

FLUFFY PARADISE

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Fluffy Paradise Volume 3

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Kai

A SIREN. HE POSSESSES A HUMAN FORM, A MERMAID FORM, A BIRD FORM, AND A HORSE FORM.

"YOU DON'T WANT ME IF I DON'T HAVE ANY HAIR, RIGHT?"

"HOW'S THIS, THEN?"

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.



Karnadia Osphe
NEFERTIMA' S OLDER SISTER.

"NEEMA!!!!"

"KARNA,
LET NEEMA
GO."

Ralfreed Osphe
NEFERTIMA' S OLDER BROTHER.



"BIG BROTHER SHINKI!"

"BIG BROTHER TOUKI!"

Spica

A BEASTPERSON WHO LIVES WITH THE KOBOLD PACK.

Gratia

A FROST SPIDER.

Shinki

A FORMER HOBGOBLIN. NEFERTIMA'S SELF-APPOINTED BODYGUARD.

Haku

A SLIME.

Pluma
A BANDU FORVOTSE.



1 - Ralf Is Way Too Perfect!

THE day after the banquet, three investigators arrived.

I was shocked, thinking they'd been dispatched and arrived in the span of a single day. As it turned out, the request for their assistance was submitted the day we arrived in Lenice.

The investigators took over both cases—the beastmaster's fight and the raccoon-like regional commander's corruption—from Will. They seemed especially dedicated to this case since *Prince* Wilhet was personally involved. His popularity never failed to surprise me.

How do they not see what a demon prince he is...?!

"Did you say something, Neema?" Will asked.

"Er, I just said, 'Will is so handsome!'"

I hadn't spoken out loud—he was just too good at reading me. But when I tried to play it off by saying something else, I blurted out the weirdest possible thing!

"Have you still not learned your lesson even after the scolding you received yesterday?" he sighed.

As if I could forget that!

Both Ralf and Will had scolded me thoroughly for saying something in Luck's presence that alluded to our involvement with the kobolds. Ralf had been more concerned than truly angry, but Will had let loose on me. I'd known I was in the wrong, so I'd stayed silent and accepted the brunt of their lecture, but it chiseled away at my spirit.

Only an evil demon prince could be capable of such black-heartedness!

With the banquet stuff out of the way, all that remained of our duties here was to inform Marquis Parzeth about the raccoon-like regional commander.

That was also Will's job.

After that, we'd get in the carriages and head to the next city.

Since Papa was no longer with us, we didn't have to be as concerned about keeping to a strict schedule, but I wanted to hurry and get the red tape over with because I was worried about the kobolds.

Once we'd quickly packed up and finished preparations for the trip, the members of Red Hlaada came to see us off.

"Take care on your journey," the head swordsman said.

"Thanks. I'm looking forward to hearing the tales of your exploits." Ralf held out his short sword, and the swordsman gently struck his sword against it.

"What was that?" I asked.

"It's a common form of greeting among knights and adventurers. It symbolizes wishing luck upon the other person's weapon."

Hey, that's pretty cool! That isn't part of aristocratic social manners. Did Ralf learn it at school?

As for my parting greeting, I indulged in a final session of petting Luck's ears. I *really* wanted to know what his tail felt like, but I had a feeling that if I asked to feel it up, I'd be mistaken for a perv, so I kept that to myself.

But anyone would be curious about a bear's tail, right?

"Take care of yourself, little miss," Luck said. "And don't give your brother and His Highness too much grief, you hear?"

"I'll do my best!"

With one last wave to everyone, I climbed into the carriage.

Hey, Healran! When did you get back?! I spotted Healran sitting in the knights' carriage, acting as if there were nothing unusual about his sudden reappearance. *I didn't even see him slip back in.*

In any case, we departed from Lenice without leaving any human members of our band behind. In fact, we'd picked up a few extra members. I was told that the number of the king's private soldiers shadowing Will had increased. I never

saw them, so I couldn't say for sure either way. When he was involved with me and my adventures, the royal guard alone wasn't enough to protect Will—or so everyone else seemed to think. I didn't agree with them, but we could use all the help we could get, so I kept my mouth shut.

Today, we were headed to a town called Galea. There weren't any reports of monster attacks in this town, so we only planned to spend one night there.

The real question was if we'd find anything tasty to eat there! I hoped to find some sweets in Galea as well. I was sick of eating nothing but meat and was ready for something sweet!



DURING the tedious carriage ride, Will gave a whole lecture on his royal studies. He discussed everything from the principles of a ruler to how to win the people's hearts. He told us what he'd learned in his studies, illustrating each point by recounting personal experiences.

It was good to care about the citizens, but overindulging them was inadvisable. Humans were creatures of habit. Once they adjust to the current state of things, they become greedy. If a ruler favored the common citizens too much, the aristocrats would become discontent. Deciding which to prioritize required a case-by-case analysis of the situation before making a judgment.

I intently listened to Will's speech. I knew it would aid me in the future.

"In your case, Neema, you'll need to choose close associates from among the goblins and kobolds," Ralf finally joined the conversation.

I already had candidates for my trusted associates: the monsters I'd named. But when I said this, my brother shook his head.

"Because they're bound to you by their names, they can't go against you. You should have Shinki name the goblins and choose kobolds who already have names."

In other words, appoint others besides my current inner circle.

"The biggest problem going forward is the humans," Will warned. "Since the founding principle of Project Shiana is coexistence, choosing the right humans

to trust will prove crucial. You'll need to be skeptical of everything."

"You mean I can't trust anyone?" I asked.

"It's not a problem if the person is worthy of your trust," Will said. "But how long will you need to know someone before you determine if they're trustworthy? In my case, I've observed the character, words, and actions of the people around me since I was a child and even considered their parents and siblings before deciding if I could trust them."

Oh, really? Will's been observing me this whole time, has he?

No, wait, that's not the point here.

"You should be careful when it comes to the monsters as well. Shinki's clan and Sicily's pack seem okay, but when others join them, there's always the possibility some members will harbor hatred toward humans."

Then what am I supposed to do?! When you put it that way, it sounds like I can't trust anyone outside my close personal friends!

"Ugggh..." I moaned in frustration.

"Why don't you start with observing humans?" Ralf suggested. "You've never paid close attention to what the people you know like, what their personalities are, or what their habits and quirks are like, right?"

Observe humans...? I love observing animals, but humans? I suppose, in a way, humans are also a kind of animal...

"Normally, you would learn this through practice after your debut into high society."

Right. All I know about things like the social machinations of the nobility and passionate romantic relationships that would put soap operas to shame comes from overhearing the maids gossiping in our house. But it seems Ralf and Will have already studied these things at school?

And so, I was given an impromptu crash course on human observation, things to be careful of when making conversation, and how to make a favorable impression as if I were preparing for a job interview. My one saving grace was that I'd already learned a bit about polite conversational skills from Annalee.

However, Will declared my ability to be at the absolute lowest level.

My brain felt like mush from cramming all the information into it, so I spent most of our break time soothing myself by petting Lars. I'd gotten sick of sitting all day, so I also played a quick game of tag with Nox. I then helped feed the carriage horses and gave them some quick pets.

When we finally arrived in Galea, I felt like death, but Ralf bought me a baked treat similar to a madeleine as a reward for good behavior. That perked me back up.

Nothing beats something sweet right after giving your brain a good workout!

Although it couldn't compare to Lenice, Galea was also along the major highway, making it bustling and lively.

The inn we'd be staying in that night was the fanciest in town. They'd been informed of our visit in advance, so the mayor and local nobility gathered to meet us when we arrived. They really wanted to speak with Will and Ralf, and I was left out again. That had been happening a lot lately...

But, but, but! The inn we were staying at had a dog mascot!

The mascot was a breed called a fergie. If I remember correctly, the beast knights also had some fergies working with them. Overall, the fergie resembled a beagle but with two-toned white and black fur. It was hard to say whether it was black with white accents or white with black accents, but I thought there was slightly more white. The fergie's fur couldn't compete with Lars' or our family's pet dog, Dee's, but it got full marks for cuteness. I shouldn't be surprised that a mascot would be so appealing!

I scratched the fergie's stomach, and it flopped on its back to give me better access. It was probably used to being treated like this as part of its customer service duties. The way it closed its eyes in bliss and wagged its tail, begging for more, seemed to be practiced to perfection.

Hey, now, your tail is kicking up dust, so calm down a little bit, okay?

Just then, a woman who seemed to be the innkeeper came over and offered me a treat for the dog.

They even let you feed their mascot?! This place rocks!

However, there was a small fee for the treat. The innkeeper was a shrewd businesswoman.

At some point, while I played with the dog, the group that'd gathered to welcome us began to disperse. I was instructed to wash my hands because it was time to eat, so I washed them carefully, even cleaning under my nails.

Ralf, Will, and I would eat in Will's room for security, and the knights and guards would take turns going to the public dining room to eat their meals in shifts. It would've been more fun to all eat boisterously together, but we could only do that when camping out. I was already planning to indulge my selfish wishes by having a meal with everyone on the last day, at least.

It might be fun if we all ate outside together, like a barbecue or something!

It was a fancy inn, so naturally, the food was a full-course meal.

The appetizer was similar to pâté on Earth. A colorful array of small, round things decorated the top of the yellow pâté. These "round things" were smaller than bite-sized. I watched Ralf eat them along with the pâté and copied him. It was sweet, almost like a dessert. The yellow pâté had a sweet and faintly citrusy profile that reminded me of orange peel, and the round things burst in my mouth, releasing a thick syrup. The syrup had a refreshing, minty flavor that complemented the sweetness of the pâté. It was surprisingly tasty!

The next course consisted of a salad of fresh local vegetables and a hearty soup made with what appeared to be tripe. The soup had a faint tanginess, and I happily finished the entire serving.

If this were French cuisine, we'd be served bread after the soup, but this restaurant served flatbread that looked a bit like naan. You could either leave a bit of soup to dip the bread in or enjoy it with the fish course that was brought out next.

The fish was a type called gardola, which was even bigger than a tuna. Despite being so huge, it was actually white fish. The rich and savory flavor reminded me of milt. I could tell immediately that sauda sauce had been used in the marinade for this dish.

Then, when I expected sorbet to be brought out, they served us fruit.

It cleansed the pallet just the same. This fruit looked like grapes but tasted almost like the citrus fruit, yuzu. You could eat the entire fruit, peel and all, but the intense tartness made my mouth squeeze up as it used to when I'd eaten *umeboshi*, dried pickled plums, in my past life.

The meat course was a bone-in sauté. It was difficult to eat elegantly. I'm sure the meat was from an animal similar to a sheep. I'd only ever seen one in an illustrated encyclopedia, but their hair was used to make yarn and insulation material, their milk was highly nutritious, and the meat of young animals was prized as high-class red meat. The animal was called a maidell.

Once we'd stuffed ourselves with meat, it was time for a short break and a cup of fragrant herbal tea. Then we were on to dessert!

Dessert was a crepe-like creation with a berry topping. It was another dish that required skill to eat without making a mess. Instead of whipped cream, raize mousse topped it. The syrup harvested from the raize tree would react when mixed with another syrup, expanding and becoming thick and fluffy like meringue. Raize mousse was often made with various fruit juices.

The topping on this dessert was berry, so it was an obvious choice to pair it with chocolate!

Chocolate and berries are the ultimate combination!

In this world, chocolate was a luxury food made not with cacao beans but with the seeds found inside the fruits of the deia plant. As such, it was not often that I got the chance to eat desserts containing deia. Only on super rare occasions, such as when attending the New Year's party at the royal palace, could I indulge.

I ate it slowly, relishing the flavor.

We savored our dessert, and then the meal ended with a divine cup of black tea.

My thanks to the chef! This was an incredible culinary experience. I'm stuffed!



AFTER that, we planned to bathe and go to bed early to prepare for the day ahead. I took a bath with my brother.

Ralf was the type who looked thinner than he was when he was wearing clothes, so when he got undressed, I was a bit surprised! He had a lean but muscular build. He wasn't brawny by any means, but had a well-balanced, athletic body. He even had a faint but undeniable six-pack!

Has he been working out without me knowing?!

In any case, I won't be able to bathe with Ralf for much longer, so I'll enjoy it while I can!



RALF and I would be sharing a bed tonight.

I'd noticed that I'd been sleeping fitfully recently, so I was a bit worried I'd kick him in my sleep. I was a generally good sleeper but slept even better when Ralf was with me due to the sense of security his presence provided.

That night, I fell asleep hugging my brother instead of the bunny backpack.



THE following morning, I opened my eyes to my brother's beautiful face.

His face was angelic normally, so when he was sleeping, his beauty reached nearly divine levels of perfection. It was almost distressing how beautiful he was.

I was wrapped so tightly in Ralf's arms that I couldn't even sit up.

I guess this means I didn't kick him off the bed in my sleep...

This is another experience I'll have to treasure now before I get too old for us to sleep together like this.

"Ralf, wake up."

I wiggled, trying to escape his arms, but they tightened even more around me. A refreshing citrus scent tickled my nose.

Even if he was my brother, I worried about his future. His attractive face would naturally draw people to him, and he would become the type of duke

who used that to his advantage.

Does that cast Ralf in the role of a black-hearted villain? No way; he's the gentle and kind prince-on-a-white horse type. Please don't ever let that change, Ralf!

While I was thinking that, Ralf finally opened his eyes.

"Good morning, Neema."

"Good morning, Ralf!"



AFTER Ralf helped me get ready, it was time for breakfast.

I bet breakfast will be amazing, too.

As we headed toward Will's room, a tantalizing odor wafted out to greet us.

The meal was a simple one.

There was an egg tart similar to a quiche, freshly toasted bread, a vegetable soup containing a generous serving of hearty root vegetables, and a fruit called fouxge—which looked like a fig but had the complementary sweet-and-sour flavor profile of a pineapple—to round out the meal.

While working through this impressive spread, we sipped black tea and discussed our plans for the day ahead. It was like an elegant breakfast scene from a movie.

Located a 3-hour carriage ride from here was the city of Darshleigh. There was a teleportation circle there, which we would use to travel to a city called Fauxbe.

I spent the carriage ride catching up with my studies, and when we arrived in Darshleigh, there wasn't even time for sightseeing before we teleported to Fauxbe.

Despite my best efforts, the sparkling light of the teleportation spell was too bright. I couldn't keep my eyes open.

If only I had a pair of sunglasses! Maybe then I'd be able to witness the moment of teleportation...

When we arrived in Fauxbe, the scenery around us firmly announced the arrival of spring. It must've been due to the city being in the southern part of the Osphe Province that there was no trace of the cold bite we'd experienced only days ago in Arsentia.

The presence of many wooden buildings in the city also made me believe that it didn't snow much in this area.

Our next destination was Zigg Village at the foot of Mount Reitimo.

An increase in monster sightings had been reported in the area surrounding Zigg, but Papa had theorized it had nothing to do with Runohark—the name we had given our enemies. The reported sightings had all been of sea monsters. Papa concluded that not even Runohark could drive monsters out of the sea. Furthermore, due to the irregularity of the reports, we couldn't pinpoint what type of monsters were being spotted.

For the time being, we'd added this location to our inspection to determine what was going on. If necessary, we could request assistance from the Mieuxga Province's specialized marine combat force.

They weren't related to the royal knighthood—the lord of the Mieuxga Province created these special forces to improve the security of marine trade. They were special forces trained to deal with monsters that lived in oceans and rivers.

From Fauxbe, we were again forced to rely on carriages to take us to Zigg Village. At times like these, I missed the convenience of automobiles.

Thankfully, the scenery was beautiful, and I didn't get sick of watching it the entire journey.

I enthusiastically took in everything from the quaint city streets that were so different from those in the royal city and the vibrant greenery dotted with colorful flowers to the lively animals—namely a flock of birds and a mama and baby giant boar—going about their day-to-day lives all around us.

I was enjoying the scenery when suddenly the ocean came into view.

The nostalgic scent of salt water reminded me viscerally of the town I grew up in back in my old world. I had so many memories from my past life... Every year

I'd swim with my brothers and friends, watch fireworks displays, and play on the beach for hours every day in the blistering summer heat.

"Ralf, look! That's the ocean, right?! I want to go see it!"

I'd never been to the ocean in this world before, so I had to keep up the pretense of being unfamiliar with it.

"That's right," he said. "When we have the time, I'll take you to see it up close."

Can't you make the time?! It's easy enough to come up with some kind of excuse to go, isn't it?! After all, all of the reported monster sightings were related to the ocean, right? In that case, what's the problem with cutting right to the chase and heading down there?

I pressed my face against the window of the carriage, entranced by the sight of the ocean, and almost before I knew it, Zigg Village was coming into view. It looked like a pretty typical fishing village. Everywhere you looked, fishing nets were hung to dry, and fish were strung up to be dried for long-term preservation.

It reminded me of a scene from pre-modern Japan. There was something nostalgic about it, even though I hadn't been alive in that era.

We'd be staying at the village chief's house here. His was the largest house in the village, with a dock directly behind it that could be used to go fishing.

"Welcome to our village," he greeted us. "I'm the current village chief; my name is Magrart Zigg."

"My name is Ralfreed Osphe, and I've come as my father's representative. This is my little sister, Nefertima, and my friend, Wilhelt."

I'm guessing they're keeping the fact that Will is a prince on the down low?

Outside of the royal city, few people could visually differentiate between knights and royal guards, so I doubted anyone would know better if we claimed our entire entourage were knights assigned to guard Ralf and me, but... It would be a suspiciously large number of guards for just two kids.

"It's a pweasure to meet you," I greeted the chief with a curtsy.

No matter the situation, polite greetings are always important!

“Why, thank you for such a proper greeting,” he responded.

The village chief was a grizzled old fisherman who looked as tough as Grandpa Gouche. His skin was tanned almost black, and deeply wrinkled from years of working in the hot sun. The thickly corded muscles covering his body showed no sign of slackening with age. He looked old at first glance, but on closer inspection, he might be younger than the effects of a life of physical labor made him appear.

“Now that we’ve gotten introductions out of the way, could you please tell me about the reported monster sightings?” Ralf asked.

“Certainly. Please follow me.”

The village chief led us to what appeared to be a living room. There was a large table low to the floor with no chairs. The kitchen was visible from the living room area, a very “open floor plan.” One section of the kitchen led outside, where a large stone worktop could be seen. I suspected that was where they butchered fish. It was quite the task to handle and dispose of the blood and intestines of especially large fish, so I’d seen butchering being carried out directly on the fishing boat or in special facilities containing sinks and work tables. Of course, that was back in Japan, but I figured things were probably similar here.

There aren’t any chairs, so I assume we’re meant to sit on the floor. But even though there’s a carpet on the floor, there are also cushions, so I’m not sure what the proper position to sit in is...

Should I kneel? Sit with my legs folded to each side? Or maybe sit cross-legged?

As if picking up on my internal debate, my brother swooped in to save me.

