light undertaking. So using that as fodder for self-pity was shameful.

"I should've been the one to die instead."

Do you intend to let their sacrifice be in vain? That's not what they laid down their lives for!

"If you want to hate me, go ahead," I said firmly. "But I'm going to be like them and become stronger so I can protect what's important to me—so I can protect this pack!"

I knew that the churning of my mind made my words nearly incoherent, but I finally understood something I should've realized much earlier.

From the moment Shinki named me his master, I'd become the person in charge of leading and protecting the goblins. And by trying to add the kobolds to Project Shiana, I'd also become responsible for them.

In human terms, the path I'd chosen was that of the king. And because I'd chosen monsters as my subjects, it was a road of thorns.

"I'm going to become stronger, too! Then I'll help Lady Neema protect the pack!"

Sicily's sister had awoken at some point, and, with her eyes still puffy and red from crying, she stepped in front of me as if to protect me from the other kobolds, then cried out in a voice taut with determination.

Despite suffering so much, she stood strong and tall with her eyes and tail at attention. She, too, was trying to be strong for the sake of her precious family.

"...You're right. No matter how much we weep and moan, it won't bring them back. All we can do is make the most of this chance they gave us," Sicily said quietly.

Stroking her younger sister's head, Sicily bowed to the pack members.

“I was the one who named this young lady our savior and brought her into the pack. If she is prepared to shoulder your anger, then I will take it beside her.” Then she turned and addressed me. “Young lady—no, Lady Neema. It was my decision, as the leader of this pack, to ask for your help. Even now, the stars proclaim you our savior. Thus, I beseech you: please, lead us to safety.”

“The road to that safety will be difficult and possibly even dangerous,” I warned.

“We’ve overcome countless challenges to make it this far, all under the stars’ guidance. Now, those same stars are telling us to walk with you. In that case, as the Star-Reader Priestess, I will continue to put my trust in the stars and, by extension, in you, Lady Neema.”

This is the critical moment; there’s no turning back now!

“Thank you, Sicily. What about the rest of you? How says the pack?” I addressed the group.

“I will follow you. I can say this as a member of the Healer Family: healing magic is not all-powerful. It is the fate of all those who live to one day die. For those who lost their lives in this battle, today was that day,” Hanley said, looking anguished.

He was likely more shaken by personally experiencing his limits as a healer than by the limits of healing magic in general.

All healing magic was dependent on the will of the Goddess Cresiolle. However, particulars such as which spell to use, how much magic to pour into it, and how fervently to pray were all up to the healer’s own judgment and skill.

If the healer miscalculated, the spell might be less effective, and the patient’s injuries might not heal completely.

Healing magic could be likened to surgery in that you need to understand the symptoms and their causes to effectively treat them. Of course, pouring healing magic indiscriminately into the patient would have some effect, but it would also deplete the healer’s magic quickly.

I’d gleaned that from my brother, but I could tell that Hanley was probably thinking that if he and the other healers were more skilled and possessed more

magic, they might have been able to save more people.

“‘Die not as prey, but fighting with honor.’ This is the creed of the hunting families. If I’d been the one to die, I wouldn’t want the survivors standing around blaming themselves or each other. I say we follow the young lady trying to carry out their dying wishes,” a male kobold said.

He was the family leader of the Strength Family. They weren’t named after their powerful muscles or anything, but rather due to the fact that they represented the fighting power of the kobolds. Their customary weapon was the sword, and their breed was similar to a Rottweiler.

Unlike Rottweilers on Earth, these kobolds were distinctly stylish. Instead of the black-with-brown-patches coloring of earth Rottweilers, the Power Family were predominantly brown with black patches.

Because the ends of their limbs were black, it almost looked like they were wearing boxing gloves and boots. They also had black patches where their eyebrows would’ve been, which gave their faces a serious and dignified air.

Overall, the Strength Family had a fearsome appearance, but their droopy ears helped soften the look a bit.

The motto the family leader had referred to proclaimed that rather than dying as prey—due to a lack of strength, skill, and sound judgment—being defeated in battle while fighting an opponent you were unable to overcome even after giving it your all was an honorable and therefore preferable way to die.

“I agree with Strength.”

The next to speak was a gangly kobold.

He was long-haired with dark gray fur and carried a long, thin rapier-like sword. His face was long and pointed like an Afghan Hound, but where they had the faces of aristocrats, this kobold’s face was more like that of a knight.

I think the name of the breed is Saluki?

“I’m Tolf, the family leader of the Insight Family. Miss, my family will do our best to assist you, so please take care of our pack.”

As Tolf bowed to me, the family leader of the Strength Family followed suit.

“Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier. I’m Gova, the family leader of the Strength Family. I, too, ask you to take care of our pack.”

The surrounding kobolds chimed in.

One by one, the other authority figures besides Sicily spoke up, agreeing to follow me. I couldn’t even get a word in as they took turns pledging themselves to the cause.

After the Insight Family and the Strength Family, the leaders of the lifestyle families, including the Green Family, the Carpenter Family, and the Furnace Family stepped forward to support me, or rather, Sicily’s decision to follow me.

In the end, most of the family leaders agreed, saying it was best for the pack.

And so, the kobolds would join Project Shiana.

As for the bodies of the deceased, we left them in the care of the Guardian of the Forest until the kobolds settled down in a permanent location.

With the guardian watching over them, the bodies would be safe from predation by animals and other monsters. And when the kobolds finally came to retrieve them, they would likely already be reduced to skeletal remains that would be easy to transport.

The kobolds visited the guardian of the forest before departing since, in addition to entrusting him with the bodies, they also wanted to thank him for harboring them.

“Lady Neema, my sister would like to remain with you,” Sicily told me. “But she’s too weak as she is now. She will use this journey as training to become stronger, so please promise that when you have need of her, you will call for her.”

This is like the cherry on top of everything else! And I just got a flash of inspiration... If Sicily’s sister learns to fight and then undergoes training as a servant in our household, she’ll become the ultimate animal-eared maid!

“I didn’t mention it before, but I’m the daughter of a noble family,” I said. “Staying with me would mean living among humans. Not only that, but you’d also need to learn etiquette, at least to a certain degree. Are you still interested

despite all that?”

“I don’t mind! I’m going to do my best to help you and thereby help the pack!”

I had a feeling she’d say that. I was a little worried that, being so earnest, she might get taken advantage of in the future.

“It seems she is in agreement. Seeing her determination, I feel it’s time to acknowledge her maturity. Will you please give her a name?” Sicily asked me.

“Isn’t the pack leader supposed to choose her name...?” I said.

“Normally, yes. But my sister is a beastperson. Unlike a monster, giving her a name won’t bind her to you. And besides, it is her good fortune that she was able to meet a person she wishes to serve.”

“Yeah! I’m so glad I met you, Lady Neema!”

I don’t remember doing anything to inspire such devotion... Is this also the effect of the power I received from God?

In any case, I had to admit I was happy to finally make a friend around my age. Not to mention another female.

“In that case...” I trailed off.

Should I give her a star-related name since she’s likely a member of the Star Wolf Tribe? Hmm, I need to come up with a suitably beautiful name for such a beautiful girl...

Huh? Come to think of it, there aren’t many star-related names in Japanese... I can’t think of any except Subaru for the Pleiades star cluster. Well, there are also Akiboshi (morning star) and Hokuto (north star), but those are men’s names. And anyway, I think they’re Chinese, not originally Japanese, right?

I suppose it doesn’t have to be Japanese. What if I used a name from Greek mythology?

“How about Spica?” I decided.

It may be simple, but Spica is a star that shines in the spring. There are various interpretations in mythology, but with its ties to the Goddess of justice and

astrology, Astraea, as well as Persephone, daughter of the Goddess of fertility, Demeter, I'd say it's a fitting name for a girl.

It'll be troublesome if she becomes the Queen of the Underworld like Persephone, though.

I'd merely suggested the name to gauge her opinion, but she broke into a smile so quickly I could practically hear the sound effect for it, and her tail was wagging a mile a minute.

I'm glad she likes it! That's all that matters.

"Okay then, Spica," I said, using her new name. "Do your best in training with your sister, okay?"

"I will! I'll work hard so you can summon me soon!"

She's so cute! I just can't stand it!

I wanted to offer to take her with me right now, but it would be disadvantageous to stand out any more than we already did. Shinki already drew enough attention; we couldn't also travel around with a beautiful young girl who was also a member of a species believed to be extinct.

Then a mewling "*Whine!*" came from near my feet.

"What's wrong, Gou and Roku?" I asked.

They desperately pleaded for something with their big, round eyes, but I didn't understand monster language.

"For shame! Number five and number six, don't make such insolent requests!" Their older sister, Filia, came to collect the two young kobolds. As soon as Filia picked them up, they let out wailing cries.

What's going on?

"Sorry, number five and six are begging to receive names from you too, Lady Neema," Filia explained.

Oh, I see the problem. If I name them, they'll be bound to me because they're monsters. But that doesn't mean they have to give up living their lives to follow me. Suzuko and Touki are proof of that. I'll leave it up to the pack leader to

decide.

“What should we do, Sicily?” I asked.

“Hmm, personally, I’d be grateful if you named them,” she said. “We don’t have any kobolds in our pack named by humans; I’m curious to see how it affects their development.”

Oh my. You’re going to use them as test subjects?! But it would be easier to act quickly in emergency situations if pack members were connected to me. At the very least, we’ll be able to figure out where the pack is.

All right, time to put my naming sense to the test again.

Pentagram and hexagram are too long... All right, I’ll go with common Japanese names that use the antiquated kanji for five and six in combination with the kanji for star.

“Gou will be Seigo, and Roku will be Rikusei,” I said.

I wanted to brag about how perfect the names were, but there was no point since no one in this world would understand the meanings behind them.

Heck, these days, many Japanese don’t even know these antiquated forms.

“Seigo and Rikusei, huh? Sounds good!”

The expected mark... didn’t appear. Maybe it was covered up by their fur?

I examined their foreheads and spotted a white patch directly on their skin. It was nearly the same shade as their skin, making it hard to spot, but it was there.

Unlike Shizuku and Haku, I didn’t sense a connection with them. As I’d suspected, the connection with the two slimes must’ve been due to Shizuku inhabiting my body.

I’m accumulating monsters at an alarming rate... Is this really okay?

When Seigo and Rikusei evolve into high kobolds, I won’t be able to take them with me anymore. Although, since they’re members of the Herb Family, they’d probably be able to hide themselves when needed!

For now, they’ll stay with the pack to continue their training.

“Seigo and Rikusei, I want you to work hard to become stronger, just like Spica, you hear?” I encouraged.

“Woof!” the two young kobolds answered energetically.

“All right. Be careful, everyone. We’ve got a few more things we need to take care of, and then we’ll meet up with you.”

That would be where we parted with the kobolds for the time being.

Tomorrow, we would travel along the Manoa Highway once more to a town called Galea. We’d spend one night there, then use transportation magic in a city called Darshleigh to travel to Fauxbe, the largest city in the southwest region of the Osphe Province.

We were planning to leave at noon the following day, but depending on Healran, we might delay our departure an extra day.

“Gova and Tolf, I know it will be difficult, but please protect everyone,” I requested.

“You got it!”

“Leave it to us.”

After waving goodbye to the kobolds, we hurried back to Lenice.

We needed to slip back into our rooms before anyone noticed we were missing.

Shinki carried me, Will rode on Lars’ back, and the royal guards all ran!

Looks like they can run while wearing light armor. I guess they must’ve trained for it.



WE made it back to Lenice safely, but when we stole a peek at the city square, it was full of adventurers and knights. We returned to the manor using the hole the royal guards had made in the wall, and once we arrived at our room, Healran was already there waiting for us.

How does he keep getting in here?!

“I’m glad to see you’re safe,” Healran said.

“If you’re here, that must mean you’ve got something for us?” Will asked.

“Here,” Healran said, passing a file to Will. “These are the order and delivery receipts as well as usage records. At the beginning of this cycle, the orders and deliveries were matching up. But after that, there were receipts for additional orders, but those items are nowhere to be found. There are also signs of falsification in the usage records.”

Hm, in other words, fictitious billing? They must be tampering with the usage records to make them match the product in the warehouse. If so, that means the merchants are probably also in on it, as are a number of people within the knighthood.

“Good work,” Will said. “I’ll submit these documents as evidence. Thanks to this, we’ll be able to have an investigator dispatched from the royal city with all haste.”

“You’re not going to make the arrest yourself, Will?” I asked.

Thanks to the royal decree issued by the king, Will had the power to make arrests.

So why is he leaving it to an investigator?

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t want to get stuck here dealing with this and lose even more time,” he said. “And besides, they’re probably up to a lot more than just this, so it’s best to have the issue thoroughly investigated and the full extent of their crimes uncovered. I have a feeling we’ll be able to take down more than just one bad guy this way.”

Oh, so that’s it. He’s hoping to make a series of arrests all at once. Well, in the end, this is Will’s appointed task, so he can handle it however he likes.

Will and Healran were poring over the file of documents when Ralf returned.

“Welcome back, Brother!” I exclaimed.

I’m glad to see he’s unharmed.

I reached out toward Ralf, begging for a hug, and he happily obliged.

“I’m back, Neema. Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Nope! I’m fine; everyone helped protect me.”

Still carrying me in his arms, Ralf walked over to Will.

“Good job today, Will. Apparently, there’s going to be a banquet in the city center in a little while. I hope you’ll join us there.”

“Sure, I don’t mind. Did anyone die on the human side?”

“No deaths. There are a few people who left with handicaps due to the healers’ inexperience, but I will redo their healing later.”

Ralf gave Will a report of everything that had happened that day.

The traps had been highly effective, but the fact we’d been unable to pin down the members of Red Hlaada had led to many of the casualties the kobolds suffered. It seemed that not being able to demobilize the bear beastperson had been the single most decisive factor.

“Looks like I’ve still got a lot to learn,” Will said. “And did you speak to them?”

“Yeah, they all vowed upon their names to keep it between us. It was as you suspected, Will.”

This has been happening way too often lately! Just how long do they intend to exclude me from the conversation?! I have no idea what they’re talking about. By “vowing upon their name,” he’s not suggesting he revealed the details about Project Shiana to someone without telling me, right?

Hmph, I hate feeling left out. Time to forcibly change the subject!

“Ralf, what is a banquet?” I interjected.

“It’s a party where people eat and drink alcohol to thank everyone for working hard.”

“I wanna go too!”

I know I can’t drink, but I at least want to eat all the delicious food!

“Hmm... Do you promise you’ll stay with me or Will the whole time?”

“Of course!”

I’ve never broken a promise to Ralf or Karna! I have broken a promise to Papa

before, though.

“We’re supposed to be leaving tomorrow, so you can’t stay up too late,” Ralf said.

“Okay!”

I never stay up late if I can help it. Only on rare occasions when I go on a spontaneous outing with Sol. But if I get caught doing that, I’ll be on the receiving end of a double scolding from Mama and Papa, so I don’t think I’ll do it anymore... Maybe.

13 - The Night of the Banquet

IT'S time for the banquet to begin!

Already, a myriad of delicious smells filled the air.

The ruckus the men and women who'd already begun drinking were raising was incredible. People were gathered around in small groups, noisily cheering and booing over bouts of arm wrestling or while gambling over some kind of game using dice.

Oh, and there's the raccoon!

"Your Highness Prince Wilhelt, Lord Ralfreed, it is an honor to have you join our humble gathering."

"We're just glad the subjugation mission was a success," Will said. "Please keep working hard for the sake of the country."

Whoa. No matter how many times I see it, Will's poker face always gives me goosebumps!

"Thank you very much."

Once we separated from the raccoon-like regional commander, Will spoke to Shinki. "Please ask some earth spirits to follow him and observe his movements."

"Even though there are already wind spirits following him?" Shinki asked.

"They're to restrain him if necessary," Will responded. "The wind spirits would end up killing him."

While I appreciate that this is a volatile topic, Shinki is mine!

"What would you like me to do, Miss?" Shinki turned to me.

Heh, there's the Shinki I know and love.

I couldn't say if he was good at advocating for me or just downright stubborn,

but I also didn't really care which it was.

"Do as Will says. If it looks like he's going to run or try to resist, capture him!"

"Very well."

But, you know, it never occurred to me you could use earth spirits that way. I figured they were mostly suited for agriculture. And who would've guessed that wind spirits tend to be so aggressive? I'd better watch out for them.

"Neema, I'm going to do some healing, so you stick with Will, okay?" Ralf told me.

"Okay! Come back soon!" I waved.

Will is boring. And Shinki seems to have learned how to hide his presence lately, so it's almost as if he's not even here. Booooring!

"In that case, why don't we speak with Red Hlaada?" Will suggested.

I take it back! Will, you are an incredibly insightful man! I've been itching to meet that bear beastperson!

"Really?!" I exclaimed.

"We have to thank them for their efforts."

In that case, what are we waiting for?! Let's go!

Red Hlaada were easy to spot in the crowd.

First of all, a large group of people surrounded them. And the bear beastperson had a tremendous presence. After all, he stood head and shoulders above the rest of the banquet attendees.

He's got to be nearly seven feet tall!

"Let us through."