“This is how they sit in the culture local to the area from the Reitimo region to the Jeedag region in the Mieuxga Province,” he explained, leading by example.

Oh, I see. So it’s a regional thing.

The correct answer was to sit with your legs folded to each side. Or at least,

that was how women sat. Men sat with one leg folded and one leg up. I was a bit jealous since that looked more comfortable.

We were served a fragrant herbal tea that was the most commonly brewed blend in these parts. Depending on the herbs used, it had various medicinal properties.

“The monster sightings started at the beginning of the earth season,” the village chief began once we were seated. “At first, it was just giant fish. We just assumed they were strays that had come here mistakenly from another region.”

The earth season was winter. In this world, spring was called the wind season, summer was called the water season, fall was called the fire season, and winter was called the earth season. One rotation through all four seasons was called one cycle, which equated to one year.

“But then a horse-like creature was spotted,” he continued. “Not only that, but there were reports of a mermaid and something that looked like a maidell, but the reports are all over the place, and we’ve already begun suffering damages as they continue to flood in. A child was kidnapped.”

Unfortunately, it seemed the missing child, a little boy, still hadn’t been found.

“We don’t know if it’s the same monster or if there are multiple monsters. Furthermore, perhaps due to the monster’s presence, there are many days when, no matter how many people go fishing or how long they stay out, no one catches a thing. If this continues, this village will be...” Sadness was written all over the village chief’s face.

He must be worried about the kidnapped boy as well as about the future of the village.

“We will spend a few days investigating the monster. If we can figure out what it is, we can request aid from the Mieuxga Province’s marine combat force,” Ralf explained.

The village chief seemed surprised by this. “I’m very grateful, but if something happened to His Grace’s son, we would never be able to show our faces again...”

“It’s all right. I, too, would like to avoid Father’s wrath, so I’ll be careful. Besides, I’ve brought plenty of guards, so there’s no need to worry.”

More than half of those guards are actually here to protect Will, buuut...

“But...” The village chief wasn’t so easily convinced.

No matter what anyone said, Ralf was the heir and would one day inherit the titles of both duke and provincial lord.

No matter how worried the chief was about the village, it made sense that he couldn’t get past the concern that the village would be held responsible and destroyed in retribution if something happened to Ralf.

Not that I thought Papa would ever do something like that, but...

“In that case, could I get you to assign a local guide?” Ralf requested. “Someone familiar with the geography of this area. That way, we’ll know in advance which areas are dangerous.”

“...Very well,” he conceded.

“Then we’ll start by looking around the village a bit,” Ralf said.

“No monsters have appeared in the village, but please be careful nonetheless. I will have lunch and your guide waiting by the time you return.”

It looked like the conversation had wrapped up for the time being, so we left the village chief’s house.

The first place we visited was the docks.

The docks were in a cove that featured a small stretch of sandy beach with boats of all sizes moored along the jetties that stuck out into the water on both sides. Numerous piers extended out from the jetties that would be used to board the boats. However, the mouth of the cove was narrow, so only one of the larger boats could pass through at a time.

On the beach, there was a rack for hanging fish to dry for long-term preservation, and every spare inch of the rack not containing fish was stuffed with bundles of seaweed.

Is that wakame? Or maybe kombu? If it’s kombu, I bet we could make a

yummy soup broth with it...

Several fishwives were working at the drying rack, so we decided to speak with them.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry for bothering you when you’re working, but could we ask you a few questions about the monster sightings that have been occurring in this area recently?”

The women seemed startled and stared at us suspiciously.

Of course they’re on their guard! It wasn’t Ralf who spoke to them but the unit leader.

Even if he *was* only wearing light armor and not a full suit of plate armor, anyone would be suspicious if a stern-faced man suited up as a soldier suddenly started speaking to them.

Despite his intimidating demeanor, the unit leader is a really nice guy. And he’s pretty handsome, too. He might look less impressive while surrounded by the present company, but that “reliable, mature man” aura is something that neither Ralf nor Will has. And I’m sure it goes without saying, but Papa completely lacks it as well!

“Who are the lot of you?” asked a stout older lady whose appearance was the perfect depiction of the quintessential old fishwife. She seemed to be the leader of the fishwives.

“We are investigating monster sightings under the provincial lord’s orders.” The unit leader showed the women the national emblem—the symbol of the royal knighthood—engraved on his longsword.

“Oh, so you’re the folks the village chief was talking about.” The women nodded to each other, satisfied with his explanation. “But there’s not much we can tell you about any monsters. We womenfolk don’t go out to sea, after all.”

“I see... And no monsters have appeared anywhere other than in the ocean?”

“I’m not sure... Some people have said they saw monsters up on Mount Reitimo, but... Well, that place is off-limits for a reason, after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a saying that’s been passed down in this village for generations—local lore, if you will. It says, ‘Be content with the bounty of the sea, and step foot not onto the mountain.’ That’s why, even to this day, the men of the village don’t venture onto the mountain. Those who spoke of seeing monsters there were merely travelers passing through, so I have no proof that what they said was true,” the woman explained.

Hmm, I wonder why it’s forbidden to venture onto the mountain. Is there some kind of secret there? When I think of a mountain’s hidden secret, the first thing that comes to mind is... treasure! This is a seaside village, so maybe there’s a hidden pirate treasure?

That sounds like an adventure! I’m getting excited just imagining it!

“Pardon the interruption,” Ralf chimed in. “Do any of you ladies have family members who personally saw the monsters?”

Oh, now Ralf is trying his hand.

The women seemed flustered that a beautiful young man had suddenly spoken to them.

What will they do if a handsome young man like Will joins the conversation?! They’re the same age, but Ralf still has a more youthful appearance, whereas Will seems to have already steamrolled straight through puberty.

“...Um, m-my husband saw one,” one of the women meekly offered.

“Please tell me all about it.” Ralf smiled brilliantly at the woman, nearly striking her dead on the spot!

It’s terrifying how a beautiful face can be a weapon... Unfortunately, it’s not a weapon I’ll ever have any hope of wielding.

“He, um, said he saw it near Garl.”

The woman pointed to the far side of the cove, where a cliff protruded from Mount Reitimo before dropping off sharply into the ocean.

“I see. Near Garl, huh?”

“Garl” was a word in Larshian that meant “protrusion” but could also be a name.

I suppose places in Japan are often named the same way, after the topography and characteristics of the area. Oh, and there are also some places named after local deities believed to dwell there...

I'm getting off-topic.

...In any case, that cliff is called Garl. Got it!

"Come to think of it, wasn't your husband saying something like that too, Tocka?" the woman asked another.

"Yeah, he was raising a ruckus a while back, saying there was a monster on Garl."

The women all began chiming in, sharing rumors of so-and-so's husband saying this and so-and-so claiming that, all agreeing that there were monsters there.

In summary, it seemed that all of the sightings were concentrated around Garl.

Sorry for interrupting your excited banter, ladies, but a mysterious creature is behind you... What should I do?

The "mysterious creature" was a large bird with a blue body, a large beak like a shoebill's, and piercing eyes. Its legs were not long, but they were red and ended in webbed flippers. It was about the size of a pelican, if I had to guess.

"Will, what is that...?" I asked.

"I've never seen a bird like that before..." he replied.

"It seems to be eating a fish," I noted.

"Yeah..." Will chuckled at the strange sight.

Seeing no other choice, I pointed it out to the unit leader.

"Excuse me, ladies. It appears that a bird is poaching your fish..."

At the unit leader's words, the women burst into action at an incredible speed, whipping around to look behind them, locking on to the enemy, and attacking with the knives they'd been using to prepare the fish.

I don't dare look at their faces. I have a feeling I'd end up traumatized.

The bird, apparently noticing the murderous aura coming off the women, let out a taunting, “*Squawk! Squaaaawk!*” as it flew off to safety.

“Stupid bird! If I catch you nosing around here again, I’ll fry you up for dinner!” one of the women shouted to the sky, still waving her knife threateningly.

She’s terrifying!

I wonder what kind of bird that was?

A wide variety of birds visited our garden regularly, but I’d never seen a bird like that before. Our gardener, who was familiar with birds, might know, but unfortunately, he wasn’t here.

“I’m so sorry. This wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t interrupted you...”

“It’s fine. I’ll catch that bird sooner or later!”

“What kind of bird is it?” my brother asked, voicing the same question I’d been wondering.

“It’s a bird that migrates here in the earth season. The species is called bandu forvoste.”

Huh? Come again, please?

“Bandu...?” I repeated.

“Hahaha, it’s difficult to remember, right? Even we just call it a ban!”

Ban. Okay, that I can remember. I’ll research them when we get home.

“That one got injured, and his flock abandoned him,” the woman explained. “He’s been hanging around the village ever since, causing mischief like you just saw.”

Hmm... If he didn’t leave in the spring, it must mean he’s still not entirely healed. Normally, migratory birds would fly north before summer came. Even if his flock abandoned him, migration is so deeply ingrained in the instincts of wild birds that he would’ve set off on his own if he could have. Migration is necessary to avoid depleting the food supply in any one location, after all.

Speaking of the food supply... Maybe he steals fish from the villagers because

he's unable to hunt on the sea for himself?

I'll keep an eye out for him. If I can get him to trust me, I bet Ralf could heal his injury.

"Neema, don't go getting unnecessary thoughts in your head now, you hear?" Will cautioned.

"Ack..." I stiffened.

"What you need to focus on is how to make it safe for the kobolds to hide out on Mount Reitimo. Although the villagers generally avoid the mountain, that's far from a guarantee. If the humans discover them, the kobolds will be wiped out for sure this time," he continued, speaking quietly so the fishwives wouldn't hear.

He has a point. I don't have time to be worrying about other creatures right now. But I can't just ignore a creature who's injured and needs my help.

"...If I wrap this up quickly, then it should be no problem to help that little guy after, right?" I asked.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah..."

That's an awfully big sigh, Will!

I felt a little bad for always chasing one mission after another and inevitably dragging other people into it. But I couldn't abandon someone who needed help.

"As long as the monster problem and the kobold issue are settled quickly, it should be fine. Don't worry, I'll help you the whole way, so I'm sure things will work out," Ralf said encouragingly.

Ralf's kindness wrapped around me like a tangible thing.

I love him so much that I don't know what to do with myself! If he weren't my brother, I'd be tempted to propose to him!

"Aw, Ralf!" I hugged Ralf tightly to convey my overflowing affection.

"Neema's going to get a big head if you keep spoiling her like that, you know," Will quipped.

"Maybe so, but I have to make the most of this brief period I have to spoil her. Someday, Karna and Neema will go out into the world, after all," Ralf said.

"Go out into the world?" I repeated.

Ralf's words were too abstract for me to grasp their meaning.

"I have a feeling Karna will travel the world in the name of magical research, and as for you, Neema, you'll probably go off somewhere even further out of reach."

What does he mean by "somewhere out of reach"?! Am I going to be married off to another country or something?

Will looks smugly convinced by this statement... Don't tell me they already have a political marriage in mind for me?!

"I'm going to stay with you, Ralf!" I fussed.

Even if it's impossible to avoid an arranged marriage, at least make it a domestic match!

"I'm sorry for making you worry," he said gently. "It's going to be okay. I'll never let you go, no matter what, Neema."

...For some reason, I feel extremely embarrassed...

Wasn't that pretty darn close to a proposal? If we weren't in public right now, I'd probably squeal like a lovestruck girl! More importantly, I wish there was some way to record what he just said! That's it; I'm never getting married! Even after Ralf marries, I'll just be a hanger-on sister-in-law!

"Hey, sappy siblings. You almost done? I think I'm gonna hurl over here."

Grrr, Will! You don't understand the tender love between siblings! Or maybe he's jealous? Yeah, that's got to be it—he's jealous!

"I love you too, Will!" I declared to get back at him.

Oh, crap. Maybe I went a little too far just now. I may have accidentally just pushed Will's demon switch...

"Oh really... In that case, will you marry me?"

I can see from the evil smirk on his face that he's laughing at me right now!

“No thanks!”

I definitely don't want a husband like Will!

“Oh, Neema...”

Will reached out and gently stroked my cheek.

“Eek!”

“Although, being my consort probably wouldn't suit you, Neema.”

You can say that again! Who would want to marry a black-hearted pervert demon prince of their own free will, anyway?!

...No, come to think of it, there's probably somebody somewhere who's into that kind of thing.

2 - To the Sea We Go!

WE went back to the village chief's house, with Will still teasing me the entire way. As we entered the building, the tantalizing aroma of something being grilled greeted us.

Grumble, Grumble.

My stomach is incredibly blunt! It's loudly demanding something delicious right away. But I have to eat a lot since I'm providing nutrients for myself and Shizuku.

"Your stomach sure is demanding," Will said.

"I'm a growing girl!"

I'm getting bigger every day! I need ample time to play, food to eat, and beauty sleep! This is vital for healthy development!

"Welcome back," the village chief's wife greeted us. "Lunch will be ready in just a moment, so please relax and drink some tea over here while you wait."

We were led into the same living room from earlier that day and served tea.

Hmph, I can't get used to sitting like this. I think my legs are going to fall asleep. I wish I could sit with one knee up like the guys.

While thinking about this, the village chief and his wife carried over the food.

There was a salad made of a lettuce-like leaf vegetable and seaweed, dried fish, some kind of braised whitefish, and a soup made with fish broth. Everything looked incredibly delicious. Each dish was arranged on a large platter for us to serve ourselves from, but first, the food would be tasted for poison, just to be safe.

Will had undergone a careful regimen of poison-resistance training since he was young, so he had developed a certain degree of immunity to the most common poisons. Ralf was under the protection of the Goddess, so poisons

were less effective against him.

And I had Shizuku inside of me, so I was safe!

Hold on a minute; wouldn't it be easiest for me to taste the food for poison?

If it *were* poisoned, Shizuku would neutralize the poison I'd ingested and analyze it to identify what it was.

"...You do realize you're a duke's daughter, right?" Will said when I brought this up. "There's no way we can let you be a poison tester. Besides, those guys will be out of a job if you do that."

That's true...

Poison testers were trained to build up their resistance to various poisons since childhood before working for the royal palace. I'd heard there were magical items that could detect the presence of poison, but poison testers were a second line of defense. To identify the symptoms unique to each poison, they carefully cultivated their resistance to be just strong enough to avoid death but not strong enough to bypass any symptoms.

It would be unforgivable to tell people who'd gone to such lengths in the service of the crown they were no longer needed because I'm here now.

"I'm sorry," I said with sincere regret for my carelessness.

I was apologizing not to Will but to the royal guard, who was also serving as Will's poison tester. He smiled and said not to worry about it, but I couldn't shake the concern that he'd probably been upset by my inconsiderate remark. I was truly sorry.

"The food is all safe to eat," he announced.

Better eat while it's hot! The poison tester said it was safe, so I'm going to dig in!

Mmm, the "bounty of the sea" has never tasted so delightful!

I couldn't get enough of the mixed-grain rice the village chief's wife served us, either. However, as a former Japanese, I couldn't help but wish for soy sauce to go with this meal.

We polished off every morsel in record time.

The knights and royal guards could seriously pack away food. And Ralf was in his adolescent growth period, so he could eat more than you'd guess from looking at him.

But you know, he ate the dried fish so precisely, it's almost miraculous! Not even most Japanese can pick off all the meat so perfectly!

After such a nostalgic meal, I wanted nothing more than to drink some green tea and nap on tatami flooring, but the village chief wasted no time introducing us to our guide.

He was another tough-looking older man whose fierce appearance made him look more like a pirate than a fisherman.

"He has encountered monsters before and is familiar with the mountain, so please use his knowledge," the chief said.

The mountain? Does he mean Mount Reitimo?

"We'd heard that the men of this village don't go onto the mountain?" Ralf brought up.

"He's not a fisherman—he's the only hunter in the village."

According to the village chief, since meat was a rare treat due to this being primarily a fishing village, the guide's family were hunters instead of fishermen.

So he's a hunter, not a fisherman, huh?

The village chief explained that, even so, the guide went out on the ocean frequently and was more than capable of steering a ship.

I see. That explains why he's so tanned.

"We'd first like to visit the offshore area near Garl, where we've heard monsters have been spotted," Ralf said.

"Certainly. I will prepare a boat, so please wait here until it's ready. It would be difficult for him to sail a boat large enough to carry all of you by himself, so I'll recruit some others to help," the village chief said before hurrying out.

We held a strategy meeting while we waited for the village chief to return.

Not that there was much information to discuss yet.

“There’s not much we can do until we see the monster for ourselves,” Will said.

“Will we be able to identify the monster once we see it?” I asked.

Honestly, I didn’t know all that much about monsters. Even Shinki was probably only familiar with monsters that lived in the forest.

“I, too, only know of the monsters I’ve read about in illustrated encyclopedias,” Will said. “If we can’t figure out what it is, maybe we can ask the adventurers’ guild.”

Oh, that’s a good idea. The adventurers’ guild knows every conceivable monster under the sun. If we can at least identify the monster’s characteristics, they should be able to help us narrow down what it is.

Next, we decided who would remain on land as an emergency point of contact. One royal guard and one knight would stay behind. The leaders of each group chose the candidate they felt was most qualified for the task.

The real question was what the king’s private soldiers, who I’d still not so much as caught a glimpse of, would do. Would they hide on our boat, or maybe go in a separate one? It would be interesting if they used magic to let them breathe underwater and clung on to the bottom of the boat!

The two men chosen to stay on land would wait up on top of Garl. From there, they could watch us using a spyglass.

That sounded kind of low-tech, considering this was a world of magic, but they told me there wasn’t any magic for far-seeing or clairvoyance. The best they could do was use water magic to magnify things to about the same degree as a magnifying glass.

Maybe it had something to do with the lenses and optical phenomena? No magic could control light since it was well known that light and darkness were the dominion of God alone.

Before long, the boat was ready for us.

We followed the village chief to a large boat moored at the dock directly

behind his house.

I didn't notice it before, but don't we need a sail? Don't tell me they're going to row this boat by hand?!

The boat's construction was similar to that of a small vessel in my old world, except, of course, for the engine. It was wood, with a covered area in the center containing seating where people could rest and eat. At the rear of the boat was a storage area, if you wanted to call it that. In reality, there were just two glorified holes in the floor, one for holding captured fish and one for storing fishing gear.

Fenders were all around the exterior of the boat. They were like cushions that would prevent it from being damaged by bumping into piers and rocks. I was incredibly relieved to see them.

And, as for the boat's actual power source...

Of course, it was *magic*!

The mechanics were surprisingly simple. A forceful expulsion of seawater from the rear of the craft propelled the boat forward. A tank at the bottom of the boat sucked in seawater with a pump that sent the water from the tank toward the rudder. The seawater in the tank also performed the function of a ballast, and the seawater was replenished continuously. It was also possible to control the force of the water sent to the rudder by adjusting the amount of magic used.

In short, it was similar to a pipe and faucet.

However, unlike in my old world, this rudder could move 360 degrees.