Though Will's voice was not loud or menacing, it was clear and carried the weight of authority, and the people milling about instantly moved to clear a path for us.

Just like Moses parting the Red Sea!

A few of the adventurers looked ready to protest Will's attitude, but the

knights immediately knelt to pay homage, giving those adventurers an idea of just who he was. As they figured it out, one by one, they, too, prostrated themselves before him.

I still couldn't get used to this reverent treatment, but Will walked through the crowd as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

Personally, I find this position extremely uncomfortable...

"Neema!" Will called out to me when I hesitated to follow him.

Having no other choice, I held on to Lars' tail and made my way forward.

Once we reached Red Hlaada, Will finally gave permission for everyone to rise.

"I'm told that you played a big part in the success of this subjugation mission. You have my gratitude," he said.

"...It was nothing."

The swordsman was visibly nervous.

I suppose anyone would be if a member of the royal family suddenly appeared unannounced in front of them.

The swordsman had a shade of light-brown hair that was common in the Kingdom of Gaché and clear, honest-looking eyes the color of yellow quartz. His slender, athletic build was inferior to Shinki's muscular physique, but he gave off an aura of strength nonetheless.

And the sword that he carried had slaughtered countless kobolds.

...No, stop. Right now, I've got to play the part of the duke's daughter. I have to stand proud and tall, or it will look suspicious.

"Not at all," Will replied. "Thanks to your group's efforts, we were able to avoid further casualties."

While Will was speaking with the swordsman, I quietly observed the others.

The two female members of Red Hlaada were both staring at Will.

I suppose I have to concede that his looks, at least, are very good.

All of the male members of Red Hlaada were the same as the swordsman—they all seemed nervous.

Only the bear beastperson seemed relaxed and aloof.

Maybe beastpeople didn't care much about things like social status?

Beastpeople were known to have strong animal instincts and tended to judge their opponents based on their physical strength. In short, no matter how high a person's social status was, if they were a weakling, beastpeople wouldn't be impressed.

Well, not that Will is weak, but...

Just then, the bear beastperson suddenly moved.

To be specific, he walked toward me.

He was even more heavily muscled than Shinki and must've been nearly twice as big across. His dark-brown eyes were unexpectedly gentle, but I was hyper-focused on his ears, so I barely noticed. They were covered in light-colored fur, somewhere between white and gray, and the shape was rounded, with slight points at the tips, similar to those of a Ussuri Brown Bear or a Himalayan Bear. More than anything, the fur at the base of his ears was enticingly fluffy!

"I'm Luck of the Ice Bear Tribe. It is an honor to meet a wind holy beast." The beastperson knelt respectfully, and Lars responded with an apathetic "*Growl.*"

Even kneeling, he was massive, but I was fully focused on his ears.

Bear ears! Ahhh!

As if sensing my hands twitching at my sides as I barely restrained myself from touching those ears, Lars smacked me with his tail.

But Laaars! Those ears...!

Lars narrowed his eyes, clearly picking up on my train of thought. It seemed like he was saying, "*That's rude, so behave yourself!*"

Uggh!

"Um, and you are?"

"Forgive me. I'm Dayland Osphe's youngest daughter, Nefertima." I curtsied

elegantly as benefiting a duke's daughter.

"Thank you for the introduction. Oh, I should probably mention I'm not very familiar with human social manners or polite language, so I'm sorry in advance if I'm unintentionally rude."

"I don't mind," I said. "I understand there are differences between human and beastperson cultures."

The fact that he paid his respects to Lars showed that the beastpeople considered holy beasts divine beings. All species revered holy beasts as the pinnacle of all living creatures, beings connected to God.

"You aren't the wind holy beast's master, are you?" he asked me.

"No, Lars is my friend. Will over there is Lars' master."

"That can't be. You're friends with a holy beast...?" His ears twitched with surprise.

Ahhhh, I wanna touch them so bad!

"What is the Ice Bear Tribe like?" I asked.

"Hmm... Well, among beastpeople we're said to be battle-crazy. We're strong against the cold, can swim well, and are among the most skilled of the bear tribes."

They really are a lot like bears, then.

Normal bears didn't enjoy fighting but were territorial and obsessed with food.

"Well, now that I've paid my respects to the holy beast, I think it's time to go find me some food!"

When he stood up, I was struck again by just how tall Luck was. I could see how all it took was one strike from him to take down a kobold.

They must've been frightened...

Or maybe they were excited to face off against such a challenging opponent?

I hope it was the latter. I don't want to harbor hatred toward Luck or the swordsman.

“Would you like to come, little miss?”

I’d been zoning out, staring at Luck while I thought about things. He interrupted my ruminations with this invitation.

“Yes!” I exclaimed.

Lars looked disapproving, but he could come too!

I followed after Luck, but after only a few paces, he was already losing me. Even running, I couldn’t keep up!

Once he noticed me falling behind, Luck picked me up. Rather than cradling me in his arms like Shinki or Ralf, he set me on his shoulders.

Riding on his shoulders, I could see everything from a different point of view than usual, which was interesting. And his ears were right there in front of me! Up close, they were just as fluffy as I’d imagined and looked like they would feel really nice to touch.

“I gotta say, you’ve got guts, young lady. This is the first time I’ve met a child who wasn’t afraid of me.”

He is big and fierce-looking, so I suppose it makes sense that normal children would be afraid of him.

Oh, that’s right!

“Luck, I need to tell Will I’m going to eat...” I mumbled.

“Huh? Oh, is His Highness your guardian?”

From my perch on Luck’s shoulders, I called down to Will that we were going to eat, and he glared back at me.

Why?!

“Neema, what about your promise with Ralf?” Will reminded me.

“But you’re going too, right?”

I haven’t forgotten my promise to Ralf! So come on, Will and Lars—let’s eat!

“You’re hopeless,” Will sighed, then turned to the swordsman. “I’m sorry for the imposition, but would you and your party mind joining us for dinner?”

“If you truly don’t mind...”

“I don’t think we have any choice. Once she’s made up her mind, it’s almost impossible to convince her otherwise.”

“Luck seems to be enjoying himself, too.”

“I wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it with my own eyes. Luck loves kids, but they always run away from him crying,” one of the women commented.

So Luck likes kids, huh? In that case, maybe he’ll let me touch his ears if I ask...

“Luck, can I touch your ears, please?”

“What, you like my ears?”

“Yeah! They’re so fluffy and look really soft!”

“I see... Sure, I don’t mind.” Luck readily agreed, seeming pleased that I’d praised his ears.

In that case, I won’t hold back!

I started by touching the base of his ear, which was about as wide across as a child’s hand. It was just as fluffy as I’d imagined. The individual hairs were fine, and despite how densely packed together they were, the fur felt like the feather-soft stuffing inside a down pillow.

As I traced my fingers to the tips of his ears, the hairs gradually became stiffer. Even so, the fur at the very tip of his ears was still as soft as the bristles of a paintbrush.

Something told me that playing with these ears would be soothing, similar to the stress relief I got from squeezing Haku.

“They’re so soft and fluffy...”

I can’t stop!

I continued touching Luck’s ears the entire time I was sitting on his shoulders.

We met up with Ralf on the way, and he laughed wryly when he saw the position I was in.

The banquet feast was heavy on meat, so I summoned Nox to eat with us. I

selected an entire roast bird of some sort, and after I ate the thighs and drumsticks, Nox and Gratia gladly finished the rest for me. The dish was seasoned with herbs, so I felt okay giving it to them. If it were heavily salted, they probably couldn't have eaten it.

Hm, looks like it's too big for Gratia.

The tiny spider was clinging to the whole roast bird, attempting to eat it, but he seemed to be having a hard time biting pieces off.

Then, as if he'd noticed the same thing, Nox tore off a piece of the meat with his beak and passed it to Gratia. Gratia immediately leapt on the smaller chunk and, wrapping his legs around it, chewed enthusiastically.

The way he chews is so adorable!

But the two of them really have gotten close... Thank goodness they get along so well!



THE banquet showed every sign of continuing long into the night, and slowly, city residents joined in. The appetizing aroma of the food and the sounds of people enjoying themselves must've carried all throughout the city.

In one corner of the city center, a group stood watching the festivities longingly. It was the children from the slums.

Hmm, let me see what I can do.

The food was being prepared in a tent set up for this purpose.

I called out to one of the cooks at random, "Excuse me! I'd like you to put those children to work. Is it okay?"

When I pointed to the children from the slums, the cook frowned. "...They can't be trusted to do a good job."

Urk, he flat-out refused. How am I going to convince him?

While I was trying to figure out what to say, another cook standing behind the first one butted in.

"What's the harm? Look how much work we have—we can take all the help

we can get!”

Is he the head cook?