Yikes, this is unexpectedly exciting! Would it be bad if I played "secret submarine"?

...Yeah, probably. That wouldn't end well, so I'll quit while I'm ahead. I don't want the boat to actually sink...

So, should I go to the bow or the stern? If I go to the bow, I'll have a great view of the ocean, but if I go to the stern, I'll have a great view of the boat.

All right, bow it is! Nothing can beat an ocean view!

I got the unit leader to escort me, and we climbed a ladder of planks. As soon as my feet hit the deck, I sprinted to the front of the boat.

“It’s dangerous up there, Neema,” Ralf called out.

“I want to stand here!” I insisted.

“**Sigh.** Should I tie a lifesaving rope to her?” Will asked.

“Yeah, given how much Neema loves to move around, that’s probably a good idea,” Ralf agreed.

And so, for the second time in this life, a lifesaving rope was attached to me.

Shinki held the other end of the rope.



What the heck?!

We look like a pet and its owner!

Our positions have reversed...

Well, this stinks. But if this is what it takes to look at the ocean as much as I like, I'll have to deal with it. Wooow. The ocean is so blue that it almost hurts my eyes.

...Come to think of it, we still haven't set sail yet. Then there's still time to get my head in the game!

"Shove off!" I cried out.

"Barge!" the fishermen shouted in unison, replying enthusiastically.

That meant something along the lines of "steady as she goes!" and "aye-aye-sir!"

It was almost as if I'd become the captain of the ship.

This is great!

The boat slowly began to move, progressing through the gentle cove.

Once we made it into the open ocean, waves rocked the boat from side to side.

Whooooa!

The front of the vessel took the brunt of the waves' impact, dipping up and down violently. The impact and accompanying CRASH as the boat crested over each wave was like riding on a roller coaster.

This is so fun!

Once we left the cove, the boat picked up speed. The experience was similar to the fishing boats I'd ridden on in my previous life. I wished they'd go a little faster, though.

The spray of the crashing waves hitting my face and the wild ocean wind tangling in my hair...

This is how it's meant to be: riding a boat, free on the ocean!

Unfortunately, this enjoyable experience was over all too soon.

From the cove to Garl wasn't far, so we didn't spend much time at max speed. The boat slowed down and circled the area in large, winding arches.

Noooo! I wanted to keep going for a little longer!

Then, from my perch at the front of the boat, I saw a fish leap into the air a short distance away. It was a massive fish executing an impressive jump. Its mouth protruded in a sharp horn like a swordfish, and the spine fin on its back was so large and knife-edged that I suspected it, too, could be a weapon.

Overall, the fish gave off a prickly impression.

"What was that?" I asked.

"That was a gardola. That one was still pretty small," the guide replied.

That's small?! Just its body must've been over 6 feet long! But the gardola we ate in Galea was incredibly delicious. I'd like to eat it again if I can!

We circled the area for about an hour, but nothing happened, so we changed locations. We headed over to the far side of Garl, out of view of the cove.

Up close, Garl was pretty much a sheer cliff.

Was this created by the movement of tectonic plates?

In the first place, does this world even have tectonic plates like Earth? Come to think of it, I've heard there are volcanoes in the Dierta Province. That must mean that there's magma here like on Earth, so it wouldn't be a stretch to assume that there are also tectonic plates that move, and maybe even earthquakes.

I'll ask God about it next time I see him.

It would probably be faster to look it up in the library at the royal palace...

A small waterfall was on the far side of Garl. It didn't start at the top of the cliff—water was spurting out from a point partway up.

That could be from an underground water vein in the mountain.

In any case, the scenery was captivatingly beautiful.

While I was staring at the waterfall in a dreamlike daze, out of nowhere,

something massive appeared!

Is that a boulder?

It looked like a boulder, except the surface was covered in seaweed and moss, making it hard to determine if it was green, brown, or something in between.

“If a totos is coming up to the surface, we probably won’t see any monsters today.”

It wasn’t the guide who spoke but one of the fishermen who’d come along.

“...That thing’s alive?!” I was so shocked that my voice broke as I practically wailed.

“It’s a type of shellfish called a totos.”

Huh?! A shellfish of that size?!

“Totos are highly sensitive to predators, so if one is coming to the surface, it means this area is safe.”

Sigh. *I’m still trapped by the common sense of my former world.*

Ralf and the others also looked surprised, but they didn’t seem to have a hard time accepting that it was a shellfish.

“Only a monster would be capable of catching such a large one, but totos are delicious when they’re small.”

What?! You can eat them?! Seriously?!

I was so shocked that I did a double and then a triple take.

As if a 15-foot shellfish wasn’t surprising enough, a human who even *considered* eating such a thing was enough to leave me flabbergasted.

No, wait a minute. The bigger it is, the more meat there is to eat, right? I don’t know how big of a shellfish he had in mind when he said, “while they’re small,” but I bet it was still pretty darn big!

And so, we didn’t achieve much else in this location besides viewing the totos and the waterfall.

We didn’t make any progress today.

It would be a shame to go home empty-handed, so we did a bit of fishing.

Both Ralf and Will said that they'd never been fishing. Since we were already out on the water and had plenty of time when the fishermen suggested it, the two eagerly agreed to give it a try.

With the fishermen teaching us as we went, we spent about an hour casting our lines into the ocean.

My catch was pretty impressive, if I do say so myself.

Even in my past life, I'd never caught this many fish at once.

To be specific, I caught about thirty fish of various sizes. The largest was about 3 feet long, and I'd been unable to haul it up by myself, so the fishermen helped me.

As for Ralf's catch, he managed to catch enough fish not to disgrace himself.

We'd take the largest fish home and have them cook it for our dinner that evening.

The fishermen set to work butchering a few fish to eat on the boat.

The first way they served it was as sashimi. Apparently, eating raw fish wasn't unheard of here, but Ralf and Will grimaced. Come to think of it, we'd never eaten raw fish at home.

"...You can eat it like this?" Will asked.

"As long as it's fresh, this fish is perfectly safe to eat raw," the guide explained, encouraging us to try it, but neither of the guys moved to.

More for me, then!

"Thanks for the food!" I said.

It's delicious!

It was so fresh that the texture was firm and springy, and instead of soy sauce, it was paired with sauda sauce.

I could eat my weight in this stuff! Huh? For some reason, Shizuku is having a strong reaction...

Don't tell me it's poisoned?!

...In actuality, the fish was so nutrient-dense that Shizuku was begging for more. Since Shizuku seemed so fond of it, I gave some of the sashimi to Haku as well. Haku absorbed the sashimi and bounced up and down happily. It seemed to be unable to control its reaction to the delicious food.

Nox and Gratia looked on longingly, so I gave them some sashimi as well. Both of them dug in with gusto.

Were you two always so gluttonous?

"Is it really that good?"

After witnessing my reaction, Will hesitantly put a piece of the sashimi into his mouth.

Hey, am I your guinea pig or something?!

"Oh! It's actually pretty good!" Will said.

Ralf took a bite of the sashimi at almost the same instant as Will. "I never would've guessed what a big difference being freshly caught would make in the taste..."

Right?! Fish is delicious no matter how you cook it, but when it's fresh, sashimi is where it's at!

After sampling several varieties of sashimi, they next brought out a hotpot stew.

Hotpot! Seafood hotpot, seafood hotpot!

Several types of fish, clams, something that looked like shrimp, fish cakes, and some root vegetables filled the bubbling broth.

Oh man, I'm gonna start drooling!

I cradled the bowl I was served in my hands and took a sip of the broth.

Mmmm! Could this possibly be miso? No, it tastes a little different than miso...

"What did you use to flavor this broth?" I asked.

"It's sauda yube."

“Yube?”

“It might not be common in the royal city. To make it, they simmer dried sauda berries until it forms a paste, then age it in a stone vessel.”

Hmm? Is it fermented, then? How mysterious...

“They make similar seasonings out of other things besides sauda, too, in particular grains.”

...Maybe sauda is similar to soybeans? Which would mean sauda is a multi-purpose food in this world, just like soy in Japan? All right, enough thinking about complex topics! It's time to eat!

After enjoying the seafood hotpot, we returned to the village chief's house and ate a full dinner. In the end, we'd pretty much spent the entire day eating.

I'm not going to gain weight, right? Come on, Shizuku, I'm counting on you!



THE following day, we again set out on the ocean first thing in the morning.

It would be boring to sit on the boat looking around, so we fished to kill time. However, I continued catching way too many fish, so I had to start releasing everything I caught. Too late, it occurred to me that this might be the effect of the special ability I'd received from God.

Will was pouting about it.

You're how old and still pouting like a child?!

At first, Will said that if I could do it, there should be no reason why he couldn't, too, but now he seemed to be speaking to Lars about something.

Lars, do your best to comfort him, please! Besides, this one's on God. It's not my fault!

I ignored Will and focused on looking for monsters, but I still didn't see anything.

I was so bored that a nap was starting to sound good.



...URK.

I'd been sleeping, using my bunny-backpack as a pillow, when suddenly my head smashed into the boat railing.

Owww...

Instantly wide awake, I looked around to see the fishermen running back and forth, looking panicked.

Did they spot something?!

The guide was pointing toward where a thick fog had begun rolling in.

"That's it!" one of the fishermen shouted.

It looked like we were about to have the encounter we'd been hoping for.

The boat turned toward the fog, and we slowly made our way forward.

Once we entered the fog, visibility dropped drastically in the blink of an eye. I was in my usual position at the front of the boat but couldn't even see my brother and the others anymore. Shinki stood poised directly behind me, having determined that the lifesaving rope was no longer sufficient.

Something was in the fog.

We could all tell that, but we couldn't make out its shape.

"Shinki, could you clear away the fog, even for a moment?" I asked.

"The bugs claim they can do it," he said.

Will you stop calling them bugs already?! I'm starting to feel bad for the elemental spirits!

"In that case, please ask the elemental spirits to do it," I said.

"As you wish, Miss. You heard the lady; have at it!"

The moment Shinki spoke, a fierce wind blew all around us. The boat was somehow untouched, but the fog surrounding it was blown away in moments.

The wind spirits are terrifyingly powerful!

Once the fog cleared, it revealed a mysterious creature—or rather, a monster—floating on the ocean's surface.

Is monster the right word?

No matter how you look at it, that looks like a boy to me?

“Shinki, what’s that?” I asked.

“It’s obviously a fish?” he responded.

Huh? It looks like a fish to Shinki? How...?

I was tilting my head in confusion when the fog rolled back in. The mysterious monster disappeared, and slowly, the fog dissipated, this time on its own.

I left the bow and approached Ralf and the others to ask what it had looked like to them.

“It looked like a mermaid to me, but you saw something different, Neema?” Ralf said.

“It looked like a boy to me,” I responded.

“I saw something that looked like a horse...” Will chimed in.

We asked the fishermen, but based on their responses, no two people had seen the same thing. One saw a beautiful woman, and another saw a monster with hideous tentacles.

The mystery only seemed to deepen, but in the end, we decided to return to dry land.

I wonder what the two men watching from up on Garl saw.

We’ll need to research to find out if there’s some kind of monster that can change its appearance depending on who’s looking at it.



ONCE we regrouped at the village chief’s house, we discussed the monster.

First, we asked the knight and royal guard stationed on Garl what the monster had looked like to them. One said it looked like some kind of snake monster, and the other said it looked like a giant bird.

That supported the theory that it appeared differently to everyone.

The other knights reported seeing a winged dragon similar to a wyvern, a

flabby monster covered in dozens of eyeballs, and even a broken-down old boat.

Few of us saw anything even slightly resembling a person. There was only my boy, Ralf's mermaid, and the one fisherman who saw a beautiful woman.

The others mostly saw large and frightening monsters.

Does this mean the mysterious monster can use illusion magic?

However, this brought up the issue of illusion magic.

One might assume that magic that showed a person an illusion would be in the territory of light, but it was actually non-attributed magic.

For humans to create illusions, they needed to be especially adept at non-attributed magic. Furthermore, in some countries, it was labeled as dark magic and prohibited by law. That was the case here in the Kingdom of Gaché.

Dark magic included magic that worked on the mind, such as bewitchment and mind control, as well as necromancy and other immoral types of magic.

Cases of dark magic were usually discovered by chance, but the elemental spirits would not sit by quietly and let it go when it came to necromancy. Death was the exclusive dominion of God and the Goddess, and no one would be allowed to encroach upon it.

If a magic user were caught using necromancy, they might only be branded with the mark of the fallen if they hadn't used it for evil purposes. But if they had, they would be executed.

And since illusion worked on the mind, it was a clear case of dark magic. But what would happen if a monster was able to use it?

"Its appearance is different for everyone who sees it... At first glance, this seems like a clear case of illusion magic, but what if it's not?" Will suggested.

"What do you mean?"

Will's face turned grim in response to Ralf's question.

"Recall, if you will, the forest the kobolds were hiding in. We were thoroughly confused by perception-altering magic, right? This might be another case of

magic that works on our visual perception, not our minds.”

I see... The Guardian of the Forest did a good job of concealing the kobolds from us.

Perception magic would be hard for Will, naturally attuned to wind magic, and Ralf, an advanced-level user of wind and water magic, to detect. The fishermen, too, were all gifted with wind and water magic, which were useful for fishing.

However, one knight was a strong user of non-attributed magic. I knew this personally because I’d spent plenty of time having the knights entertain me with demonstrations of their magic.

I asked him to see what he thought.

“I didn’t sense the use of perception magic,” he said. “I don’t believe any non-attributed magic was being used.”

And so the mystery deepens further. I just don’t get it!

“Lars and Shinki, did either of you sense anything?” I asked.

If all the humans who could use magic were out, what about the members of our group who could see elemental spirits?

Oh, but Shinki said it looked like a fish to him.

“Growl.”

“What?!” Will responded violently to whatever Lars had said.

Translation, stat!

“Lars is saying it was wind magic.”

Huh? It’s possible to create an illusion with wind magic?

“Come to mention it, the bugs were saying something about a song,” Shinki added.

A song?! Is Shinki speaking in riddles now?

“Wind... A song... And the sea... There is one monster that fits...” Will pondered it deeply for a long moment before speaking. “It’s a siren.”

Ding, ding, ding!

We have a winner!

Of course, it's a siren! The infamous monster known for bewildering sailors!

It kind of fits, but also kind of doesn't.

In my old world, sirens, usually described as looking like a mermaid or sometimes a bird, use their beautiful voice to bewitch sailors so they'll run aground, and the sirens can eat them, right?

It makes sense that wind magic would have something to do with their song, but how can they make you see an illusion?

"A song can make you see an illusion?" I wondered aloud.

In response, Lars began casting some kind of spell. It was blurry and hard to make out, but what appeared to be a small bird hovered in front of him.

"A bird?" I said.

"Oh, now I get it," Will said, looking convinced.

"Umm, is it a ria?" Ralf asked.

Does the fact that Ralf saw a ria mean that Lars is recreating the same phenomena that occurred when we saw the mysterious monster?

I asked the knights what they saw right now.

The answers were all different—one saw a small furball, another saw a butterfly, and another saw a hat.

Hey! Who was it that just said they saw a runohark?! Keep c--kroaches out of it, please, and thank you!

In any case, this proved that it was caused by wind magic.

"Why does everyone see something different?" I asked.

"Hmm, well, to put it simply, he's using wind to warp the direction of the light, creating an optical illusion," Will explained.

"An optical illusion?" I repeated.

"That's right. It makes the actual object look like something else."

Light and optical illusions, huh? Once magic gets involved, it becomes too complicated for me to follow.

Does it work kind of like a mirage?

But we're talking about wind here! If it were water, you could affect the refractive index of the air by manipulating the humidity and temperature, but... Oh, that's it! The air!

You can use the wind to carry in warm air. So, the air is also under the influence of the wind attribute? I see...

"Supposing it is a siren, why would one of them come here?"

We tentatively proceeded under the assumption it was a siren we were dealing with, but sirens' natural territory was primarily in the Mieuxga Province. They made their homes in the beautiful, warm ocean and rivers there.

The ocean here in Zigg Village was clean and beautiful, but the fishermen had never heard of a siren appearing in this area before. Meaning this region was outside of their natural habitat.

We weren't going to get anywhere just discussing it among ourselves, so we decided to ask the village chief and the guide.

"It's a siren...?" the chief asked.

"Most likely."

"A siren has never appeared in this area before..."

Or so the village chief claimed, but the guide disagreed with him.

"If it's a siren, it's probably living in an aquatic cave at the base of the mountain."

...Say what?! The mountain, again?

"Do you mean Mount Reitimo?"

"Yes. It's part of why the mountain is called 'The Lost Mountain.' When travelers venture onto the mountain, they're bewitched by the sirens and eaten," the guide explained. "The lucky few who escape speak of encountering a beautiful monster."

So that's why there have been so many deaths and missing people?

"Have you ever seen one yourself?" Ralf asked.

"No. The stories have been passed down from generation to generation. Everyone knows to avoid the ocean around the base of the mountain."

Which would mean they've been here since long ago? If so, why is one venturing closer to the village now? Based on what the guide's saying, sirens have been living exclusively in the waters surrounding the mountain for ages.

"Tomorrow, will you take us to the area of which you speak?" Ralf requested.

"...It pains me to disobey my grandfather's teachings, but if it is our future lord's request, I will do so," the guide said.

Sorry, but please cast all the blame on the need to protect the village! In exchange, we'll protect you, mister guide! Or at least Shinki will!

And so the following day, we'd go mountain climbing!

3 - It Started With Mountain Climbing

IT'S the day of our mountain-climbing adventure!

I've got my lunch and snacks, and I'm ready to go! However, even though we'll be climbing a mountain, I'm wearing a dress, like usual...

Come to think of it, for all of our adventures up to this point, including the battle with the kobolds and our trips out on the ocean, I was always wearing a dress. It didn't hinder my movements, so I didn't pay it much attention.

"Are these clothes really okay?" I asked.

"Huh? Do you want to wear something else?" Ralf handed me a different-colored dress.

It's the dress part I want to change, not the color!

"I want to wear pants!" I insisted.

Here in the Kingdom of Gaché, it wasn't unheard of for women to wear pants. Auntie Olive wore pants practically all the time. Among the nobility, it was still much more common for women to wear dresses, though.

"But these clothes are more functional," Ralf said.

"Huh?"

What does he mean, "these clothes are more functional"?

"You received quite a few dresses from Auntie Olive for your birthday, right?"

"Yeah!"

"Did you not know that the clothes Auntie Olive gave you contain written spells with various effects?" he asked.

"No!"

This is the first I've heard of it! I remember her saying she'd made them so

they'd last a long time, but she didn't mention anything about written spells!

"To protect you, she had spells included for protection, ease of movement, anti-tripping, and..."

I get it already.

Auntie Olive, an anti-tripping spell? Really? I'm not that clumsy!

"She said these clothes were equipped with even more spells than the clothing typically worn by the royal family, so I'd prefer if you wore them," Ralf said. "Besides, they look cute on you, Neema!"

When my brother said such things while turning the full force of his sparkling prince aura on me, I was a goner.

We're going mountain climbing, so should I wear green to blend in with my surroundings for protection, or red so I stand out and won't get lost?

I asked Ralf's opinion, and without hesitation, he said I should wear blue.

"Blue? Why?"

"Because blue suits you the best."

Oh. Really?

And that's how it was decided I'd go mountain climbing in a blue dress.



WITH the unit leader taking point, we slowly made our way up the mountain.

Unlike the forest we'd been hiking in not so long ago, this path had a subtle but undeniable upward slope that left no doubt that this was a mountain.

For two hours, we climbed, following the guide's directions.

Along the way, we encountered steep slopes and bubbling brooks, and at no point did I get sick of admiring the scenery.

"Cooo!"

Suddenly, an animal called a maroo, with the face of a bear and the body of a pig, appeared in front of us. It had fur on its face but not on its body. In some ways, it resembled a shaved bear, leaving only its head covered in fur.

Two maroos approached, begging for attention, so I obligingly petted their heads.

Hmm, their fur is stiff and prickly.

Apparently, it felt good to be pet because the maroos rubbed against my hand as if pleading for more.

As for their peculiar bodies, fine baby hairs covered them.

Maroos had a higher basal body temperature than other animals, so they were warm to the touch. It would probably feel wonderful to curl up with one under a blanket on a cold day.

Various other animals also came out to play, including some weasel-like kewies and a few kikis, which were similar to mice. A few brought us fruits they'd picked on the mountain as a present, and we ate them together right then and there.

It only seemed fair to share since they'd carried the fruits all the way here for us.

Nox and Gratia begged for some of the fruit, so I shared it with them, but I couldn't help wishing they'd be a little more like Haku.

Haku was obediently serving as Will's stress ball.

Don't tell me he's still bent out of shape over not catching any fish yesterday? I only caught so many due to the special ability I got from God, so, of course, you couldn't hope to compete!

Address all complaints to God, please. I don't want to hear it.

And so, no matter how we tried to keep moving forward, different animals kept appearing to impede our progress.

It can't be helped! This is all due to the special ability that God gave me! I didn't ask the animals to appear and beg for pets, but it would be cruel to ignore them, right?!

We continued for another hour, and although we were still a short distance from the summit, we'd reached our destination.

Thank goodness, my legs and back are starting to ache. I'm going to wake up with muscle pain tomorrow, for sure!

"There are many caves of various sizes in this area," the guide explained. "I don't know anything about the interior of the caves, but it's said that sirens live in the largest cave."

A lot less water was immediately visible than I'd been expecting from an "aquatic cave."

Directly in front of us was a cliff, towering over us impressively. Several holes were in the cliff wall. Were these the caves the guide had mentioned?

"Based on my grandfather's stories, I believe this is the right cave..." he said.

We walked until we came to a hole in the cliff wall big enough for two people to walk through side-by-side.

That's the biggest one?

"He said the size of the cave's interior, rather than the size of the entrance, was important," the guide said.

"You think it's larger inside?" Ralf pondered aloud.

"Probably. We won't know for sure until we go inside and see for ourselves," Will replied.

Oh, did playing with Haku improve Will's mood?

Although we would be entering the cave, we didn't know what we'd find inside, so we left a reserve group behind as a safeguard again.

I feel bad for the guys who can't explore the cave! Cave exploration is the height of adventure for men, isn't it?!

"I'll bring you back some treasure!" I promised the men who would be staying behind.

The two chuckled and said they'd be looking forward to it.

Watching this exchange, Will turned to Ralf.

"Ralf, get the lifesaving rope."

Ralf! Don't smile like that while preparing the rope!

I was tied to a lifesaving rope again. This time, the other end was attached to Lars.

How did it end up like this?!

The knights were busy preparing the magical items we'd use as a light source, and no one came to my rescue.

Ugggh.

Shinki took the lead of our expedition force as we entered the cave.

We decided on this course of action because Shinki could use the elemental spirits to give him an idea of his surroundings. Next came the unit leader and the knights with their magical items, the guide and Haku, then us, and finally the royal guard Danart brought up the rear.

I'd instructed Haku to protect the guide if something happened. I suspected Shinki would be able to handle just about anything that came our way before it came to that, though.

Near the entrance, it seemed like an ordinary, naturally occurring crevice in the cliff. The light from outside illuminated the area, so it didn't feel like a cave.

That all changed as we progressed further in areas where the light didn't reach.

Based on the ground felt under my feet as I walked, I got the impression the tunnel was gently sloped downward. It felt warmer here than outside, and the humidity was higher.

More surprising than anything, though, was the eerie feeling I got in here!

The light from the magical items illuminated our immediate surroundings, but hanging down from the ceiling were not dripstone stalactites but some mysterious, slimy things! Some kind of plant life clung to the gray stone walls of the tunnel, and the sound of water dripping somewhere far off only fanned my sense of dread!

I thought a cave would be more beautiful than this! I'd been expecting some majestic scenes of otherworldly beauty, not this terrifying haunted house

atmosphere!

Not to mention, those mysterious plant things appear to be moving!

The mysterious plants reacted to the light, moving with slithering motions. It was a stomach-turning sight!

I clung to my brother and somehow forced one foot in front of the other.

Eventually, the atmosphere of the cave changed.

The sound of water dripping began to echo around us. It appeared we'd made it to a wide-open cavern.

"Whoa!"

Now, this is a cave!

What I'd been expecting from the beginning spread out before us.

A copious number of stalactites were hanging from the ceiling, and stalagmites covered the ground, as well as one thick stone pillar that seemed to be acting as a support beam.

All of them were glowing with a faint light.

If this isn't just like an illusion, I don't know what is!

"Try to make as little noise as possible," the guide instructed.

That's the first rule of cave exploration! Everybody knows that if you make a loud noise, the reverberations could cause the stalactites to fall from the ceiling.

We could probably use wind magic to muffle any noise we made, but to be sure, we asked the elemental spirits to tell us the safest path, which we followed as we made our way through the cave.

The ground beneath my feet was slick and smooth, so I clung to my brother as we walked.

But I wonder what makes the stalactites glow?

I knew it was standard for a fantasy world, but I was still curious.

However, we weren't supposed to talk, so I'd have to keep my questions to myself until we'd finished exploring the cave. I examined the stalactites closely

and noticed a small creature clinging to one of them.

Oh, look—a lizard! Hm? Is this a salamander? Or maybe a gecko? Oh well, I suppose it doesn't matter.

The unidentified lizard was about an inch and a half long and blue.

Upon closer examination, its color was changing in tandem with its movements! The various shades of light and dark blue sparkled with the reflection of the stalactites' glow.

Oh man, I wish I had a camera right now! This is such a beautiful sight! I wanna play with the gecko-manders, cave lizards, whatever you call them! But this is no time to be playing...

Holding back tears, I gave up on playing with the blue lizards and focused on making my way through the maze of stalactites without bumping into any of them.

With the elemental spirits leading the way, we pressed forward, but the temperature seemed to drop with every step. One of the knights gifted with fire magic cast a spell to ward off the cold, and we continued.

When I saw what awaited us, I understood why it had gotten so cold.

The next area was a world of ice.

I suppose it would be more accurate to say a series of ice sculptures extended as far as the eye could see. They appeared naturally created by water dripping from above and freezing, but it was a marvelous sight!

There were also some hexagonal pillars that would've looked just like crystals if they had a bit more rounded curvature. When I tried touching one, they were ice, so there was no doubt that these, too, were naturally occurring.

I bet if you carved channels into these and poured whiskey into them, it would taste amazing!

I slipped and almost fell while admiring the scenery as we passed through the ice chamber. The ground beneath our feet was as smooth as an ice-skating rink!

Once we passed the natural ice sculptures, three holes were on the far side of the cavern. A faint breeze seemed to be coming from the hole on the left. The

middle hole was pitch black, and I couldn't see anything inside. And a faint light shone from somewhere inside the hole on the right.

If we were searching for an exit, we probably would've gone left or right, but the elemental spirits chose the middle hole.

Entering the center tunnel, we had only our magical items to rely on for light.

After a short distance, we spotted a flickering bluish-white light up ahead. The light danced along the walls of the tunnel. It looked almost like light reflecting off the water's surface.

We tiptoed stealthily forward until the sound of a woman laughing reached us.

Are we finally there?!

The unit leader cautiously crept forward to have a look.

The sirens must've been there because he gestured for us to proceed. We all stealthily inched forward to peek into the open cavern ahead.

A first glance revealed a large lake. I suppose the proper name for this dark blue, sparkling pool was an "underground lake." What was more mysterious was that, although it didn't appear connected to the outside in any way, the entire lake was giving off a faint glow. There weren't areas of stronger or weaker light—the entire pool glowed at the same brightness.

Maybe there are photoluminescent organisms living in the water?

But what drew all eyes was the highly anticipated sight of several half-naked women lounging about. They all had smoking hot bodies with outrageously large chests and outrageously tiny waists. Most outrageous of all were the gorgeous scales that covered their fish-like tails.

Since they're mermaids, I suppose it can't be helped, but after seeing those tiny waists, anyone would naturally anticipate a pretty peach-shaped butt! What about enchanting thighs? What about enticing calves? What about erotic ankles?! Those are the base ingredients of all men's romantic dreams, so where have they gone?!

Oh crap, I've gotten so worked up, I think I'm going to get a nosebleed...

“Well, this is quite a sight.”

What are you grinning about, Will?! That’s it; I’m adding “lecherous” to his already excessively long title of “perverted black-hearted demon prince”!

Ralf’s gaze darted erratically back and forth as if he couldn’t force himself to look directly at the women.

Come to think of it, since they’re so unabashed about their nudity, it kind of ruins the excitement a peeping-tom would feel over “accidentally” catching a glance of it...

“Those are sirens?” I asked.

If the ladies with the hot bodies were indeed sirens, then that must mean Ralf, who’d said he saw a mermaid, had it right all along?

“I think so...”

Now, what should we do? If we barge right in there, they’ll probably run away. Hmm, this poses quite a problem...

“We should just ask them,” Shinki said before striding toward the sirens.

Wait just a minute!

Everyone looked too stunned by Shinki’s unexpected action to react. The ladies let out brief screams when they spotted Shinki and dove into the water to flee.

I told you!

“We’re looking for a siren who’s been causing mischief in the ocean near the village,” Shinki announced. “Do any of you know who it is?”

Way to just come out and say it, Shinki!

As if they were intrigued by Shinki’s question, the ladies stuck their heads back up above the water’s surface.

“...You’re a monster?” one asked.

“That’s right.”

Hey, hey! Don’t spill the beans so easily, Shinki! The royal guards still don’t

know!

The royal guards let out shocked gasps when they heard Shinki's admission.

"Who else is there with you?!" she asked.

Crap, we've been found out.

"Looks like the ria's out of the bag. I'm going to need you all to vow upon your name later," Will said, effectively forbidding the royal guards from ever speaking of this to anyone.

Sorry, Shinki's such a blockhead...

Then Will used his eyes to signal to Ralf, who stepped forward.

"We're sorry for startling you, ladies." Ralf's sheepish smile snared the ladies' hearts, hook, line, and sinker!

Does that pun hit a little too close to home, considering they have fishtails?

Next, Will and Danart stepped out and were greeted with girlish shrieks. Even if they were sirens, they were still female. They were just as susceptible to a handsome face as anyone.

The rest of us meekly stepped out behind them.

All right, handsome men to the front! Unit leader, use your mature adult charm to win those ladies over!

I prodded and poked the best-looking men forward. They seemed taken aback by my unusual behavior, but I didn't care.

"Hehe. So many fine men in one place..." the siren giggled.

Uh-oh. Her eyes have taken on a predatory glint. This takes the term "maneater" to a whole new level!

"It's an honor to be praised so highly by beauties such as yourselves."

Oh, good lord, now they've done it—they pushed Will's pervert switch!

The ladies tittered over being called beautiful.

If you want a lecherous, perverted, black-hearted demon prince like him, I'll gladly put a bow on him for you because he's all yours, and good riddance!

Oh, but King Gauldi and Queen Relena would probably be sad, so I suppose I can't let them have him after all.

"So, do you know who's making mischief in the ocean near the village?"

Shinki is as blunt as a hammer, isn't he? Be a bit more charismatic, will you?!

"In the ocean?" the siren asked. "We don't go out there. It's much more peaceful here, and we capture plenty of men."

She said such an alarming thing as if it were nothing!

After glancing at Will, Ralf began explaining what had been occurring in the ocean nearby.

"That does sound like one of our species. But the men of the ocean aren't tasty, so we don't eat them. Right, ladies?" The lead siren turned to others for confirmation, which they all gave.

So the men who work in the ocean don't taste good...

"Forgive me, but what exactly do you mean by 'eat'?"

I had to give it to him; Ralf certainly had guts.

I hope they mean something other than "crunch, crunch" and "chew, chew."

"What we feed on are 'deeds.'"

"Deeds?" Ralf repeated.

"Yes. Perhaps it would make more sense to explain it as the sins that all creatures accrue throughout their lives?"

Deeds...

God, what on earth were you thinking?! What did you use as reference material when you created these sirens? Are you an angsty teenager or something?!

"What happens if a person loses that?"

"Hehe. Of course, they can't go on living."

"Why?"

"Deeds are like a record of a person's existence. No matter how many times a

person is reborn, the deeds engraved on their soul remain and accumulate. Without deeds, life cannot go on.”

While I was seriously pondering God’s similarities to an angsty teenager writing fan fiction, the conversation continued without me.

Why is it that once I hit upon the comparison to an angsty teenager, all of this starts to seem like some kind of angsty teenage drama? I thought this was supposed to be a fantasy world!

“And some deeds taste more delicious than others?”

“The men of the ocean are all too serious and upstanding. The deeds of wicked men are much more delicious,” the lead siren admitted.

Really? Once again, the world favors bad boys? All the nice guys in this world must feel so disappointed.

“I see. In that case, I doubt any of us would taste very good,” Will said.

He has a point; righteousness is the core of a knight’s being, after all. And Ralf probably has the least number of deeds of any of us!

As for Will... He might taste good.

Hm? Wait a minute—I might be the tastiest out of all of us!

“We have other uses for fine men such as yourselves...” the siren tittered. “We have to create our offspring somehow, after all.”

Hold on! The content rating of this conversation is getting a little high! Don’t tell me this is about to devolve into a siren-harem scene?! That sounds like the premise of an adult game, so stop it already, will you?!

“I’m sorry, but my younger sister is here, so can I please ask that you not speak of such things in her presence?” Ralf cautioned.

Thank you, Ralf! I don’t know anything! I have no idea how “offspring” are “created.” A stork brings them, right?!

“Oh, how adorable!”

Ralf’s statement had alerted the sirens to my presence.

Is it just my imagination, or did it look like a flash of light just crossed their

eyes? Maybe I really am the most delicious-looking? Eep!

Frightened, I hid behind my brother.

I don't want to be eaten!

"Come here. We promise we won't eat you."

The sirens beckoned to me, but my worry about being eaten didn't ease much.

"Growl."

A gentle wind wrapped around my body at the same time Lars growled.

Whoa! I think Lars is telling me to go! He seems to be saying that it's okay to approach the sirens because he'll protect me, but what is he going to do if they grab me and start chomping down?!

But the sirens just continued to beckon me with friendly smiles.

All right, I need to show my courage as a woman!

I inched to the water's edge, and the sirens gathered around me.

They petted me all over, remarking that I was "So cute!" and "So tiny!"

The roles were reversed from my usual encounters.

I'm surrounded by the hot babe brigade, being fawned over and called cute... This isn't too bad!

I'd been frightened, but they didn't show any sign of intending to eat me, so I accepted their friendly contact.

Overcome by curiosity, I reached out and touched one of the sirens' hair.

She was just underwater, so it should be soaked, but it's not; it's glossy, silky, and completely dry! Her silky locks feel incredible. What kind of shampoo do I need to buy to get hair like this?!

"Girls really are the best!"

"Boys just aren't as cute!"

"I want to have a girl next!"

“Hey, gentlemen! Come on, let’s make some babies. What do you say?”

La-la-la, I can’t hear you! Knock out the dirty talk, will you?!

Several hot-blooded young men in our group turned bright red at the hot babe brigade’s invitation.

The unit leader and Danart both seemed unfazed, though.

Wait a minute, she said “next”...

Does that mean she already has a boy?

“You have a son already?” I asked.

“That’s right. One of the travelers who ventured onto this mountain was a very fine man.”

Nope! This conversation is heading into adult territory again!

“I want to play with him!” I followed Shinki’s lead and crashed straight through their innuendo with a battering ram of bluntness.

“Hm? Come to think of it, I wonder where he’s gone,” the siren said.

“We haven’t seen him lately.”

What?! You guys, this sounds dangerously like a case of child neglect! Unless maybe sirens are a species that practices a laissez-faire approach to parenting?

“Could he be the one making mischief in the ocean near the village?” I asked.

Hearing about the existence of a boy called to mind one possibility—the boy I’d seen in place of the monster.

Maybe that boy was this siren’s son?

“It could be...” she said.

You ladies really have no interest in anything but men, huh? I feel kind of sorry for that little boy...

“I’d assumed you only produced female offspring,” Ralf said.

I understood how Ralf got that idea. After all, the hot babe brigade contained only women.

“Occasionally, a male child will be born,” the siren replied. “But they’re weaker and have a hard time finding food, so they usually die young.”

“Is their food different from yours?” I asked.

The outrageous boobs directly in front of my face inevitably caught my attention.

Would it be sexual harassment if I touched them to see what they feel like? I’m curious to see how they compare to the sensation of squeezing Haku.

“Males eat ‘desire.’ We got mad at him for eating all the sexual desire of a man we caught, and he ran off somewhere.”

I see. I suppose it does amount to a life-or-death struggle for these ladies. They need to continue having children to flourish, but their primary candidate for fathering those children lost all his sexual desire. Well, it looks like we’ve figured out what kind of monster we’re dealing with, so now all that’s left is to figure out what to do about the young siren boy.

“Won’t you try to reconcile with him?” I suggested.

“If he’s decided to strike out on his own, I’m sure he’ll be fine without our interference.”

“So you don’t care if he’s killed?” The ladies looked shocked by Will’s harsh words. “A child was kidnapped from the village at the base of the mountain. Once the perpetrator is determined, a subjugation force will be dispatched.”

“Do you seriously think any parent would be fine with their child being killed?” The siren’s voice took on a sharper tone.

If you’re going to threaten them, at least wait until after they release me!

“In that case, stop dawdling and retrieve him,” Will demanded.

“...Fine.”

“If the kidnapped child is okay, please return him to his parents,” I said.

“I think he’ll be fine. He was probably only taken so that little troublemaker could feed on his desire,” the siren said.