“All right, little miss. As you can see, we’ve got a mountain of dishes to wash. I bet even those little ruffians can handle that.”

Now that’s what I’m talking about, mister!

Now that he mentioned it, there really was an overflowing pile of dirty dishes in the corner of the kitchen tent.

In addition to plates and utensils, a number of pots and pans and other cooking utensils needed washing. The young, lower-ranked staff were frantically using magic and handwashing to try and make a dent in the mountain of dirty dishes. But as fast as they cleaned the dishes, more were brought over to be added to the pile. They really had their work cut out for them.

“Thank you!”

I thanked the cooks. Then Luck and I turned and headed toward the slum children. I rode in my signature spot on Luck’s shoulders.

I bet they’ll be super jealous that I get to ride up here!

“Is it really okay? They don’t seem like the type of kids to do as they’re told...”

“Something tells me they’ll work for food. It’s not charity or a gift; they’re earning it fair and square.”

“I suppose so...”

By the time we finished this brief exchange of words, we’d made it to where the children were standing. The children were visibly frightened. Several of them even had tears in their eyes.

Does Luck really seem that terrifying to them? He’s a really nice guy!

Now, what was that kid’s name? I said I would remember it, but I forgot already... I think it was similar to the name of some animal from Earth... Panda? No... Bear? No, that’s not it, either. B... Beluga! No, wait, it’s Belgar!

Thank goodness I remembered!

“Is Belgar Crius here?” I asked.

“Wadda ye want?”

The child who stepped forward from the group was the same boy who’d abused the baby kobold.

“You kids must be hungry, right? If you help wash the dishes, you can have some food.”

“Who wants ta do sumtin’ like that!”

“Oh? Didn’t you say you wanted to protect these children?” I challenged. “Do you truly plan to let them starve because you don’t feel like washing a few dishes?”

The boy gritted his teeth in response. I’d seen this expression before. This boy didn’t understand anything.

“Protecting someone doesn’t mean just protecting them from enemies. It also means watching over them so that they can grow up and become self-sufficient.”

“What would ye know?! A pampered noble brat like ye ’as no idea what it’s like fer us on these streets!”

I let the boy’s angry outburst roll right off of me.

I didn’t know why he was living in the slums despite his father allegedly being a red rank adventurer or how he became these children’s de-facto leader, but right now, it didn’t matter.

“Isn’t it your duty to determine whether the hand reaching out to help you is sincere and to guide the other children?” I asked.

No matter the circumstances, the role of a leader didn’t change.

Just as Shinki had protected the goblin clan. Just as Sicily ruled the kobold pack.

You need to learn to lead by example. Barking out orders and doing nothing yourself won’t change anything. You won’t be able to protect the things you want to protect. This isn’t an easy road you have chosen.

“I think it’s really incredible to want to protect someone,” I said. “But what do you want to protect them from? Think about it. Their survival depends on you. Your choices might end up killing the very people you claim you want to protect.”

Don’t become like me.

“I might end up killin’ them...?”

“Yes. Letting those children die due to your pride is the same as killing them yourself, don’t you think?”

“No! Everythin’ I do is fer their sake!”

“Then get it together already! It’s impossible to go your whole life without ever depending on anyone! You first need to learn to accept help from adults. Only then can you become wily enough to manipulate adults into doing your bidding. But don’t lose sight of your goal, you hear me? You’re going to become stronger so you can protect those kids, right?”

The boy glared at me silently.

I stared straight back at him unflinchingly.

The silence was so heavy between us that the raucous noise all around us seemed to fade into the background.

Luck and the other children silently watched the exchange between the boy and me.

“...I understand what ye’re tryin’ ta say. Fine, I’ll manipulate ye inta doing my bidding, then!”

Did he really understand what I was trying to say?

The boy summoned five children from the group behind him, calling out to each of them by name.

“ere’s wat we’ll do. From here on out, the six of us will take care of the rest of these kids. Fer now, we’ll wash the dishes. And tomorrow we’ll look fer work that even we can do.”

So he understood, after all.

“The older children could probably join the adventurers’ guild.”

I merely made an off-handed suggestion but was met with a death glare.

Hm? Maybe this kid has poor eyesight, and I’ve been misinterpreting his squinting as glaring this entire time?

“Ye seem differ’nt from last time we met.”

“Yeah. A lot of people died because of me...”

Oh crap! I forgot Luck is right there! Did he realize I was referring to the kobolds?

I glanced nervously toward Luck, and he met my eyes with a pained expression. Then he stroked the top of my head.

He’s comforting me?!

“That must’ve been hard.”

Umm... I can’t tell if he misunderstood or understood perfectly and is pretending not to.

Will would probably be furious if he found out, so I decided to discuss it with Ralf later.

“Well, let’s go then. The head cook seems to be a nice person. I’ll be leaving this city tomorrow, so good luck,” I said.

“Nefertima, when I become strong, I’ll find ye so I can brag about it. Don’t ferget our promise.”

Oh! He remembered my name!

“Okay. Don’t you forget either, Belgar.”

As I reaffirmed this promise with Belgar, I thought I did a pretty good job concealing that I’d completely forgotten it once already.

Does this mean we’re friends now? I’m gonna take it that way!

“This makes us friends now!” I exclaimed.

“Huh?!”

Belgar’s face had turned bright red.

Is he embarrassed that I called us friends? He's at a delicate age, after all...

Now that his belligerent attitude had disappeared, Belgar and the other five children followed me to the kitchen tent.

The person I assumed was the head cook greeted the children warmly, saying, "We were waiting for you."

Before they dived into the massive pile of dishes, the head cook gave each a bit of food to hold them over until they finished their work and could have the rest of their meal.

I think they'll be fine on their own from here.

"Thank you, miss, for caring about these kids. The adults of this city should've been the ones watching out for them."

I could tell that the cook clearly cared about Belgar and the other children. He probably just didn't know how to help them or where to start.

"Please watch out for them," I responded.

I hoped Belgar would quickly learn that not all adults were bad people.



THAT detour cost more time than expected, so I hurried to get back to Ralf and the others.

"You really don't seem like an aristocrat, little miss," Luck said.

"I hear that a lot."

Healran had said the same thing, and Will told me that all the time.

Karna had told me to never change, but I was perfectly capable of acting like a noble young lady when I needed to!

"You've been blessed with many companions."

"Yeah, but because of that, I've got a lot to learn."

"A lot to learn?"

"Yeah. I need to learn more about this country and its people so I don't dishonor my father's name and noble lineage... There's a lot I still don't know."

My studies with my private tutor, Annalee, covered a broad range of subjects. I'd also studied various topics on my own, so it was hard to pinpoint exactly where my education was lacking, but...

This incident made me painfully aware of how naïve I was, so I was determined to learn all I could about this world.

"The higher your social status, the greater your burden of responsibility. I still can't do anything by myself, but I don't want to be a detriment to my family just because I'm young," I admitted.

These were my true, unfiltered feelings. Currently, I seemed to do nothing but burden my family, so I wanted to reduce that burden even a little if I could.

That's one more reason why I need to develop the mental fortitude to resist temptation!

I was well aware of my own weakness: I lost my head at the first sight of anything fluffy! Part of me protested that this was my nature, so there was no use fighting it, but I tried desperately to bury that voice.

"It sounds tough being an aristocrat. If you find yourself in trouble, you can count on us. We're not good for much other than fighting, but we'll help if we can," Luck offered.

He's a good person.

I wish he could see that if he just talked with them, he would probably find that he has a lot in common with some of the monsters. I have a feeling he and the family leader of the Fighter Family would've gotten along well. He was a tough but kind-hearted guy.

"I'll keep that in mind! Thanks."

Bonus Chapter

“UGH! Why do you keep accepting such tricky requests?!” the fire spirit literally fumed.

Hey, knock it off—that’s hot!

“It’s fine, isn’t it?! It was a request from Shinki. If we don’t honor the requests of the guy chosen as the beloved child’s ‘knight,’ we’ll sully our names as elemental spirits!” the wind spirit literally blustered.

The combination of flames and wind basked the surrounding area.

I’m in danger of getting evaporated, so I’d better end this quickly.

“Are you guys trying to irritate me? Or maybe you want an elemental king to come erase you?”

The animals who lived in the surrounding forest were all frightened by the two elemental spirits’ unintentional emotional expressions of their powers.

It looked like even the plants had been affected, so I’d have to ask the earth spirit to pep them up later.

“Oh!”

Finally returning to their senses, the two reined in their powers.

I slightly increased the humidity in the super-heated air so that a wildfire wouldn’t occur. The animals probably found it sticky and unpleasant, but they’d have to bear it for now.

“Hey, Wind! Hurry up and blow away this excessive heat!”

“Oh, right!”

It took me pointing it out to get him to finally summon a breeze and dispel the heat.

“If you’ve got the time for bickering, why don’t you focus on figuring out how to lead the goblins to the northern cave?!”

The fire spirit snapped her mouth shut at that, glaring at me reproachfully.

That's not cute at all, you know!

"In the first place, how are we supposed to lead a bunch of goblins who can't even see us?!"

"That's why I'm telling you to try and think of something! You're always such a dummy, Fire!"

"Whaaat?! Who are you calling a dummy?! Wind is the real dummy here!"

Now I've done it.

Just when things had cooled down, the fire spirit was getting heated again.

"But if we don't fulfill his request, Shinki won't give us his power."

Oi, you're awake over there, Earth? You haven't said a word this whole time. I thought you were sleeping!

"Earth is right. So, what should we do?"

Even now, as we discussed it, the goblins were running around lost. It would be troublesome if they headed south and ran into humans, so I wanted to lead them to the cave as quickly as possible.

"Hmm... Oh! What if Earth made a path for them to follow?"

"A path?"

"Yeah. If there was a path that was easy to walk on, the goblins would surely take it."

The fire spirit's suggestion had merit.

Even animals instinctively stick to established paths.

When it came to monsters, even goblins with slightly advanced intelligence would probably follow that same natural instinct to choose a path over trudging through the wilderness.

"Let's give it a try. Do you mind, Earth?"

"Leave it to me!"



IT worked at first.

The goblins obligingly chose the easy-to-walk path.

But after about a day, the hobgoblin suddenly diverted from the path.

“Hey! That’s the wrong way!” the fire spirit shouted, but, of course, the hobgoblin didn’t hear her.

“Wait, wait!” the wind spirit cried, using his power to try and stop them, but the hobgoblin ignored the sudden breeze.

Are his senses dull or something?

Normally, if a strong gust blew suddenly out of nowhere, you’d at least pause to cautiously scan the area, right?

After traveling quite a distance from the path, the goblins finally stopped at the base of a tree that had some berries on it.

I completely forgot! Living creatures need to eat!

The remaining berries were all at the top of the tree. The goblins had absolutely no hope of reaching them.

I watched to see what they would do. The hobgoblin shrieked out a “Giii!” and several of his underlings scrambled up the tree.

Huh?! Don’t fall to your deaths! Shinki will lose faith in us if that happens!

I could’ve asked the wind spirit to blow the berries down from the treetop, but it was against the rules for us to get involved.

We weren’t allowed to interfere with living creatures’ fight for survival. We were only allowed to act in exchange for compensation. Even helping Shinki was only permitted because he gave us his power in exchange.

There was also the fact that he was the chosen “knight” of the beloved child, and the power of the God of Creation dwelled within him.

By receiving that power, we elemental spirits could advance to the next level.

That’s why we helped beings who possessed the power of the God of Creation, such as holy beasts and those known as “God’s favored.”

These days, it seems like no one has enough of his favor to be able to see us...

The competition over getting close to the beloved child was especially tough.

She had the fire dragon Sol and the sky tiger Lars—holy beasts who were very popular among the elemental spirits—as well as her “knight” on her side.

Not to mention, once the beloved child herself could use power, the elemental spirits around her could earn even more power.

Our greatest desire was to always be of use to the God of Creation and the Goddess.

We wanted to earn power so we could help stabilize the world, and we also wanted to protect the beloved child.

So, we couldn’t allow ourselves to stagnate at this intermediate level.

“Wind, use your power to make sure they don’t fall to their deaths, okay?”

“I don’t need you to tell me that!”

It was incredibly challenging to protect the goblins and guide them to the northern cave. I knew that among the creatures created by the God of Creation, not a single one was unnecessary, but the goblins were just so stupid!

When they climbed trees, they fell. When they tried to hunt, they got attacked by the kiewie they’d been trying to catch. They nearly drowned in a river. Somehow, they even got buried in the snow.

The goblins’ erratic behavior kept us busy, bustling around, trying to keep them out of trouble.

But finally, we reached the end of our mission.

At last, the path connected to the northern cave.

All you have to do is walk straight forward!

Hey, wait! Why are you fighting with Touki?!

“Hey, hey! You’re all the same clan, so stop fighting and get along, will you?!”

“Oh no! Touki, stop that!”

“Wind! Inform Shinki immediately, and carry his voice here!”

“Okay!”

I dumped water on Touki and the hobgoblin, and the earth spirit created a wall between them to buy us some time until, at last, the wind carried Shinki's voice to us.

"These goblins have pledged to follow me and join our clan. Suzuko, Touki, look after them."

Touki jumped in surprise at the sudden voice, but Suzuko came out of the cave and quelled the fighting.

That was close! We should've thought to relay a message to them from Shinki before we suddenly appeared.

Phew! In any case, now we've fulfilled our mission.

"Okay, let's go back to the beloved child."

"Yeah."

"I feel Shinki's power running through me!"

"Whoa, the power of a 'knight' is especially potent!"

The God of Creation's power flowed from Shinki into us.

It was inferior to that of a holy beast, but compared to the favored of long ago, it was strong.

When we returned to the beloved child, the wind spirits surrounding Will were complaining that Shinki had called us bugs.

I mean, he can't exactly go around talking openly about elemental spirits, after all.

These days, almost no humans can see us.

And it wasn't just humans—the number of beastpeople and monsters who could see was decreasing as well.

Apparently, the elves could still see us, but the wind spirits said that occasionally, even among the elves, a child was born who couldn't see us.

Little by little, the number of people who could see us would likely dwindle until none were left.

Next, some of my brethren started bragging about how they'd led the beloved child to water. Some had even advanced from low level to intermediate level. Honestly, I was so jealous I almost wanted to erase them right then and there.

But, after hearing that the beloved child had given us the name "Nano," my jealousy melted away instantly. Such a swell of happiness replaced it that it was all I could do to keep my power from flaring up.

Joy was an especially difficult emotion for elemental spirits to control.

Every elemental spirit's greatest dream was to receive a name someday.

Elemental Kings received a name directly from God, but that was an impossible dream for us. So instead, we aspired to receive a name from a beloved child or a holy beast—beings with deep connections to the God of Creation.

If someone had a name, they could serve the world. They could be of use to the God of Creation. That was the wish of all elemental spirits created by the God of Creation.

So, beloved child... quickly become able to see us!

Side Story - Neema's Day at the Royal Palace

TODAY *I'm going to explore the royal palace!*

I'd been planning to have Will show me around, but unfortunately, he had official duties he needed to attend to.

It must be hard being a prince!

He'd offered to have Lars accompany me, but I'd refused, saying he should have Lars by his side when attending to official duties.

Then he'd offered to assign someone else to escort me, but I'd refused that as well.

Today, I just want to go for a leisurely stroll!

Will sighed and told me that if anything happened, I should either let out a huge scream or run to find a member of the royal guard.

Is the royal palace really that dangerous?! If anything happens, I've got Sol's power, so I'm sure I'll be fine.

I headed from the east building, where Will's room was, toward the north building, where the Magical Research Center was.

The royal palace was square-shaped. The west building contained government offices, and the south building was where events usually took place since it housed the ballroom and the throne room.

All kinds of interesting things were in the magical research center!

In particular, magical items still in development seemed like toys to me, and I would play with them under the premise of "prototype testing."

Last time I was there, they were working on a magically powered device similar to an electric fan. I suggested they add a swiveling feature. I wondered how that had gone.

I was strolling along the first floor of the east building when I came across an unfamiliar royal guard chatting amicably with one of the maids.

They were probably on the job, but I would mind my business. Perhaps the “season of love” had come for that royal guard.

I was debating which route I should take when, from the opposite direction, a maid appeared, walking toward me, leading an aristocrat.

Is he here for an audience with Will or maybe Queen Relena?

But, you know, this aristocrat looks vaguely familiar... Is he an associate of Papa's?

When the royal guard and the maid noticed the approaching aristocrat, they backed up against the wall and lowered their heads respectfully.

Just when I thought the aristocrat was going to pass by without incident, he stopped to call out to the young man and woman.

“Aren’t you two supposed to be working right now? Your training must’ve been severely lacking if you find it acceptable to sneak off and meet in a place like this during working hours!”

Urk, that was pretty harsh. But I suppose they only have themselves to blame. They need to learn to choose their TPO—time, place, and occasion—a little better.

“Forgive me, my lord. I was the one who stopped her; the blame is entirely mine. Please don’t punish her for my mistake,” the guard said, bowing deeply.

He gets high marks for trying to protect a lady, at least. Just like a knight in shining armor!

“Even so, she could have declined since she’s in the middle of working. The way I see it, you’re both guilty of neglecting your duties. I’m going to have to report this incident to your superiors.”