That doesn’t sound “fine” to me! When it comes to children, “desire” refers to

the desire to sleep and the desire to eat, right? If so, he's consuming the instincts the child needs to survive!

"So you'll reconcile with him?" I asked.

"Yes. But we can't live together. He'll have to live in another cave."

That sounds incredibly lonely. We saw plenty of other caves, but this must mean that at least some of them also contain water?

"Is there water in the other caves?" I asked.

"Sure, there's plenty. There are hot pools and pools frozen over with ice."

Hot pools?! Does that mean...?!

"The water is hot?!" I asked.

"That's right. There's moss growing all around, and it's very beautiful."

"I want to go see it!" I exclaimed.

"In that case, I promise to take you there after we catch that naughty boy," the siren said.

All right! We might have found ourselves a hot spring bath!

...But how are the sirens going to travel to the ocean?

I asked and was surprised by the answer.

The sirens had a way to travel through the air. Their hot bodies stayed just as they were, but their arms transformed into wings, and their fishtails turned into bird legs. Furthermore, their incredible hips and beautiful thighs were exposed!

A glorious sight!

Disappointingly, their calves and ankles were those of a bird. Hmph.

But I'm jealous they have two forms—a mermaid and a bird.

Striding on their bird legs, the ladies led the way to the chamber beyond the underground lake, which was a pit that opened up to the sky far above.

The sirens leapt into the air and flew up through the hole.

Are they just gonna leave us here? Lars is the only one of us who can fly, you

know! Okay, then I'll have Nox track them!

...Oh, but Nox is waiting outside...

Having no other choice, we quickly retraced the route we'd come here through. Of course, I picked up some souvenirs along the way. I collected several sparkling stones that covered the ground around the underground lake.

They're sparkly, so I think they qualify as treasure! Besides, we can bring the men who stayed behind along with us when we go to the hot spring later as their reward.

Cave exploring, a hot babe brigade, and hot springs—we've got all the ingredients for a man's dream-come-true scenario!

4 - God, Will You PLEASE Stop Messing With Me?!

AS we rushed back toward the mouth of the cave, the unit leader unexpectedly slipped and fell inside the ice cavern. Fortunately, he was uninjured but seemed embarrassed because he covered his face with his hands, a gesture I found adorable.

Is this what they mean when they refer to “cute older men”?! No, that can’t be it. The unit leader’s still young, objectively. The average age of our team is unusually low. He’s not old enough to be called an “older man” yet!

In that case, maybe it’s the allure of a person who displays a marked incongruency in their personality?

The unit leader is always hard-working and rarely shows emotion, but is cute when embarrassed. Come to think of it, one time, he got discouraged because Papa’s subordinate said something heartless to him. At that time, I was so angry at Papa’s subordinate that I wasn’t paying much attention to the unit leader. Now I regret that decision.

“The allure of incongruency,” huh? Let’s think about this.

If Ralf was embarrassed... He would be cute, but that’s his natural character, so it’s not incongruent.

If Karna was embarrassed... She’s usually so powerful and full of confidence, so it would fit the “allure of incongruency” trope.

If Papa was embarrassed... It would probably be weird and creepy.

If Mama was embarrassed... She’d probably try to play it off, but Papa would eat it up. And then, given Mama’s enchanting beauty, it would most likely quickly devolve into an adult scene.

If Will was embarrassed... As if that would ever happen, he’s shameless! I can’t even picture it!

Hm? So does this mean I don’t fully understand “the allure of incongruency”

yet?

By the time I snapped out of this weird train of thought, we'd already reached the mouth of the cave. There, we regrouped with the reserve team waiting outside.

After briefly explaining the situation, we all quickly made our way down the mountain. I couldn't keep up and gratefully accepted a ride on Lars' back.

I can't get enough of Lars' fluffy fur! The fur on his back feels nicer than even the highest-quality carpet. But my favorite is the ultra-fluffy fur around his face and neck! I'll have to make the most of this opportunity to indulge in the feeling of this ultra-fluffy fur under the premise of "holding on tight"!

Honestly, I never want to get down!

Oh, that's right! Once we finish with the Hanley stuffed animal, let's make a Lars stuffed animal! Since he's the holy beast partnered with the crown prince of our kingdom, it would, without a doubt, become a popular souvenir.

I hope Karna catches up with us soon.

At last, we reached the bottom of the mountain, but other than Lars, Shinki, and me, everyone seemed exhausted.

It seemed to be mental exhaustion more than physical, though. Some of the younger knights were still feeling the effects of the sirens' erotic attack.

We didn't have time to stop and take a break, though. As soon as we made it off the mountain, we ran straight to the village chief's house. Lars must've been using the wind to help him because he was moving faster than I'd thought possible.

We explained the situation briefly to the village chief and got him to prepare the boat for us.

Where did the sirens go?

It seemed Lars had asked the elemental spirits and already knew because Will was giving directions about where to steer the boat.

Oh, there they are, straight ahead!

The flock of sirens certainly drew attention.

All of the fishermen, seeing them for the first time, were enchanted by the ladies' hot bodies.

If you stare for too long, they might be tempted to eat your deeds!

One of the sirens noticed us and came to land on the ship. She seemed to be the leader of the group—the boy's mother.

"There's a cluster of rocks up ahead; he's hiding in there and won't come out," she said.

Hmm, that poses a problem.

"Did you try assuring him that you're not angry anymore?" I asked.

"Yes, but he still wouldn't come out."

What should we do...?

If it were me, I wouldn't trust it even if I was told they were no longer angry because even if Papa wasn't mad, I could still count on getting a whopper of a scolding from Mama!

Maybe we could lure him out with food? Oh, but he eats desire, right? Hmm, well, I have a feeling Shizuku and Haku have a limitless desire for food.

"Can sirens consume a monster's desire?" I asked.

"Of course. That hunky monster over there looks exceptionally delicious right now."

Oh my. Shinki, she's got her sights set on you. You'd better watch your back when you're walking alone on a dark night.

"Haku, come here!" I called out to Haku, who was sitting on Lars' head.

I'm kind of jealous of its current position!

"Haku, would you be willing to give some of your desire to eat to the siren child?" I asked.

"Mew!" Haku cried, agreeing easily.

What about Shizuku?

“How about you, Shizuku?”

Shizuku replied that it didn't mind as long as it wouldn't affect its children.

It has a good point.

Now is the time to have the wind spirits help us out. I just need them to project my voice, as they often do.

“Hey kid, aren't you hungry over there? Wouldn't you like something to eat?”
I asked.

No answer.

“That's too bad because these two slimes just told me they wouldn't mind if you ate their desire for food,” I tempted.

Hmm, maybe he's more stubborn than expected...

“As long as you return the child you kidnapped, no one will be angry with you,” I promised.

“...Really?”

Ah-ha! His voice was quiet, but he finally responded! Looks like I was right, and he was worried about getting into trouble.

“I promise! No one will be angry with you!”

They won't be angry but might give him a well-meaning scolding.

A young boy came out from behind the rocks. He walked across the surface of the ocean, approaching the ship.

Huh? He's a siren, but has a human body?

The boy was naked from the waist up but wore a pair of shorts covering his lower body, and he walked on two legs. He appeared to be using magic to raise the ocean water beneath him so he could make his way over to the boat.

I'm a little jealous! It must be convenient to be able to control water however you like.

Then, the boy produced something from beneath the water's surface. It looked like a bowl covered in a membrane made out of water. Inside, a boy of

about five years of age was fast asleep.

“...I’ll give him back,” the siren boy said.

Ralf tore the water membrane and rescued the little boy. He immediately set to work using healing magic on him, which put my mind at ease.

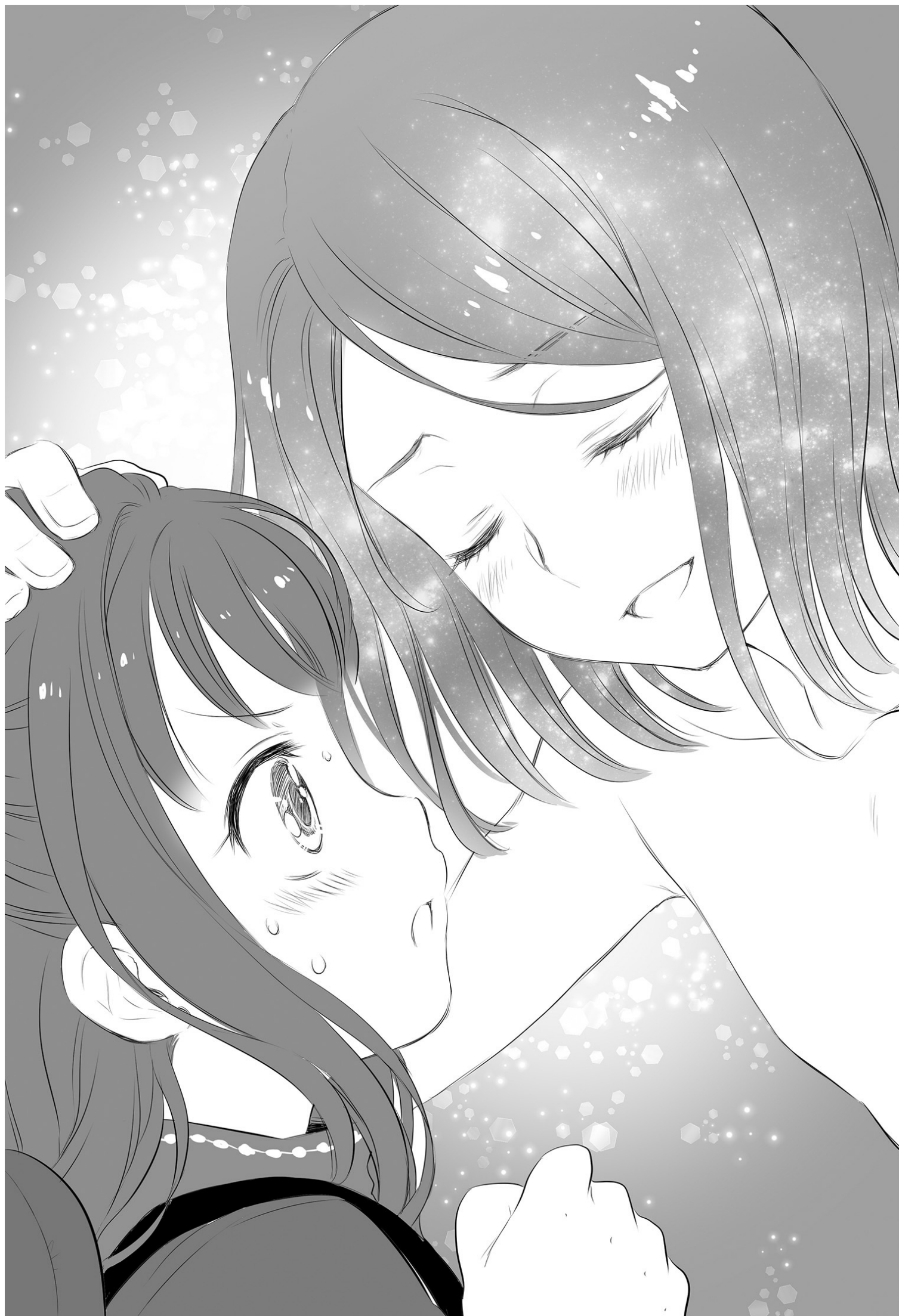
“You must be hungry, right?” I said. “You can feed on Haku here and Shizuku, who’s currently inhabiting my body. Their only desires are for food, though. I hope that’s okay.”

With an expressionless face, the siren boy reached out to touch Haku. Even he wasn’t entirely immune to Haku’s squishiness because he gave a faint, gentle smile. As could only be expected from the son of the hot babe brigade’s leader, his smile was devastating. Even my heart beat faster despite being desensitized to good-looking young men after all the time I spent around Ralf.

When he was done with Haku, the boy placed his hand on my head.

This time, his face morphed into an expression of pure ecstasy.

His eyes drifted shut. He had loose, marine-blue hair and eyes that were an unearthly shade of blue, like the color of the underground lake. His face was handsome and resembled the female sirens, but there was an almost suspicious shine to him—a potent charm that I couldn’t shake.



He's a little terrifying!

"So very, very delicious..."

Oh, really... Is the taste of Shizuku's desire more to his liking than Haku's?

Just then, Shizuku warned me of danger.

At the same time, Haku jumped onto my head and knocked the boy's hand away.

What's going on?!

"...Too bad," the boy said.

"Mew mew meeeew!"

Haku's threatening him? But Haku's normally so easy-going!

The mother siren strode forward and wedged between the boy and me as if protecting me.

"Do you have any idea what you've just done?" she asked her son.

"..."

"Breaking your promise like that... Whether you live or die is entirely up to this young lady, you know!"

I have no idea what they're talking about...

Did the boy do something to me?

"...But she's so delicious."

Huh?!

He was feeding on me?!

Hold on, what desires do I have for him to eat?

The desire for food? The desire for sleep? Or maybe...

"She loves animals," he said. "Her desire to pet as many of them as she can is so tantalizingly warm and delicious!"

Waaaagh!

You don't have to come right out and say it like that! I'm so embarrassed! Ahh, I'm going to die of embarrassment! I can't believe he was feeding on the desire to pet animals that forms the innermost core of my very being...!

"I understand, but the young lady only gave you permission to feed on the *slimes*, not herself!!"

Yeah, yeah! Do I look delicious in the eyes of the sirens or something?!

Humiliated, I fell to my knees. Haku rubbed against me as if trying to console me.

Hakuuuu!

I grabbed Haku tightly and ground my face into its soft, squishy body. I was so forceful that my nose sank into Haku's side.

Crap, I can't breathe like this!

I switched my grip on Haku and rubbed my cheek against it instead.

Haku really does have healing abilities, huh?

Nox flew over and demanded to be included in the group hug, so I gladly plunged my face into his soft feathers. He gave off the fresh scent of the forest. While we'd been exploring the cave, he must've been basking in the forest's peaceful atmosphere.

The conversation continued without me while I was comforted by my two companions.

"Return to the cave," the mother siren said. "No, scratch that; you can have one of the other caves. You are free to capture any humans that venture onto the mountain, but don't you dare step a single foot off the mountain, you hear me?"

The boy's expression fell in response to her orders, leaving him looking dejected.

"Well then, let's get going."

The mother siren was about to leap into the air, but I hurried to stop her.

"We'll go too!" I said.

I'd gotten an idea.

If this worked out, the boy might be able to avoid loneliness.

And so, I arranged to regroup with the sirens at the cave where we'd first met.

As for the boy, he was indeed a siren because he transformed into a bird form and was escorted through the skies by the female sirens.



Then we hurried back to shore so we could race back to the cave.

This pace is hard to keep up with.

It probably goes without saying, but we were exhausted by the long trek from the ocean to the mountain, coupled with the grueling climb up to the cave. And I had it easiest out of everyone since I mostly just rode on Lars' back.

Will somebody please invent a spell for unrestricted teleportation that doesn't rely on magic circles?!

The knights looked exhausted, and Ralf continuously used his healing magic on the entire group.

Who knows how we would've managed without Ralf to help us?

This time, we didn't bother leaving a reserve group behind at the mouth of the cave.

Instead, we had the guide wait outside for us.

I guess they're operating under the assumption that the less deadwood, the better? Although, I'm probably the biggest burden!

In any case, the sirens were waiting for us when we arrived at the underground lake. Disappointingly, their bird legs had already transformed back into fishtails.

"All right, let's search for a cave for that boy to live in!" I announced.

"You guys are going to come too?" the siren asked.

"That's right! The slime who is currently inhabiting my body is going to have babies very soon. If they're all there with him, he won't have to be lonely anymore, right?"

I would have Shizuku's babies live with the siren boy. That way, he wouldn't be lonely and could feed on their desires. This situation was ideal for everyone!

"That's true... And slimes can eat just about anything, right?" the siren mother asked.

"Yeah!"

“In that case, let’s try to find a cave that contains a lake with fish and plants in it.”

The siren mother approved of the plan, so it was decided—we were going cave-exploring once more!

Or so I thought, but then we were ushered *into* the underground lake.

The underground lake was connected subterraneously to the other caves.

The knights who could use water magic and my brother cast spells on all of us that would allow us to breathe underwater. In addition to their magic, I also received the support of the water spirits.

I overheard Shinki giving orders to the elemental spirits. “Hey, water bugs! Protect Miss Neema, got it?”

Come on, already! Don’t I keep telling you not to call them bugs?! I want to come up with something else for him to call the elemental spirits, but what should we call them? They’re like really tiny bugs with wings... Tiny, hm? Some synonyms of “tiny” are small, micro, nano... That’s it, nano! I think it technically refers to things so small they can only be seen with a microscope, but hey, it’s better than “bugs,” right?

“Shinki, why don’t we start calling the elemental spirits ‘nano’s from now on?”

“Nano?”

“Yeah, because they’re so tiny and adorable.”

“If that is your wish, Miss...”

All right, there’s one problem resolved.

I could feel a breeze stirring only around me. Could that mean the elemental spirits were pleased with their new nickname?

Oh, that’s right! There was one more thing I’ve been wondering about! Lars is a wind holy beast, so what are we going to do about him?

But I needn’t have worried. Lars was a super-powerful holy beast, after all. He just used his wind powers to create an air bubble around himself. He could even

move underwater like this. Holy beasts really are incredible!

Everyone was prepared to breathe underwater, so it was time for a cave diving adventure!

With the sirens leading the way, we swam on and on through the water. Along the way, the sirens took our hands to lead us each time we encountered rough water or other difficulties.

It wasn't pitch-black in the lake—surprisingly, even when we'd submerged to quite a depth, light reached us from somewhere. It was a mystery. It couldn't possibly be the light from outside. That wasn't physically possible. That only left the possibility of photoluminescent organisms in the water, but no matter how I searched, I couldn't spot them.

The first cave we surfaced in was like a jungle. There was a thick tangle of plant life surrounding the underground lake. Furthermore, the cavern was hot and humid, as if heat were rising from the planet's core.

"This cave has plenty of plants and fish," the siren mother said.

"But it's open at the top," I pointed out.

It was a cave, but a round hole in the ceiling opened up into the outside world. That presented the very real possibility of baby slimes and mischievous siren boys jumping up through the hole in the ceiling and going outside.

"Oh, you're right... I wonder when that happened?"

Yeah, it wouldn't be unusual for something like this to happen naturally. I bet the sirens didn't even notice due to their long lifespans.

"Let's try the next cave."

The next cave we came to was a wonder of natural beauty.

A giant metallic object that almost appeared to be some kind of man-made abstract sculpture sat in the center of the lake, and a faint haze rose from the water's surface.

A single ray of light shone down from the ceiling, where a thin stream of water poured into the cavern like a waterfall. Flowers bloomed on the ground, greedily drinking up the sliver of sunlight coming in from above. And the walls

of the cave sparkled.

The incredible beauty of the cavern left us all speechless with wonder.

“It’s pretty in here, right?” the siren said. “The hole leading outside is small, so they can’t slip out, and if they want to go to the ocean, they’ll need to first pass through our cave.”

But if the sirens get distracted, I bet that boy could sneak out...

“We’re always in our cave. And even if he sneaks out through one of the other caves, if similar things start happening in the ocean again, we’ll all know who it was, right?”

That’s true... And anyway, even if Shizuku’s babies are here, being completely shut up here would mean the boy wouldn’t have many opportunities to find other food sources.

“Shizuku, what do you think of this place? There don’t seem to be any dangerous creatures around.” I asked Shizuku what it thought, and it seemed extraordinarily pleased with this place.

That does it, then! This is where Shizuku will have its babies!

Without wasting another moment, I climbed out of the water so Shizuku could exit my body.

Hm? My nose is running... Am I catching a cold?

“...Ah-choo!”

I let out a huge sneeze, and when I opened my eyes, Shizuku was in front of me.

...How did you get out?! Through my nose?! You came out with that sneeze just now, didn’t you?!

Immediately upon exiting my body, Shizuku trembled like Jello.

Are the babies going to be born right this second?!

As if on cue, tiny little slimes began popping out of Shizuku’s trembling body.

Pop! Pop! POP-POP-POP!

Just how many babies are there?!

Colorful baby slimes swarmed around Shizuku like a big, huge... swarm!

“Pyuuu!” Shizuku let out a relieved cry that seemed to be saying, *“I did it!”*

I think it’s over?

There were red, blue, green, yellow, orange, purple, brown, gray, and black babies... Wait, black?!

Shizuku, what’s the meaning of this?! When a monster is black, it means they’re a deviation, right?!

“Pew pi-pyu!”

Shizuku coyly suggested that the black baby slime might just be a case of sudden evolutionary development.

Putting the issue of the baby deviation aside for a moment, I began naming the babies. There were a whole lot of babies, so I started naming them based on their varying shades.

Seki (Red), Crimson, Scarlet, Blood Red, Coral, Cherry Blossom... Some of those even sound like actual names; so far, so good!

*Sei (Blue), Navy, Aquamarine, Indigo, Lapis Lazuli, Sky Blue...
Ryoku (Green), Jade, Spring Green, Forest Green, Moss Green...*

Ou (Yellow), Sunflower, Lemon, Daidai (Orange), Honey, Kohaku (Amber), Wheat...

Dusk, Wisteria, Violet, Hai (Gray), Silver, Charcoal...

Let me just say now that I don’t know if I can remember all these names!

Some of the names are fruits, plants, etc., but who cares as long as they correlate with the slime’s color?!

For the primary colors, I named them using Chinese-derived readings of the Japanese kanji for their corresponding colors.

The black baby looked at me beseechingly, as if asking, *“What about me?”* So I named it Koku, for black.

They sure have a colorful assortment of names!

The colors corresponded to each slime's characteristics.

The red-hued babies liked places that had fire and heat.

The blue-hued babies liked places where there was water.

The green and brown-hued babies liked the mountains.

The yellow and orange-hued babies were fine with both fire/heat and mountains.

The purple-hued babies were poisonous and were happy anywhere.

The gray-hued babies were parasitic and preferred to inhabit a host.

As for Koku... It was a mix of all of the above. It possessed abilities similar to those of a parent slime, could eliminate poison and analyze compounds, was impervious to most physical attacks, and, surprisingly, was even unaffected by most types of magic, according to Shizuku.

In summary, deviations have special abilities? In that case, Gratia must also have special abilities, right?

Shizuku wanted to stay with its babies, so, in exchange, Hai, Silver, Charcoal, and Koku would inhabit my body.

Isn't that too many parasites for a single host's body to support?! I'm shocked it's even possible for multiple slimes to inhabit the same person simultaneously!

Haku said it wanted to stay with me, so we decided to take it with us.

Hold on, isn't the situation only getting worse? Wasn't I just saying I wanted to stop adding to my collection of monster companions?!

...I guess I should've known that's impossible for me!

"...I'm jealous; it must be nice having a name..." the siren boy said.

Don't you start, young man!

"Why didn't that possibility occur to me earlier!" the mother exclaimed.

Uh-oh, now the mother siren's getting ideas...!

"Please name him," she said. "If you do that, you'll know if he gets up to any

mischief, right?”

I knew it! Did the universe not just hear me thinking I want to STOP adding to my monster collection?! In particular, I want to stay away from humanoid types without any fluffy fur for me to pet!

“You don’t want me if I don’t have any hair, right?” he guessed.

I don’t have a problem with baldness! Baldness has its own unique allure... No, no, wait. That’s getting off-topic...

“How’s this, then?” As he said this, the boy transformed into a small horse.

...Wait, what?!

“Can you transform into anything you like...?” I asked.

“Not exactly. Although he’s a siren like us, he’s a male. The males also possess a monster form,” the mother siren helpfully explained.

It’s a little unusual that the biology of males and females of the same species differs so greatly...

So, if I understand this correctly, this boy has his siren forms—a mermaid and a bird—and his monster form—a horse?

“Then what about his human form?” I asked.

“That’s probably from the traveler’s blood.”

So, he also possesses a human form because of his paternal lineage?

“We don’t know either. We’ve never seen a male live to maturity before.” The mother shrugged.

Which makes this boy a practically legendary, super rare monster?

Another mysterious monster, just like Shinki...

I looked at the boy, who’d take on the form of a stocky, ponylike horse. Just as in his human form, he had marine blue fur and round blue eyes.

I hesitantly reached out to pet him, and the pony narrowed its eyes blissfully.

Th-This mane is incredible!

Just like the female sirens’ hair, his mane was smooth and glossy, but the way

it flowed through my fingers was enchanting. The locks formed perfect natural ringlet curls. If his mane was like this, then his tail must be...

Hair, just like in those shampoo commercials, that was the envy of women around the world—the kind you'd see the model running her hands through gratuitously and gathering into an impossibly smooth and silky-looking ponytail... That's exactly how his tail was!

It was the silkiest thing I'd ever touched, but it still gathered effortlessly into a perfectly frizz-free ponytail...

Incredible! Truly amazing!

"...Ahh, you really are so delicious..." he murmured.

Whoa! He was eating my desire without me even realizing it?! Give me back my desire to pet!

...Huh? He did eat my desire to pet, didn't he? But it doesn't feel like it's decreased at all...

Perhaps my desire to pet is truly limitless?!

"...If you let me feed from you again, I promise to behave myself."

I see... I really do have an intense desire to pet, don't I? If my desire doesn't decrease no matter how much I pet, it means I'm practically starving for the sensation of petting fluffy animals!

"...That's why I want you to bind me to you..." the boy continued.

"Wait, what?"

The slightly alarming proclamation broke through my deep concentration on my seemingly limitless desire to pet.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that," my brother butted in for reasons I didn't fully understand.

"...Why not?"

"Because I won't let anyone who might harm Neema get close to her, no matter who they are."

"...I'm going to be with these slimes, and she is their master... So I want her to

be my master as well.”

Hmm, well, it would be easier to deal with any problems that might arise in the future if he's bound to me by his name...

In fact, if Shizuku's going to be here, it makes sense. I can ask Shizuku to keep an eye on him, and if he starts making mischief, I can stop it immediately.

“...Is it really such a bad idea?”

Personally, I couldn't see any drawbacks.

A monster that eats desire, huh? Hm...

“You can eat any kind of desire, right?” I asked.

“...Yeah, but the desires of someone especially attached to something are the most delicious,” he said.

I might be able to use this.

For example, to help people suffering from addictions. Dependencies such as drug addiction, gambling addiction, and alcohol addiction involve a strong attachment to a specific thing. It's possible to temporarily remove all drugs and alcohol from a person's system, but that alone won't cure their attachment to the focus of their addiction.

This might also work for treating certain types of habitual criminals. The attachment to money, to sex, to killing...

Furthermore, it might help if our country ever falls into crisis. As long as King Gauldi is our king, I doubt that will ever happen, but when Will becomes king, it's entirely possible.

In summary, if this siren boy eats people's attachments, it might be possible to cure dependencies that even healing magic can't fix, right?

“What happens to the person's attachment after you eat it?” I asked.

“...They lose all interest in it. ...The thing they'd been attached to starts to feel unnecessary to them.”

...You jerk! You had every intention of stealing my desire to pet from me permanently?!

“But I haven’t lost interest in petting fluffy animals...” I said.

“...That’s because you have so much desire that I could gorge myself and still never consume it all.”

Thank goodness for the intensity of my desire. I couldn’t go on living without petting fluffies!

“Does that mean you can’t feed on someone to the point that they lose the will to live?”

“...Not particularly. If someone wants to die, I’m able to consume their remaining will to live.”

Urk! That complicates things!

For someone like me, who is so attached to something that they don’t even want to go on living without it, he couldn’t consume all of their attachment without killing them, right?

That means this method can’t cure someone with such severe alcoholism that they don’t want to live anymore if they can’t have it since they would die from apathy.

“...I think you’re special. ...It seems that something is protecting you,” he said.

“Protecting?”

“...It has nothing to do with being more attached to petting than to life itself. ...It’s because you’re protected that your desire doesn’t disappear.”

I’m being protected, huh? I assume by God? Yeah, it must be God.

“He’s also protected, but his desire would disappear if I consumed it. ...So he’s not special,” the boy explained, pointing to Ralf.

If Ralf’s being protected, it’s probably by the Goddess.

Assuming I’m receiving special divine protection from God, it’s either intended to throw a curve ball into this situation for his own amusement or because it’s necessary as part of my mission.

In this case, I have a feeling it’s simply for his amusement.

“...You are special. ... So please, bind me to you.”

If he felt this passionately about it, I had no choice but to concede.

“If I do, will you uphold your promise not to leave this cave until I come to get you?” I asked.

“...Yeah. If we’re bonded, you would know. ...And I would be unable to disobey my master’s command.”

Even if I give him a name, I’ve already exhausted every conceivable color name. In Latin, the word for “the sea” is Mare, but that sounds like a girl’s name. I already named one of the slimes Lapis Lazuli, so what about the Japanese version, Ruri?

Ruri, huh? Hm, no, I don’t think it suits him.

I could connect his name with Spica’s by naming him Arion.

The constellation Virgo, which contains the star Spica, is modeled after two half-siblings with different fathers—Persephone and Arion.

But they’re not siblings, so that would be weird.

There’s also Grani, the horse owned by the hero, Sigurd, in Scandinavian folklore. Hm...

All right, I’m going to keep it simple and name him after the Japanese word for “the sea”!

“Your name will be Kai.”

“...Kai. ...Oh, I feel it. We’re bonded now.”

A white symbol appeared on Kai’s forehead.

“Kai, please take good care of Shizuku and its babies,” I said.

“They’re my companions now. ...So, of course, I will protect them,” Kai replied, looking somehow pleased.

He really must’ve been lonely. But it’s okay now! Shizuku and its many, many babies will be here from now on—they’ll make this place very lively for sure!

“You too, Shizuku. Please keep an eye on Kai for me, okay?”

“Pyuuu, pyu-pyu!”

Shizuku seems to view Kai the same as its babies. I think it just said, "I'll raise him right; leave it to me!"

Well, with the super-mega-ultra hands-off mother he has, I'd say he can use any parental figures he can get, even a parent slime!

5 - Take Me to the Hot Spring!

I was thinking...

Shinki was a monster who could use elemental power after undergoing a mysterious evolution.

Gratia was a deviation who possessed some kind of unknown special abilities.

Kai was a super-rare monster whose current abilities were already special, not to mention what powers he might develop as he grew.

But I'd realized that the most mysterious of all was the biology of slimes!

Even with only what we currently knew, their powers differed depending on their habitat, and while some were parasitic, others were poisonous. All slimes were strong against physical attacks, but some were also all but impervious to certain types of magic as well. And once a slime reached the level of parent slime, it obtained the ability to break down and analyze compounds.

And then there was the mystery of their transmutable body size. How on earth did Shizuku's normally almost 3-foot-round body fit into my mouth in a single swallow? Its body mass and compactness must be changeable. Even so, it was still a mystery to me.

Hai, Silver, Charcoal, and Koku all entered my body in a single swallow... It seemed impossible, but I was there to attest that it had indeed happened.

More concerning to me at the moment, though, were their demands to be fed. As such, we decided to head back for today.

But first, we had a request for the siren ladies.

"A pack of kobolds is coming to this mountain; please don't eat them," I said.

"Are they your friends?"

I'm not sure I'd go so far as to call them friends, exactly...

“Hmm, I guess you could say we’re allies?” I settled.

“Well, isn’t that nice—a friendship that overcomes species! It would be even better if love could do the same... Hehe.”

Kai’s mother seemed to be the de facto leader of the group. Was it my imagination, or did she resemble some of the *fujoshi* girls I’d hung out with in my previous life?

“But I don’t think I can promise with confidence not to eat them if I happen across an especially fine man...” she said wistfully.

If she’s into fluffy, dog-faced men, there are quite a few hotties on their way here right now...

But she can’t eat them! Especially not Hanley!

“No! You can’t eat them!” I stressed.

“If you insist, I suppose I’ll have to restrain myself. But why are they coming to this mountain?”

“Currently, monsters are being targeted by some unknown organization.”

I explained the situation with the goblins, the kobolds, and Runohark, with Ralf and Will jumping in to clarify when I got off-topic or it was difficult to understand. I was surprised the sirens seemed interested when the topic of Project Shiana came up. They even said they’d be glad for the project to take place on this mountain.

“You don’t mind humans and other monsters wandering around?” I asked.

“We’ve been getting bored here alone, so it would be a welcome change. Besides, adventurers sound incredibly tasty, don’t you think?”

I guess this means the plan has a lot of merit from the sirens’ point of view? If we enact Project Shiana on Mount Reitimo, I guess we’d build the inn and other support businesses in Zigg Village?

The side of the village near the ocean is already crowded with homes, so we’d probably only be able to build on the mountainside of the village, but there’s plenty of open space over there that looks buildable at first glance.

If there is a natural hot spring, as the sirens claimed, we could enlist help from the magical research center and get them to construct a transportation circle and figure out some way to draw on the natural hot spring to create bathing facilities.

As for the mountain itself, it has just the right amount of steep slopes to be challenging but not impregnable, and if we can get the sirens to help, it might be possible to turn the network of caves into a labyrinth.

Once we get back to the village chief's house, I'll discuss it with Ralf and the others.

After promising to return the following day, we bid farewell to the sirens and Shizuku.

Kai acted as our guide back from his cave, and we traversed beautiful underwater scenery again along the way. I looked forward to seeing the cave containing the "hot pool" the sirens had promised to show us the next day.

When we made it back to the village chief's house, the first order of business was dinner. With Hai and the others inside of me, I felt like I was being devoured from the inside out! I needed to get something to eat ASAP.

Because the kidnapped boy was home safely, a banquet was being held tonight to celebrate resolving the monster problem.

And boy, was it a feast!

They'd sliced an entire massive fish into fresh sashimi. There was a rice casserole with white fish, a stewed dish of shellfish and seaweed, lobster grilled with a savory, miso-like glaze, and to top it all off, there was an entire whole-grilled gardola!

Its massive head, larger than a tuna's, was placed on the serving platter as a decoration.

Oops, I'm drooling! Okay! Time to dig in!

I stuffed myself silly. I don't think I'd ever eaten so much in my life. Will stared at me, astonished, but I didn't pay him any mind. If I didn't eat enough for Hai and the others, there wouldn't be enough nutrients left to sustain my body. I

had no interest in stunting my development at this crucial age!

Despite what a ruckus Hai and the others had been kicking up earlier, they were finally satisfied—for the moment at least. Slimes sure were focused on food!

Once my appetite was satiated, it was time for a group meeting.

It probably goes without saying, but the royal guards joined us this time, as they were now involved with Project Shiana. Whose fault was this, you ask? Of course, it was Will's. As if plowing over any objections, he blankly stated that he needed all the help he could get keeping tabs on me. I wasn't surprised by his rude comments anymore, but why were all the royal guards chuckling knowingly?!

In any case, Mount Reitimo checked all the boxes of what we were looking for in a site to enact Project Shiana, so it was decided quickly.

The determining factor was that the locals already avoided the mountain whenever possible, so it would likely be an easy sell. The hunter who'd acted as our guide might be troubled by the development, but we could always hire him as an advisor. He was knowledgeable about the mountain.

And so, we wasted no time bringing the discussion to the village chief.

At the same time, we dispatched a letter to Papa. By "we," I mean Ralf. I had no idea what exactly he'd written, so while we were at it, I wrote my own letter to Mama. Let's chalk it up to a "charming mistake" that the letter's contents were almost entirely about food. I did mention the hot spring bath idea a bit, though.

"If a bunch of monsters come to live on the mountain, won't that put us in danger?" the village chief asked after we explained our plan.

I understood why the village chief was nervous about the idea.

"We will erect a magical barrier around the mountain so no monsters will be able to enter any of the surrounding villages." Ralf dealt directly with the village chief. I doubted he'd find *me* terribly convincing, after all. "The Osphe family will fund Project Shiana, so there will be no financial burden on the village. We also plan to invest heavily in lodging and tourist attractions, so once they are up

and running, I expect a direct benefit to the local economy as well.”

Selling fresh fish to restaurants and dried fish to visitors as souvenirs would undoubtedly invigorate the local economy. We could probably come up with other souvenir goods to produce and sell to visitors, too.

As for tourist attractions, a leisure boat trip might go over well. Sailors were a dime a dozen, and if there was work to be had, I had a feeling plenty would be willing to relocate here.

“I can’t decide something of this magnitude on my own,” the village chief said. “Would you be willing to wait two days for our answer?”

“Certainly.”

The village chief said the following day, he would gather all the residents for a town meeting. There, they would decide as a group whether or not to join Project Shiana.

I’m hoping they’ll agree!



THE following day...

We planned to meet with the sirens while the village chief held the town meeting, but something unexpected occurred before we could leave the village.

“Neema!”

A vice-like grip grabbed me.

Owww, I can feel my ribs bending! I think my bones are going to break! I give up! Yield! Just lemme goooo!

“Karna, let Neema go.”

Ralf’s words snapped my sister back to her senses.

She apologized, face just as serenely beautiful as always.

“Karna!” I was so happy to see her that now I was the one to pounce on her for a hug.

And so the prey becomes the predator! Mwahaha!

"I missed you so much, Neema!" she said.

We'd been so busy with one crisis after another that it didn't feel like we'd been apart for very long, but now that she mentioned it, it had already been over ten days since I left home.

"Karna, don't you have any sweet words for your dear, older brother?" Ralf chided.

"Haha. Of course, I missed you too, Ralf."

"I think I might cry at the difference in your enthusiasm level for Neema and me."

"Isn't it obvious that adorable little Neema will be number one? Besides, you're virtually indestructible, Ralf, so I haven't worried about you at all."