...What a hard-hearted person! They’re not even his own servants! He could’ve just overlooked it. I feel bad for the royal guard, knowing that guy, Gwynn, will scold him. I’ve heard Gwynn’s scoldings are especially harsh. His subordinates complained that he was naggy and vicious when angry.

...Hm, well, I’m intrigued now. I guess I’ll help them out.

I hummed cheerfully and strolled toward the group as if I were coincidentally

passing by. I hoped it looked natural and I wasn't overselling it.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Oh, if it isn't Duke Osphe's youngest daughter."

The aristocrat seemed to recognize me. I must've met him somewhere before, as I'd thought.

"Good day."

This aristocrat was surely lower-ranked than my family's title of duke, so I didn't bother with more than a simple greeting.

"These two were neglecting their work, so I'm teaching them the error of their ways."

"You mustn't neglect your work," I tutted. "Gwynn is terrifying when he's angry with someone."

The royal guard paled as if well acquainted with Gwynn's anger. I felt a little bad for taking my teasing too far.

"Mister, are you here to see His Highness?" I asked.

"No, today I have an audience with Her Majesty the Queen."

Oh, so it's not Will, after all. He's here to see Queen Relena, is he? If he were here to see Will, I would've offered to go with him, but if I show my face to the queen, she'll use me as a living dress-up doll...

What can I do to get these two out of a thorough scolding? Hmm...

I guess all I can do is speak to Gwynn before this aristocrat gets to him?

"Is that so? My apologies for waylaying you and taking up so much of your precious time on your way to such an important meeting."

Ugh, polite conversation is so exhausting!

"Don't trouble yourself; it was a pleasure to meet you, my lady."

"I will take my leave here. Enjoy your audience with the queen."

I pasted a wide smile on my face, and with a slight curtsy, I turned away from the aristocrat.

“Oh, that’s right. I have some business with Gwynn. Would you please lead the way, Mister Guard?” I said to the guard, pretending that I’d just remembered needing to speak with Gwynn.

“Y-Yes, of course.”

The knight quickly straightened and then performed a formal salute.

The formal salute of the royal guard began at attention, then the guard would trace his right hand over the hilt of the sword he wore at his hip, and finally, he would show the crest on his right shoulder denoting his rank and division to the recipient of his salute.

That was the formal salute the royal guard used to greet anyone outside the royal family. As for the royal family, there were different variants, including one used exclusively for the king, one for the queen and princes and princesses, and one for other persons of royal blood who held a place in the line of succession.

The royal knighthood, on the other hand, had three variations of the formal salute: one for the royal family, one for aristocrats and commoners, and one for fellow knights.

“Will you please inform my mother that I’ll be visiting Gwynn?” I asked the maid.

I’ll send the maid to my mother. She’ll probably be surprised to receive that message.

Knowing Mama, she’d probably deduce that something was up and ask the maid what happened. And once she heard the story, I bet she’d understand what I was trying to do.

“Uh, um...”

The maid seemed slightly flustered, but I left it at that so I wouldn’t give anything away.

“Do as the young lady asks,” the senior maid escorting the aristocrat ordered the flustered maid.

Then, as if coming to her senses, the maid bowed her head and said, “Yes, my lady.”

“My deepest apologies for the delay, Baron Cheuxvan. If you’ll please follow me.”

The senior maid’s respectful urging seemed to remind this Baron Cheuxvan person why he was here in the first place.

It wouldn’t do to keep the queen waiting, so beat it!

However, he kept glancing at me as if concerned about what I was up to. I couldn’t tell if he was being childish or just incredibly stubborn.

“Let us go as well,” I said to the guard, and we departed first.

The maid tried to say something, but I cut her off by pointing to the north building and directing her to see Mama.

The maid bowed deeply, then left the royal guard and me, heading into the central courtyard. I’d heard a shortcut through the courtyard led to the north building, so that must’ve been the path she was taking.

I followed the royal guard toward the guardroom in the east building.

I think we’re probably in the clear now?

“All right, let’s apologize to Gwynn before that nasty old man gets to tattle,” I said.

“I’m very sorry, Lady Nefertima.”

The royal guard apologized, but did he really understand his mistake?

“Next time, please consider the lady’s position. Gwynn is scary enough, but I’ve heard the head maid in charge of the east building is super strict, too. You don’t want that poor girl to get scolded harshly, do you?”

Each building had a head maid overseeing the maids who worked there, and Will had told me the head maid of the east building was especially strict.

Apparently, until recently, she’d even scold Will from time to time. Although now that he was taking on so many official duties as the crown prince, she’d stopped scolding him.

When I asked what he’d done to get scolded, he said that he’d been playing pranks...particularly using magic in experimental ways. And, furthermore, it was

the maids he was pranking.

I don't blame her for telling him off!

"If I did something to make her hate me, I couldn't live with myself!"

"In that case, you need to protect her."

Which is why we've got to take on Gwynn!

When we peeked into the guardroom, the men were lounging around eating sweets or napping despite it still being morning. Everyone looked quite relaxed. They were always at attention when on shift, so I understood wanting to veg out during their break time.

"Excuse me..." I called out, and the conversation screeched to a stop. Silence descended over the room as every guard froze.

Huh?

"L-Lady Nefertima!" someone shouted, and all at once, the guards snapped to attention, straightening their uniforms so quickly that I almost wouldn't have believed how relaxed they'd just been if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your break. Is Brigade Leader Gwynn here?" I asked, causing the guards to whisper among themselves.

"Hey, where did the brigade leader go?"

"Earlier, he was asking about the daily reports..."

"The daily reports? Don't tell me the unit on duty didn't turn in their reports?"

"No way, that can't be. There must've been some kind of mistake in their report."

"But where is the brigade leader?!"

Although they intended to whisper, their voices were gradually rising in volume.

I can hear every word you're saying, guys!

"I'm sorry, I believe he's either gone to his office or to report to the captain of

the royal guard.”

Hmm, so he's not here right now?

“In that case, will you please escort me to Gwynn’s office?” I asked the first guard.

...They're all guards; that doesn't make it very clear who I'm talking about! Oh, I know! Since he was hitting on the maid, I'll call him the playboy guard!

“Why him?!”

“What is he doing with our Angel of Healing in the first place?!”

Huh? What are they talking about? Oh well, the royal guards have always been an unusual bunch. Maybe they're traumatized from being bullied by Gwynn all the time. Or maybe it's the stress of the job?

In any case, you can do it, guys!

“Sorry again for the intrusion!” I excused myself.

Next, the playboy guard led the way to Gwynn’s office.

Offices were in the west building, so we’d need to go to the opposite side of the royal palace. It was quite a distance, but this was a world of swords and magic.

If only we could use transportation magic to pop over there...

Unfortunately, that wasn’t possible.

The royal palace was intentionally not connected with a series of teleportation circles to prevent anyone from using them to break in.

Teleportation circles were also huge and difficult to create.

In any case, I had no choice but to accept reality and walk there.

Shortly after we passed from the east building into the south building, the playboy guard let out an unexpected “Urk!”

What does he mean by “Urk”?

“Oh no. There’s Princess.”

Huh? The king and queen don't have any daughters, so what “princess” is he

talking about? I haven't heard anything about a royal delegation visiting from another country, either...

I followed the playboy guard's line of sight to a large, pink furball a short distance away.

Um... Is that a stuffed animal? Or maybe a cushion? Oh, wait. Don't tell me that's "Princess"?!

"...Lady Nefertima, let's take another route. We mustn't approach Princess," the playboy guard cautioned, but I couldn't see what was so dangerous about this "Princess."

I was examining the pink furball when legs popped out.

Huh?! Ew, gross!

Imagine four stubby little legs suddenly popping out of a fluffy pink furball.

Ugh, no way, it's too gross! It may be fluffy, but those legs are really nasty-looking!

Once the legs popped out, the playboy guard took a fighting pose.

"Lady Nefertima, please run away!"

Even if you're telling me to run, I don't know the south building at all, so I'm 100 percent certain I'd get hopelessly lost.

While I was debating what to do, the pink furball suddenly charged!

It moved with the agility of an animal, and although the playboy guard attempted to shield me with his own body, it cleanly dodged him and body-slammed straight into me.

The force of the impact sent me flying backward.

As I tumbled backward, I mentally braced myself for the pain of crashing into the floor, but it never came.

Thinking it strange, I opened my tightly shut eyes and looked around, only to spot my bunny backpack behind me.

It seemed the bunny backpack, which was actually a dragon orb, had absorbed the impact of my fall. The lack of pain and the mitigation of the shock

of hitting the floor only proved what a legendary item it was.

The pink furball was directly in front of me.