"The same could be said of you, Karna."

"Hehe, don't deny it—Neema is your number one as well, right?" Karna teased.

"You two..." Will was practically tearing his hair out in response to my siblings' usual banter.

Whenever these two get together, they only fan the flames of each other's sister complex. Better give up now, Will.

"Karna, did you travel here all by yourself?" I asked.

"No, Uncle Phillip and his party escorted me."

...Do we have an Uncle Phillip?

"And here I thought you forgot me completely!" an unfamiliar man said, laughing jovially.

"Oh, Phillip. How've you been?" Will spoke up.

"Long time, no see, Your Highness." The man called Phillip paid homage to Will.

Which must mean he's an aristocrat? All of his companions are prostrating themselves, as required of commoners.

“Enough bowing,” Will said. “You should show your face to my father now and again, though.”

“You know I can’t stand the suffocating formal atmosphere at the royal palace...”

“You never change, do you?” Will laughed.

“I’m happy to see you looking well, Uncle Phillip,” Ralf interjected.

“Oh! Is that you, Ralf?! You’ve gotten even more handsome—you really do look just like your mother.”

Umm... My brother, sister, and even Will seem to know this “uncle,” but how long do they plan to leave me out of the loop?

“My, you’ve certainly gotten big, Nefertima!”

Huh? He knows who I am?

“The last time I saw you, you were only this big!”

As he spoke, the man held up his thumb and index finger, indicating a size no larger than a peanut.

I seriously doubt I was ever that small! He certainly likes to dramatize, doesn’t he?!

I ducked behind my brother, peeking out to regard the man warily.

“Phillip, don’t scare such a small child!” a female member of Phillip’s group scolded. The woman’s aura somehow resembled my brother’s, which immediately put me at ease.

“Sorry, sorry. My name’s Phillip; I’m a friend of Dayland’s.”

What’s this?! Papa has friends?!

I didn’t think he got along with anyone except for the other cabinet ministers... Although the cabinet ministers are more like relatives at this point than friends...

“Uncle Phillip’s getting on in his years now, but he was Father’s friend in their school days. He wanted to be an adventurer so much that he abandoned his aristocratic position as the son of Earl Chouxnbelle.”

Oh, I see. It's the special friendship forged among classmates during their years at the academy, huh?

"Hey, hey! Don't make it sound so bad, will you?" Phillip said. "Besides, I'm only two years older than your father!"

"You deserve it for scaring Neema."

And he went so far as to relinquish his status to be an adventurer? Not to mention, the Chouxnbelle family is so highly respected that even I've heard of them!

"You and your companions are adventurers?" I asked Phillip, curious but still timid.

"That's right. We call ourselves Purple Gandal."

Oh! Gandal was the name of the first king's beloved sword.

The Legendary Gandal... If I remember correctly, it was a broadsword forged by a dwarf renowned as the greatest craftsman of his time, and upon the king's death, it dissolved into pieces and dissipated away.

...And they're all purple rank?!

"Uncle Phillip and his party are incredibly strong. They're the closest thing that exists today to legendary black-rank adventurers."

Living legends, here in front of our very eyes! I think I've already accumulated enough super-powerful people to help me on my mission, though...

Huh? Wait a minute... If they're adventurers, our monster friends are in danger as long as they're here!

"Ralf..." I said uneasily.

Ralf picked up on my train of thought from the worried look on my face because he stroked my hair reassuringly before saying, "Will..."

When the proverbial torch was passed to him, Will nodded in unspoken understanding.

It is incredible how much they understand each other without needing to say anything.

“Karnadia Osphe and members of Purple Gandal, the matter we are about to discuss is of the utmost secrecy,” Will said. “I would like you to vow upon your names not to divulge the details of this conversation to anyone before we begin.”

The understanding we were about to discuss something so serious it required a vow upon their names registered as the faces of the adventurers, and my sister’s tensed.

After each had made their vows, Will explained the situation in detail.

They’d heard at least some of the story from Papa because none seemed shocked and instead listened quietly to his explanation. Of course, they couldn’t entirely conceal their surprise when they were told about Shinki and Gratia.

“As such, I request that you take additional vows upon your names not to mistreat any of the monsters bound to Nefertima,” Will insisted.

I wasn’t sure if it was necessary to go that far, but since my primary image of adventurers was vanquishing monsters, it *would* make me feel better to prohibit them from killing any of my friends.

“Neema, you really are beloved by the God of Creation, huh?!” Karna cried, sounding overjoyed for some reason that escaped me.

Beloved? I think you’ve misread the situation a bit, Karna; he just loves messing with me!

“But what a wild story, huh? I had no idea it was even possible to form a contract with monsters,” Phillip commented.

Huh? Really? Aren’t there any monster-tamers in this world, or anything?

“We don’t know how it works,” Will said. “It’s possible it has something to do with the Holy Beast’s Blessing.”

“Holy Beast’s Blessing? You mean she’s bonded with a holy beast as well?!” Phillip asked.

“Yeah, the fire dragon who lives in the mountain range to the north. According to the fire dragon, he can’t do a true-name bond with her right now, so for the time being, it’s just an unofficial bond,” Will explained.

“...Unbelievable.”

Come on, there's a holy beast and his master with us at this moment! Stop making it sound like I'm something special and weird, will you!

Well, whatever.

More importantly, I want to move on and head over to the cave!

“Karna, come with us to the cave!” I said. “It’s sparkly and beautiful!”

“Okay. I want to see the baby slimes, too!” Karna exclaimed.

“I found some treasure inside the cave!” I bragged, showing her the shiny stones I’d collected inside the cave.

“Wow!” Karna’s eyes sparkled with sudden interest. “Neema, could I hold one of those stones, please?”

“Sure.”

Karna examined the stone closely, then popped it into some kind of magical item. “Maybe it’s a matter of quality? The flow of magic is...” She trailed off, lost in her own little world.

“Hey, Karna! Come back to the real world now, please!”

“I’m sorry, it’s just... If this is what I think it is, it may be possible to make a magical item previously believed to be impossible to construct. Could you send this to Mother immediately?”

I didn’t get it, but it seemed these stones would come in handy to Mama, so I asked the knights to use their magic circle tapestry to send her all the stones I’d collected.

These small teleportation circles sure are convenient! I'm curious to see what Mama will make.

In any case, let's return to the topic at hand, shall we? Time to go!

Today, Will forced me to ride on Lars’ back from the very start.

I feel like a piece of luggage like this... I can't complain too much, though—this is easier than walking, that's for sure!

Karna seemed curious about Shinki because she kept asking questions about him: what species he was, where he lived, and what abilities he possessed, among other things.

Shinki seemed uninterested in entertaining her barrage of questions, so I answered for him. Of course, I kept the bit about his ability to use elemental power to myself for now.

Time flew by while we were chatting, and almost before I knew it, we'd arrived at the mouth of the cave. It didn't hurt that the knights and royal guards had grown accustomed to the route over the many trips back and forth the day before.

As could be expected of such a high-ranked party of adventurers, Uncle Phillip and his group had no trouble.

Karna almost slipped as we passed through the ice zone, but Shinki quickly reached out to steady her, and she avoided falling. Shinki's considerate nature made me seriously question at times whether he was really a *goblin*.

As we were stumbling through the ice zone, Gratia suddenly moved.

"What is it, Gratia?"

In response, Gratia clicked his fangs together. He was hungry. Without missing a beat, he leapt from my shoulder over to a pillar of ice nearby. Perhaps because his natural habitat was cold, Gratia moved easily across the ice. I watched to see what he would do and was surprised that he disappeared for a moment.

Just as I was about to panic, Gratia reappeared, carrying something!

"Where did you get that?!" I cried.

Clutched in Gratia's fangs was something that looked like a squashed snake. Actually, it most closely resembled a light-blue version of the mythical flat-snake known as a *tsuchinoko* in Japanese folklore. It was a different species from the blue lizards we saw yesterday. This creature was a little larger than Gratia, but based on the fact that it didn't move, I assumed it was already dead.

Don't tell me he's planning to eat that thing?

All four sets of Gratia's eyes shone like a predator that had captured its prey.

Oh yeah, he's definitely going to eat it.

I couldn't help but sympathize with the *tsuchinoko* when confronted so unexpectedly with a real-life case of eat-or-be-eaten. From now on, I'd feed Gratia more at mealtimes.

"In any case, Gratia! You are forbidden from eating that poor creature on top of my head! Go eat on Shinki's shoulder."

I picked up Gratia, who was dragging his catch laboriously toward me, and transferred them both onto Shinki's shoulder.

Shinki and Gratia stared at one another until Shinki gave in and averted his gaze first.

Unable to resist my morbid curiosity, I cautiously watched Gratia eat his meal, but this entire incident reminded me that he was, after all, a monster.

If he were an Earth spider, he would eat through a process called "external digestion," which involved secreting digestive liquid onto the food and consuming it after it became soft. But Gratia was not an Earth spider. It was faint, but I could hear the unmistakable sound of crunching and tearing.

He dug in without a preamble. I hoped Shinki's shoulder wasn't getting dirty in the process.

...Come to think of it, I haven't seen any spiders in this world that aren't monsters. I'll have to look into it when we get home.

At some point, while I was distracted by Gratia's meal, we arrived in the sirens' cave.

"You're finally here. Oh, and you've brought even more fine men with you!"

It appeared that a target had been painted on Uncle Phillip.

"I never dreamed I would be able to meet a siren..." he said.

Don't let the attention go to your head, Uncle Phillip, or you'll get eaten!

"Please show us the place with the hot water today!" I hurried to interrupt.

Yes, let's focus on that—the long-awaited tour of the hot spring!

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that approximately 30 percent of Project Shiana's success depends on the hot spring baths!

We were a massive group at this point, but like yesterday, we cast spells to allow us to breathe underwater and followed the sirens into the water.

Since we were here, we might as well take Kai along with us. On that note, we made a quick detour to the cave where Kai and the others now lived.

Karna and the adventurers raised their voices in cries of wonder and delight upon viewing the ephemerally beautiful cave for the first time. But before long, Karna's attention turned to the adorable baby slimes whom she pounced on immediately.

"They're so adorable!" she squealed.

Right?!

The colorful baby slimes were partially transparent. When light was cast on them, it looked incredibly beautiful! And all of them were significantly smaller than Haku, tiny enough to fit in the palm of your hand.

"...Feed me..." Kai whispered, coming up and grabbing me unexpectedly from behind.

Karna's attitude changed instantly.

"Neema's cute, so I understand wanting to hug her, but I won't let you do anything untoward to such a sweet little child!"

Little fires sprang to life all around my enraged older sister.

Oh, crap! This is about to be verrrry bad!

"Kai, back off a minute, will you?" I warned.

"...I don't wanna," he refused.

I don't care if you don't want to—you're about to be burnt to a crisp, so just shut up and do it!

"I'll feed you as much as you want later, okay?" I told him.

"...Fine."

Kai finally released me, but Karna's anger showed no sign of abetting.

Thankfully, the baby slimes came to the rescue, distracting Karna for me. They gathered around her, letting out adorably strange little cries of "*Pu-myooo!*" and "*Ukyuu!*"

The fact that only the red, yellow, and orange slimes had approached led me to believe they were reacting to Karna's fire magic.

"What's this? These little guys can even eat magic, eh?" Karna observed.

Huh? They can eat magic? This is the first I've heard of such a thing...

"Karna, did you say the baby slimes are eating your magic?" I asked.

"That's right. I'd already pulled magic into the spell, ready to release it, but these little guys ate it."

I was not expecting that! That just adds to the mysteriousness of slimes...

To my knowledge, neither Shizuku nor Haku has ever eaten magic before.

Karna seemed amused by the sight of the baby slimes consuming her magic because she repeatedly conjured flames one after another for them to eat.



The other baby slimes cried out as if jealous of the feast their siblings were enjoying. One of them let out a despairing sound that sounded like a long, drawn-out “Noooo!” but I couldn’t pinpoint which of them it was.

Since there didn’t seem to be much other option, I asked Ralf and one of the knights, an Earth magic user, to feed the other slimes.

Once that was done, we set off, hoping to make up for the time lost to this unexpected delay.

I held Kai’s hand as we walked leisurely through the water, but he was wearing a dazed expression that I could only assume meant he was eating my desire to pet fluffy animals. I had promised to feed him, so I didn’t mind, but I got the feeling that I’d need to teach him some restraint.

Are we almost to the hot spring area? The color of the rocks around us has changed.

The rock making up the walls was yellow and red and spotted with black here and there. The water didn’t feel any warmer to me, but I suspected that the magic that allowed us to breathe underwater also prevented us from feeling the temperature of the water.

Swirls of haziness were in the water around us, maybe caused by differences in the water temperature, that lent an air of mystery to the cavern.

Closer to the water’s surface, a green light penetrated down from somewhere above, illuminating the yellow and red stones and creating a gentle gradation effect.

Clamping down on my rising excitement, I poked my head above the water’s surface...

The scene that awaited me was like the ephemeral Peach Blossom Spring from Yuanming Tao’s classic fable of the same name.

Between the wafting clouds of steam, a carpet of faintly glowing moss covered the ground, and tiny, orange-cast lights studded the ceiling. The lights looked like stars or perhaps a holiday light display.

“Woowoow!”

I stared agape in shock and wonder at the scene before me, exceeding even my wildest dreams, and drank in the image of the sparkling ceiling far above.

Ralf urged me out of the water, then removed the spell he'd cast earlier.

Based on the steam rising off the water's surface, I'm assuming it's hot!

I cautiously dipped my hand in and found it pleasantly warm.

Hm, maybe I'll try dipping my feet in.

I tucked the hem of my skirt into my waistband, removed my shoes, and stuck my feet into the water.

"Neema! That's incredibly unladylike!" Ralf scolded me.

"You try it too, Ralf! It feels so nice!" I kicked my feet happily, splashing water all over.

"The water here is warm!" the siren leader goaded.

While everyone else seemed undecided, Karna sat beside me and put her feet in the water.

"Oh, wow. It really does feel nice!"

Side by side, both of us sisters played in the water, splashing with our feet.

Smiling wryly in defeat, Ralf sat on my other side and put his feet into the water.

"This *is* kind of relaxing."

After Ralf, Will sat beside us. He was shortly followed by Healran, Danart, and the unit leader.

In the end, the entire group was sitting on the edge of the pool with our feet in the water, probably making for an amusing sight.

"Bathing in a pool this large *would* be nice..." Will remarked.

So you say, but the bath at the royal palace is freaking massive! It's bigger than any public bath I've ever seen and even has a sauna attached!

I'd used the bathing facilities at the royal palace when spending the night there. It was like a spa, and I'm sure it goes without saying, but obviously, I

played there to my heart's content!

"The scenery is also astoundingly beautiful, almost like some kind of fantastical illusion."

I'd like to find a way to draw from this natural hot spring and use it to create an outdoor bath. If possible, I'd like to build it somewhere with a nice view of the ocean!

Speaking of natural hot springs, I wonder if this water has any healing properties? The effects should depend on the minerals present in the water, right? I wonder what kind of minerals are in this water...

I experimentally scooped up a handful of the hot spring water and took a sip.

It tasted vaguely like tap water. It didn't smell sulfuric or taste salty, just pure, hot water.

Let's have Koku try analyzing it.

"The Goddess's Healing" and "The Goddess's Salvation"...

These were present in Ralf's healing magic as well. If I remember correctly, "Healing" worked on minor external injuries, and "Salvation" worked on low-level illnesses? In any case, this meant the water had healing properties.

"Corkos," "Gildan," and "Pevan."

The sole female member of Purple Gandal, Eligeena, came to the rescue, explaining each ingredient. Corkos and gildan were medical herbs effective for healing wounds. To put it in gaming terms, they were like the ingredients for formulating a healing potion.

As for pevan, those were insects. Not snake-like *mamushi*, but actual bugs. Pevan were the source of the tiny, orange-hued lights on the ceiling of this cave.

I'd heard that pevan were used to treat a variety of illnesses and that a certain medicine that was made by drying and powdering the bodies of about ten pevan could cure any kind of illness. Pevan were coveted by adventurers because they fetched a high price when sold to healers in regions where they were scarce.

The dead bodies of these insects had fallen into the hot spring, and their

essence had been naturally extracted into the water.

It would be unpleasant to bathe in a pool with dead bugs floating in the water... I wonder if using cleansing magic on the water would remove the extracted essence as well... We'll have to experiment with that later.

It was the final element present in the water that was the real problem, though.

Tears of the God of Creation...

God's tears? You have got to be kidding me. I can't picture that guy being capable of shedding a single tear! And it's anyone's guess what effect such an ingredient might have...

Will hypothesized it was a type of miracle, but I took that to mean he didn't know, same as the rest of us.

Even though there's that one suspicious ingredient in the water, it's probably safe to declare that this water has healing properties and use it to create a hot spring bathhouse, right?

Yeah, I'm sure it'll be fine!

6 - Preparations Are Coming Along Nicely!

WE were all relaxing with our feet in the hot water and tossing back-and-forth ideas about our future plans. Even I was impressed by how laid-back this hot spring business meeting was. But I had no complaints—the hot water felt so nice that it was hard to remain uptight and formal.

Even Gratia made an appearance, creating a little raft for himself out of spider silk to ride on in the water, just like he always did in the bath. The sirens cracked up when they saw this and played with Gratia by creating little waves in the water. For his part, Gratia skillfully surfed his little raft over the waves. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves, so I left them to it.

“Do you think the goblins could use this place too?” I asked the sirens, and they happily agreed. Although they had no problem with the goblins bathing here, the real problem was how they’d get here from outside the cave.

“I could’ve sworn there was a hole around here somewhere...” the siren leader said.

But despite her apparent conviction, no hole was to be found anywhere.

“Oops, sorry! I closed that up ages ago,” another siren sheepishly confessed.

“What?! Why?” the siren leader demanded, exasperated.

“The wind was so loud! What else was I going to do?!”

This siren had a childlike, coy air about her, and her way of speaking was just a touch bratty-sounding in an endearing way.

She’s so stinkin’ cute!

“If I remember correctly, it was behind that big rock over there.” In the direction the siren had indicated, there was a sizeable boulder. “It should lead to a small cave at the peak of the mountain.”

And so I asked one of the knights who could use earth magic to lend a hand.

Once he moved the boulder, it revealed a hole just barely large enough for one person at a time to pass through.

An eerie, echoing roar came from inside the tunnel.

This must be what the siren was talking about. It certainly is noisy.

The wind beating against the mountain echoed within the cave like the roar of a dragon. It was unbearably loud, so I asked Lars to stop the noise.

I was impressed that a single “Growl!” from Lars was all it took to quiet the wind.

Examining the interior of the tunnel revealed a gentle upward slope.

A sloped path like this would be dangerous when descending from the mountaintop, so I wanted to have stairs put in. Preferably a staircase with even, wide steps that were not too tall. This way, even the smallest visitors wouldn't need to worry about tripping and falling.