No, it was a mysterious pink creature.

It was about as large as my torso, so maybe a foot and a half or so?

One-third of that was its legs.

It had a flat, rounded face like a rabbit with squinty eyes. Its ears were longer than a dog's but not as long as a rabbit's.

It's almost like they added a rabbit and a raccoon dog together, then divided it by three.

The mysterious pink creature's nose twitched with excitement.

"Are you okay?!"

The playboy guard frantically ran toward me, but the mysterious pink creature didn't like that because it turned and charged at him next.

The impact wasn't enough to send the playboy guard flying by any means, but Princess caught him right in the solar plexus, causing him to fold over in pain.

"...Princess, you...!"

Hmm, so this mysterious pink thing is "Princess"...

"Princess is her name? How cute!" I said.

If this was an animal, that placed it squarely within my sphere of influence. Time to put my God-given ability to good work!

After being called cute, Princess let out a shrill squeak as if to say, *"Of course I am!"*

"My name is Neema. Where are you on your way to right now, Princess?"

She responded to my question with two more shrill squeaks.

I think she's asking, "Where are you going?"

"We're going to the west building. Would you like to join us?"

Princess reacted strongly to "west building," her ears standing straight up.

She followed that up with another series of shrill squeaks.

She seems to be saying, "Follow me!"

Eeeek! I wanna let out a blood-curdling shriek! This is so wrong! It's like something from a horror movie!

When Princess ran, it was at a scuttling gait, with her back two legs dragging behind her.

I hoped she'd trot proudly like a fox based on the length and curvature of her legs.

I was frozen, cringing as I watched her scuttle, when Princess turned around and glared pointedly as if demanding we get a move on it.

"Let's follow her, I guess."

I pulled myself together and set off after Princess with the playboy guard.

Despite her strange manner of running, she was pretty fast.

Why do I have to go full-out sprint to keep up with her?!

We left the south building and entered the west building, turning more times than I could count.

All at once, Princess slid to an abrupt stop as if slamming on the brakes.

We stood before an ornate door.

Standing in front of the door, Princess began letting out wheedling cries.

"What is this place?"

"It's the captain of the royal guard's office."

The captain of the royal guard?! He's the one they call Grandpa Gouche's "right-hand man," isn't he? He's in charge of the entire royal guard!

"Are you finished with your walk, Princess?"

A middle-aged man wearing a perfectly fitted, wrinkle-free royal guard uniform stepped from the room. An ornate insignia badge was pinned to his chest.

Is this the captain of the royal guard? And, based on the way Princess is

cozying up to him... Could he be her owner?

“Oh, what’s this? We have guests?”

Oops, we’ve been spotted!

“While I was escorting Lady Nefertima, daughter of Duke Osphe, to meet with Brigade Leader Gwynn, we encountered Princess...” the playboy guard explained.

Tracking down Gwynn is turning out to be a huge pain, but maybe the captain will do it instead?

“Excuse me, I have a favor I’d like to ask you, Mister Captain, sir!” I said.

“Huh? Whaaat?!” the playboy guard all but shrieked in surprise.

That hurt my eardrums!

“He’s ranked above Gwynn, so it’s even better this way.”

“Well, yes, but... I’m sure the captain of the royal guard is much too busy to be bothered with such trivial matters...”

Hmm, does he have a point? But no matter how much that aristocrat complains to Gwynn, Gwynn wouldn’t be able to go against his superior...

“Pardon the late introduction, milady. I am the Captain of the Royal Guard, Nahal Lingar. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He has splendid manners; I’ll give him that.

He bowed, crisply executing a formal bow normally reserved for high-level aristocrats, but I was still a child. There was no need to be so respectful toward me.

“I’m Dayland Osphe’s youngest daughter, Nefertima. Captain Nahal, your reputation as a fair and just leader precedes you.”

“I’m still inexperienced as a leader, but I do my best to follow General Zelnan’s example.”

Exceeding Grandpa Gouche will take god-like powers, so I suggest you quit while you’re ahead!

Grandpa Gouche is so intensely valiant that it's almost to the level of being neurotic. He still seems to be incredibly popular with his underlings, though.

"So, what is this favor you'd like to ask me, Lady Nefertima?"

I was about to speak, but the playboy guard stopped me.

"I'll say it myself!" the playboy guard said before truthfully recounting everything that had happened.

The captain listened earnestly to the guard's story, but at his feet, Princess was much less attentive. She was stomping her feet peevishly as if saying, "Pay attention to me!"

Hoping to keep her from disturbing the men's important conversation, I gestured for her to come to me.

Princess let out an indignant squeak but eventually came.

Let's get to know each other better!

Wow! Incredible! Your fur is so amazing, Princess! You're the genuine article—a furball in every sense of the word!

I don't know if I've ever met a fluffy who was so fluffy my fingers couldn't sink all the way into their fur down to the skin like this!



It's not like a sheep or even an alpaca; the closest thing I can compare it to is... No, there's nothing I can compare it to! Hmm, maybe if you crossed a memory foam pillow with the stuffing from inside a stuffed animal?

I couldn't tell if Princess could even feel me petting her.

Next, I tried touching her short-haired ears.

Huh?!

Her ears were slightly stiff but had the texture of ultra-plush yarn. The hairs clung to my fingers just the tiniest bit, creating an unexpectedly springy sensation.

The way she moves is a little off-putting, but her fur more than makes up for it!

"I see. Yes, I understand the situation."

Oh, looks like he's finished explaining what happened.

"So, I'd like you to please forgive him for his mistakes," I said.

"While I understand your feelings, Lady Nefertima, it would set a poor example for the other guards if I overlooked a case of neglect of duty."

Oh... Yeah, he's right. I didn't think of that.

"And so, as punishment, I'm assigning extra training. You've already completed your normal training for today, right? If so, do your extra training once your shift ends. Your unit leader can supervise."

"Y-Yes, sir! Thank you very much!"

I don't know much about it, but is this an appropriate punishment? Or maybe even a light one? Based on the playboy guard's reaction, I get the feeling he thinks he's getting off easy.

"With this, this guard's punishment has been decided. Even an aristocrat can't overturn a judgment I've already rendered, so don't worry, Lady Nefertima."

All right! Looks like we made the right choice by going to someone higher-ranked than Gwynn.

“That’s a relief. But you’d better work hard with your extra training!” I said.

“Of course! Thank you for your assistance, Lady Nefertima.” The playboy guard bowed to me.

I guess this takes care of this matter, then.

“Where will you go now, Lady Nefertima?”

I still have to go to the north building and explain the situation to Mama.

“I’ll go to the north building.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll assign this guy to escort you.”

That would be a huge help, actually. I’m not familiar with the west building, so I’d probably get lost on my own.

“Thank you. Oh, I almost forgot! Is it okay if I come to play with Princess again sometime?”

“Of course. I’m sure she’d like that.”

I’m not so sure...

“Princess, would you like to go to the north building with me?” I asked, but Princess reacted with almost violent resistance to the words “the north building.” Well, what she actually did was hide behind the captain.

Did she previously have a traumatic experience in the north building?

“That’s too bad. Oh, well. Have a good day, Captain Nahal!”

“Take care, Lady Nefertima.”

I bid the captain and Princess farewell, then followed the playboy guard toward the north building.

I almost never came to the west building, so it all seemed new and exciting to me, and I looked around eagerly, taking in the sights as we walked.

I think the last time I was here was about two years ago?

That time, I’d been exploring alone, and I’m sure it was an eventful visit.

Unlike the east and south buildings, there wasn’t a single decoration here. Normally, you’d see maids bustling about working, but there was no sign of

them in the west building.

Is this place really that unpopular? Oh, look, a person! Finally!

“If it isn’t Neema!” the person called out. I was surprised for a moment until I recognized Uncle Sanrus.

“Uncle Sanrus!”

Uncle Sanrus was one of the cabinet ministers who worked with my father—specifically, he was the Minister of Finance. He was the aloof, intellectual type. And easy on the eyes to boot. He was just the person we needed to control the somewhat eccentric heads of the five families descended from “the founding heroes.”

My papa went without saying, but Auntie Olive was a hot-blooded woman, Uncle Gene was an *extremely* free spirit, and as for Grandpa Gouche, it sounded nice to refer to him as “easy-going,” but in all honesty, he was a bit scatter-brained.

“Are you on your way to visit Dayle?”

“No! I’m going to visit Mother.”

“I see... On your way back, could you please stop and visit Dayle while you’re here? I’m sure that if he sees your face, it will help motivate him to get through his work.”

I don’t mind, but if you’re worried about him picking up the pace, that must mean he has a lot of work backed up, right? I wonder if it’s really okay for me to intrude if he’s that busy...

“Won’t I get in the way?” I asked.

“It’s fine. Sometimes we need to dangle a carrot in front of that carthorse to get him to move.”

...That’s strange. Papa’s not usually the type to neglect his work.

“Well, I’ll get going now, then!”

Hmm, now I’m concerned about Papa’s work situation, so I guess I’ll stop in to visit him later.

“Take care, Neema!”

We parted ways with Uncle Sanrus and finally entered the north building.

As soon as we stepped into the building, the atmosphere changed.

It was like a hospital or a university or something—that same indescribable, unique atmosphere of quiet busyness.

The Magical Engineering Department Mama worked in was on the second floor.

The first floor was the Magical Development Department, the second floor was the Magical Engineering Department, the third floor was the Magical Creatures Department, the fourth floor was the Magical Regulation Department, and the fifth floor was the Astrological Department.

I commonly visited the second and third floors but didn’t know much about what they did on the other floors.

“Excuse me, is Department Head Cerulia available?” the playboy guard politely called out.

When the door opened, the interior looked just like a laboratory. There were books and stacks of documents, vials containing mysterious liquids, and strange tools everywhere.

“Department Head! You have guests!” one of the researchers who’d heard the playboy guard’s question hollered.

“I’ve told you before; stop being lazy and come get me properly!” Mama said in an exasperated tone as she came out of a separate room. Of course, *she* didn’t do anything as unsightly as raising her voice.

“Oh? Welcome, Neema.”

Mama recognized me immediately, and a gentle smile spread across her lovely face.

Mama always looked more strict and serious while working, but I loved how she would soften whenever I visited.

I thanked the playboy guard, and then Mama and I had tea together in her

office while I explained what happened.

The maid had come just as I'd asked, and Mama remarked that she was glad it didn't turn into more of a mess.

After that, Mama told me not to get in the way of anyone's work—the same thing she always said—and I was left to my own devices.

When I came to the royal palace, I really only ever visited the dragon stables, the beast stables, Will's room, the library, and the north building, so I knew these locations like the back of my hand.

I stopped to check in with one of the researchers I'd become friendly with during my visits here and see how the fan-like device was coming along.

It now had a swivel function, just as I'd suggested.

I was especially impressed that she'd added both cooling and heating modes! I showed my appreciation with an enthusiastic round of applause.

Another researcher seemed to be having trouble at the design stage of whatever project he was currently working on.

"What are you making?"

"Oh, Lady Neema! I was hoping I could make it easier to brew tea..."

Tea... Heh, of course. But proper brewing is what makes tea delicious. If you simplify it, the flavor won't be as good...

When I think of simple ways to make tea, teabags or ground leaves come to mind...

If he creates a machine like a coffee maker, the tea will be easy to brew, but its aroma will gradually dissipate while it's in keep-warm mode... Oh, unless maybe there's some way to give it an airtight seal?

In any case, I tried my best to explain my tea bag and coffee maker ideas to the researcher. Of course, I made sure to outline the drawbacks, but if he could overcome these issues, he could develop an easier way to brew delicious tea.

The researcher was clutching his head even more than before, but I encouraged him that if anyone could figure it out, it was him.

Okay, next, to the third floor!

A variety of animals lived on the third floor.

They were all small animals, though. Creatures used as test subjects for research purposes.

I spotted her the moment I stepped through the door and into the animal room: the department head of the Magical Creatures Department.

“Hello, Mishri!”

The head of this department was an elderly woman, but she was so renowned in her field that even the surrounding countries highly respected her. She was very likely the most knowledgeable person in the entire world when it came to magical creatures.

“Oh, it’s Lady Neema! You’re visiting again today?”

You say it like I’m here all the time! But I visit the dragon stables and the beast stables way more than I come here, I’ll have you know!

“Yeah! I wanted to see if the baby pabar got any bigger.”

The pabars were one of the largest research animals living here, and they were incredibly cute, which made them my current favorite.

Mishri gestured for me to come to see, which I happily obliged.

I’d come at the perfect time because the baby pabar was just about to have a meal. Inside the cage, it cooed energetically.

The mama pabar had a rounded face, a little black nose, and round eyes, and she looked like a cuter version of a wallaby.

They had stiff, wiry fur, and when you petted them, the hairs stabbing into your hand felt a little itchy. Pabars were to be appreciated for their outward cuteness rather than the texture of their fur.

Their natural habitat was grassland, and this was reflected in their coloring: an irregular striped pattern of sun-burned yellows and browns. Some of the stripes were black, making them look a bit like a tiger.

The baby, who’d been small enough to fit in the palm of my hand the first

time I saw it, was now bigger than both my hands put together.

Even so, it looked so precious, waving its tiny hands frantically, begging for milk!

I really wish someone would invent a camera! It's such a shame that I can't record this adorableness! This super-cute age only lasts for a moment! They're still cute when they get bigger, but the time to enjoy that special cuteness that all baby animals have is fleeting!

I'm definitely going to find someone to build me a camera!

After lavishing affection on the pabars, I moved on to the other animals.

Next was an animal similar to a house mouse, called a rouche. It wasn't white, but a pale light blue color, had a short tail, and boundless energy. The rouche ran around doing happy little zoomies inside its cage. I was glad it was getting plenty of use out of the running wheel I'd brought the last time I was here.

Why do small rodents love running so much?

In the corner of the room, a special cage contained a monster known as a Fang—a fire rat.

Fangs were officially classified as monsters, but it was a highly debated classification. They didn't cause any damage to humans, primarily because they could only live in environments such as volcanoes where there was fire.

In general, creatures that caused harm to humans and possessed a certain degree of intelligence were monsters. Another classification, magical beast, was used when an incident caused an animal to become larger and more ferocious. But, in common practice, these were also often lumped in with monsters.

The fang's cage contained a magical item that continuously produced fire.

When a fang felt threatened, it would wrap this fire around its body as a layer of protection. That was why, if there wasn't any fire around, fangs would eventually die from the stress. They felt as if they couldn't protect themselves.

There was no way for me to safely pet it, so I settled for observing it.

I wanted to bring a toy for this little guy, too, but I didn't know what would be good. There wasn't much to choose from when you could only use materials

that didn't burn.

...Maybe a burning toy is the way to go? Something that shoots out fire at random intervals... Maybe we could make it so that whenever the fang touches or climbs on top of it, it's triggered to shoot out flames?

All right! I'll have Mama make it for me!

I wanted the toy made as quickly as possible, so I immediately explained my idea to Mishri and got her permission.

Then I returned to Mama's office and begged her to make it for me. She said she was too busy with work already piled up, but she assigned another researcher to work on it.

In any case, they were going to make it, so I spent some time tossing ideas back and forth with the researcher assigned to the project.

After several minutes of discussion, they informed me it would take three days to construct a prototype, so this was as far as I'd get today.

I informed Mama I was going to visit Papa, then made my way back toward the west building.

After taking a few wrong turns, I eventually found Papa's office.

I knocked as hard as I could, then opened the door to reveal Papa deep in discussion with three people who seemed to be his subordinates.

Looks like this isn't a good time. The atmosphere in this room is incredibly heavy... What should I do?

"Who is it?" Papa called, having noticed the door crack open.

"Father?"

"Neema?!"

I hesitantly stepped into the room, and Papa immediately stood and picked me up for a hug.

"What are you doing here? Did something happen?" he asked.

I rarely visited Papa at work, so he assumed there'd been an incident.

“Uncle Sanrus said it was okay to visit you today...”

“I see. Sorry, darling, but I’m a little busy right now.”

I was right; it really is a bad time, huh?

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m happy you came to visit me.”

I should probably get going, then. I think I’ll head home for today.

“I’m going to go home now,” I said.

“In that case, I’ll have the carriage prepared for you,” Papa said before turning to the office maid and instructing her to have the carriage prepared and arrange for someone to escort me home.

“Father, do your best!”

Before I left, I gave Papa a tight squeeze, and he squeezed me back.

But Papa! Don’t let your subordinates see that sappy expression you’ve got! Your coolness level is going to drop into the negatives!

Once I arrived home, I recounted the day’s events to my sister.

“Did you have fun at the royal palace?”

“Yeah!”

“Next time, let’s go together. What do you say about exploring the forest outside the royal palace?”

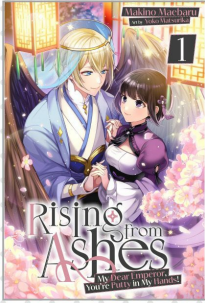
Oh, that sounds fun!

I was prohibited from entering the forest without someone watching me, so I hadn’t seen much of it yet.

“It’s a promise!”

“Yeah!”

Visiting the royal palace with Karna, huh? Sounds like fun!



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06



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