Young kobolds walking on all fours would have a difficult time with stairs if the steps were too tall. I wanted to see them roly-polling down the staircase firsthand at all costs. If they were to misstep and take a tumble, that would be sad but probably also adorable to witness.

I asked all the knights and royal guards who could use earth magic to help out this time. Working together, they completed the staircase in about an hour.

According to the earth magic users, it would take less than one color to reach the summit from this underground bathing pool. In Earth time, one color was equivalent to approximately thirty minutes. In other words, it referred to one unit of the smallest increment used to tell time—the six celebratory colors.

Thirty minutes of straight walking represented a considerable distance, but only kobolds would use this path, so I figured it would be fine. And even if someone was injured, Hanley would be able to patch them up. In other words, accessibility wouldn't be a problem.

We discovered one more thing.

This hot spring also had properties that replenished depleted magic.

When the knights and royal guards, exhausted from building the stairs,

returned to soaking their feet in the warm water, they reported feeling their magic slowly replenish itself. That meant that this hot spring would provide yet another benefit to the members of the kobold Healer Family and the magic-using Philosopher Family.

Time for another hot spring business meeting while soaking our feet!

The topic of discussion this time was the assignment of personnel. However, the Osphe family didn't have the authority to issue orders to either the leader of the royal knighthood or the royal guards assigned to guard Will.

"We won't be able to use them until Project Shiana comes together," Will said.

"At this stage of development, we can probably assign members of the royal knighthood to keep watch to make sure that the monsters don't flee and conduct public safety patrols, though," Ralf suggested.

"As for the royal guards, all I can do is appoint these same men to my personal security whenever I'm working on this project," Will mentioned.

"Bringing the water from this natural hot spring down to the base of the mountain will require cooperation from the Magical Research Center, and we'll need to contact the Carpenters' Guild to build the bathing facilities."

Opinions were jumping back and forth between Ralf and Will like popcorn, and I felt left out!

"In short, we won't be able to gather people immediately," Ralf concluded.

"I'm afraid not," Will agreed.

"That won't be a problem," Karna interjected confidently. "Mother is already contacting each of the guilds. I'm certain she'll have the most skilled tradesmen and women on standby as we speak."

Whoa, even Mama is working on this project?! It's really become a joint effort of the entire Osphe family!

"In that case, we've got nothing to worry about," Will said.

"Then the next question is who to leave in Zigg Village... I don't see us having any choice but to ask Healran," Ralf said.

In the first place, Healran had expressed his desire to remain at the site where Project Shiana would be carried out. However, I was uneasy. Healran was just too mysterious!

“Of course. It’s best to have someone here who can immediately gather the information we require,” Healran agreed.

“But it will be dangerous,” I protested. “Once the goblins and kobolds gather here, it’s sure to draw our enemy’s attention...”

“Thank you for your concern, but despite my appearance, I do have a reasonable degree of fighting ability.”

Are you sure about that? I probably shouldn’t say this, but Healran looks like the dictionary definition of a squishy magic user. And considering that he’s previously held administrative jobs, it’s hard to imagine him fighting.

“As His Highness is likely already aware, before working for the audit department, I was a member of the espionage department,” Healran divulged.

Say whaaat?!

The espionage department was an elite division of the royal knighthood that handled tasks such as gathering intelligence, manipulating the flow of information, infiltration, special missions, and, in some cases, even allegedly carrying out assassinations.

It wouldn’t be an overstatement to refer to them as the department that handled the darkest dealings in the kingdom.

And Will knew this the whole time?!

“Yeah, well... I may have done a little digging,” Will admitted.

“It’s important for the shadows assigned to Your Highness to know, so I don’t mind.”

By “shadows,” I assume he’s referring to the king’s private soldiers? I suppose it makes sense, though. There’s no way they’d let someone they know nothing about anywhere near their charge.

“But why did you transfer from the espionage department to the audit department?” I asked.

“...My younger brother passed away, and I guess you could say I was distracted. That made me a liability in the espionage department.”

Oh crap, now I’ve really stepped on a landmine!

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

I stepped in it this time, with both feet!

“There’s no need for you to apologize, Lady Neema. The department leader recommended me for a transfer to the audit department, and thanks to that, I eventually met you all, so I don’t regret it.”

“The way I hear it, he was one of the espionage department’s best operatives, so there should be no issue with leaving him here,” Will vouched.

“Just to be safe, would you like us to stay as well?” Uncle Phillip proposed.

That would be a huge help. I can’t help worrying about what might happen if something went wrong and Healran was all alone.

“You really don’t mind?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Uncle Phillip said. “Karna’s already learned the basics. Now, all she needs to do is gain practice through experience, and when she runs into trouble, come back for further instruction. Besides, so many caves are in this mountain that I’m sure there’s plenty of adventuring to be done right here!”

“And there are even valuable magical stones here, so it’ll be fun searching for them!”

Starting with Eligeena, one by one, the other members of Purple Gandal were all struck by a fever of excitement for cave exploration. Their eyes glittered like eager little children.

But what was Karna learning from Uncle Phillip and the others? The basics of adventuring? If so, I’m a little jealous...

In any case, Healran and Purple Gandal would remain in the village.

Now, all that remained was for the kobolds to arrive and see if the citizens of Zigg Village would approve Project Shiana.

We’ve enjoyed the hot spring to our heart’s content, so now it’s time to head

back to the village! The baby slimes are raising a ruckus about being hungry, so I'd better feed them sooner rather than later!



ONCE we reached the village, an enticing scent wafted out of the house, where dinner was already being prepared. I identified the scent of grilled fish and steamed rice with mixed grains. The delicious smells caused my stomach to groan loudly.

As for Purple Gandal, they elected to camp out on the mountain to avoid burdening the village leader and his wife any further.

I wish we could camp out, too! That sounds fun! Once we've resolved all this, I want to have a barbecue with everyone before we return to the royal city!

With that decided, I followed the others into the village chief's house to find yet another impressive spread of delicious food awaiting us. Despite the lack of warning that the number of guests had suddenly increased, the village chief's wife welcomed Karna with a kind smile.

It's kind of late for me to realize this, but I'm sorry for what a large group you're having to feed every night! Please bill the Osphe family for the costs incurred!

Once I'd stuffed myself silly to appease the ravenous baby slimes inside of me, the village chief took on a serious expression and told us the results of today's town meeting.

"Zigg Village has decided to cooperate with Project Shiana."

Intense relief washed over me.

"However, we have one request."

"What is it?" Ralf asked.

"Some simply wish to continue living as they always have. For this reason, we ask that you leave the area where the villagers are living as-is."

Right, that makes sense. Aside from the monster problem, this has always been a simple, peaceful village. I understand not wanting to disturb the atmosphere.

“That’s absolutely fine. We plan to build all of our facilities at the base of the mountain, so we’ll prohibit development in the current residential areas and place limitations on migration as well,” Ralf promised.

As long as it’s within commuting distance, we can build a residential area for the new workers elsewhere. I want to do whatever we can to honor the villagers’ wishes out of gratitude for their agreeing to cooperate with us.

“If any other issues arise, please inform us without hesitation,” Ralf insisted.

“Thank you very much. We look forward to working with you,” the village chief said sincerely, bowing his head.

Reflexively, I bowed my head in return, but Will cuffed me on the back of my head.

Oh, that’s right. It’s inappropriate for nobles to bow their heads to commoners.

When aristocrats wanted to express gratitude to commoners, they should do so with their actions, not gestures.

Although I understood this was so that the aristocracy would not lose face among the commoners, I still couldn’t completely shake the habits engrained in me from when I was Japanese. All the more so because I was the one asking a favor of the villagers.

I may not be able to bow my head, but I’ll make up for that by granting the villagers’ wishes and guaranteeing they can maintain their current lifestyle. All right, I’m going to do my best for the sake of these very special villagers who’ve said they’re willing to accept the monsters!

With this, the only thing left to do is wait for the kobolds to arrive.

...But what about the goblins? I bet those little idiots won’t make it here in one piece if we simply tell them where to go.

“Shinki, will you fetch the goblins and lead them here?” I asked.

“...I’d rather not leave your side if possible, Miss.”

If I went, Ralf and all the knights would have to come, as well.

We could teleport from Fauxbe to Arsentia, then travel to the Needle Frost Forest by carriage. All in all, it would take about a full day of travel. But if we then had to walk all the way back to Zigg Village, it would take quite a few days.

If I were being honest, I didn't think I could keep up with such a grueling journey. It did sound fun, but in terms of my physical endurance, I'd probably just be a hindrance.

"A long journey on foot is too much for Neema. And once the kobolds arrive, I want to bring her home to the royal city."

As expected, Ralf rejected the idea.

I can't disagree with his logic, unfortunately.

"The royal city is very safe, so you don't need to worry about me when I'm there, Shinki," I reassured him.

"Hmm... In that case, I suppose it'll be fine as long as I have some of the nanos watch over you," Shinki conceded.

So, in addition to Sol's fire spirits and Lars' wind spirits, Shinki's also going to assign some additional elemental spirits to protect me? I'm going to be pretty dang powerful!

Well, since it's not my power, I can't exactly brag about it, though.

In any case, it was decided that Shinki would retrieve the goblins and lead them here.

According to Shinki, it would only take him three or four days to reach the Needle Frost Forest. Once he rounded up the goblins and herded them all here, he speculated that the trip would take around ten days.

Based on this, we decided to return to the royal city for the time being and come back to Zigg Village once the goblins arrived.

Without wasting another moment, Shinki departed immediately. He planned to hunt for his food along the way as needed.

Shinki seems more than capable of looking after himself, and the elemental spirits will help him if he needs it, so I'm sure he'll be fine.

That night, I got to share a bed with Karna. At some point, while I was recounting everything that had happened while we'd been apart, I lost the battle with sleepiness. I could sense Seigo and Rikusei approaching, so I suspected the kobolds might arrive as soon as the following day.

I slept deeply that night, cocooned in Karna's pleasant floral scent.



“...**NEEMA**, wake up. Neema!”

Ughh... Let me sleep for thirty more minutes...

“Everyone's eating breakfast already; if you don't hurry, there won't be anything left.”

Oh, heck no!

Karna's warning rocketed me straight into complete consciousness.

Food was a deadly serious matter to me now—I couldn't afford to miss a single meal!

“Hehe, good morning, sleepy head!”

Under the force of my sister's “beautiful face attack,” I hurried to make myself presentable. I wanted to get to breakfast as quickly as possible, so I allowed Karna and the maid who'd accompanied her, a young woman named Shell, to attempt to tame my hair.

“I've been thinking this hair accessory would look cute on Neema,” Karna discussed with Shell.

“Since it's a rare opportunity, why don't I braid it into her hair?” Shell suggested.

“Okay! Please do.”

The two were speaking animatedly about me while ignoring me completely.

What about my breakfast?!

They finally arranged my hair, and we headed out to join the others for breakfast.

The meal was already underway once we entered the living room, and I hurried to my seat.

“Good morning, Neema. That hair accessory looks very cute on you,” Ralf said.

“Good morning. Karna gave it to me!”

My older sister had an impeccable fashion sense. She’d chosen a hair accessory with a deep green flower and delicate, pure white lace that suited my chestnut hair nicely. The braiding was so intricate that I couldn’t quite follow the pattern, but the weave of the braid matched the lace in the hair accessory, making for a pretty effect altogether.

I don’t think it even has to be said that I was highly impressed with the results when I first looked in the mirror when they’d finished arranging my hair.

“I see... In that case, I’ll have to give you a present too when we get back to the royal city. I think something rabbit-themed to match your bunny backpack might do nicely.”

Karna made an “Oh no!” face in response to Ralf’s words.

...What are these siblings posturing and squabbling over now?!

Once we finished eating our fill at breakfast, there wasn’t much left to do.

The kobolds wouldn’t arrive until later in the day.

Oh, that’s right! Let’s go to the beach!

Dragging my brother and the others along, I hurried down to the beautiful sandy beach.

The sand was finely ground and white, and the waves were gentle. A short distance away, a rock jetty thrust out into the ocean. All in all, it was an excellent place to play. No wonder the village chief had recommended this spot.

I removed my shoes and waded out into the waves.

The waves crashed against my calves, then pulled back out to sea, carrying grains of sand away. My feet sank into the sand underfoot, tickling my toes.

There was something nostalgic and wonderful about this ticklish sensation.

While I played in the waves, Nox brought something over to me. Clutched firmly in his talons was a large fish, nearly twice the size of his body. It was quite the catch.

He dropped the fish in front of me and landed on my shoulder. Nox let out a trilling cry and rubbed his head against mine as if begging for praise.

“Wow, good job, Nox!”

The fish dropping out of the sky into the shallow water in front of me had splashed water all over the front of my dress, but it was inconsequential in comparison to Nox’s cuteness.

Just as I was contemplating what to do with the fish, a large bird flew toward us, screeching obnoxiously, “Squawk!”

It’s that ban-something-or-other that stole the dried fish from the fishwives a few days ago! I don’t remember its proper name anymore, though.

The bird tilted his distended, shoebill-like head and stared straight at the fish at my feet.

Maybe he’s hungry?

“Nox, would it be okay if I gave this fish to that bird over there?” I asked.

“Peep!” Nox responded, seemingly agreeing.

I picked up the fish and slowly began moving toward the ban-something-or-other.

“Hey, are you hungry?” I asked.

“Squawk!”

That sounds like a yes to me!

I held the fish out with both hands, raising it up to a level that would be easy for the ban-something-or-other to eat.

Then the ban-something-or-other...

Yeesh, that’s a mouthful! Let’s just go with “ban”!

The ban opened his massive beak.

“Say ‘ah’!”

I slid the fish head-first into the ban’s mouth.

The ban tilted his huge head back and swallowed the entire fish whole. I supposed that was just how birds ate, but it seemed a shame that they probably didn’t get to enjoy the flavor when eating things like that.

“There you go, good boy!”

I patted the ban’s head.

Among all the birds I’d petted up to this point, this one was the least soft by far.

Since he was a water bird, I surmised that his outer feathers were probably water-resistant and his inner feathers were probably heat-retaining. I trailed my hands from the ban’s head to his neck. Then, as I moved down to stroke the point where his wing attached to his body, the ban shied away from me.

“Hm? Does that hurt?”

I examined the ban’s right wing closely and found he was missing several tertial feathers. If I remember correctly, there were several types of tertial feathers, but on this bird, the tertial feathers closest to his torso were ragged, like the smile of someone missing several teeth.

Now I get it. Of course. He can’t fly long distances like this.

The function of tertial feathers was primarily to provide propulsion and lift. Given time, they should grow back naturally, but I’d heard that regrowing feathers took a lot of energy.

It was dubious whether this bird would be able to regrow his feathers when he clearly wasn’t getting enough to eat. However, the fact that he was in pain indicated that there was also damage to either the bone or the muscle.

Ralf could heal those with his healing magic, but what about the tertial feathers?

“Why don’t I have my brother heal the place where you’re hurt?” I suggested.

“Squawk!”

Eep. As soon as I mentioned my brother, his guard went up.

“It’s okay. I’ll stay with you the whole time, all right?”

After much encouragement, the ban finally relented.

I called Ralf over and explained to him about the ban’s injuries.

“Hmm... I’ve never tried healing a bird before,” he said. “I’m not confident I’ll be able to regrow his feathers with magic...”

I figured as much.

Ralf had been roped into acting as a vet on more than one occasion recently but never actually trained to heal anything but humans. I decided to have him give it a go, and I would pray to the Goddess for the ban’s feathers to grow back while Ralf was casting his healing magic.

At full health, I didn’t doubt that this bird would be the proud owner of a fine set of feathers, after all! Back on Earth, goose and duck feathers were so infamously soft and fluffy that the finest blankets were stuffed with them. So a ban like this one, which was even larger than a goose, must have an incredible set of downy inner feathers!

Goddess! If you love animals, please return this little guy to his full, fluffy glory, please!

“Squawk!”

And just like that, the spell was complete.

I could see a mischievous light had returned to the ban’s eyes. He seemed well aware that Ralf was responsible for his healing because the ban was affectionately rubbing his head against Ralf’s leg.

A huge bird cuddling up to him disturbed Ralf a little, but I was jealous! Getting close to large animals was awesome.

But what about his tertial feathers?

I reached out and slowly stretched out the ban’s wing to reveal a splendid, full set of tertial feathers.

Ralf really is incredible! How about the other areas?

I especially wanted to try touching the ban's downy inner feathers. I touched the area over the ban's chest and found it exceptionally fluffy.

Now, this is what I'm talking about!

My hand sunk right into the dense inner feathers. I could feel the warmth of the ban's body and a softness like freshly fallen snow.

The feathers on the underside of his wings and the underlayer on his body were slick and supple, with wispy fluff at the base of the feathers.

This must be a layer of down at the base of the feathers?

It wasn't as fluffy as the stuffing inside of down pillows but had the slightest stiffness that tickled my fingertips.

I bet this would make the most incredible feather mattress... Not that I'd do that to this poor little guy, though!

But I still hadn't met a bird that could beat the night owl in terms of softness. The sensation of petting a night owl's feathers was other-worldly.

Does any animal exist that could compete with that? The only possibility I can imagine is some kind of bird-type holy beast.

"Now you'll be able to return to your flock!" I exclaimed.

It was pretty late in the season, but if he set out on his migration route now, he'd still probably be able to catch up to his flock.

"Squawk, squawk!"

The ban vehemently opposed my suggestion.

Uh-oh, I have a bad feeling about this...

"You don't want to migrate?"

"Squawk!"

"He probably wants to stay with you, Neema," Ralf guessed, and the ban rubbed his head against me in agreement.

"I think he's a little big to follow me around..." I said.

"He seems to have taken to you, though," Karna said. "What about bringing

him to live at our house? There's a large pond in the garden; he could live there."

As Karna said, several ponds of various sizes were at our house. Migratory birds often stopped there along their journey. I doubted it would be a problem for one extra bird to join the fray. But after being so thoroughly scolded by Papa for interfering in the ways of nature, I couldn't help worrying I'd get in trouble for bringing this guy home.

"But Father said I shouldn't bring animals home..." I explained what Papa had said when I asked to keep the rabbit as a pet.

"I understand what Father was trying to say, but I think he said that because that rabbit was meant to live in that forest," Ralf said.

"Yeah! We don't know if this bird will even be able to find his flock, and it would be dangerous for him to attempt the migration all by himself," Karna added.

I see... It's true that this isn't the ban's natural habitat, and there's a good reason why migratory birds always travel as a flock.

So we need to make a convincing argument that it would be more dangerous for the ban if we left him to his own devices!

"Besides, once we've already brought him home, it'll be too late to say no at that point, right?" Karna was wearing a rare, evil smile. I couldn't help being the tiniest bit jealous that even this expression looked captivating on a beauty like her.

"Karna..." Ralf chided.

Before anything, we had to ask the bird what he wanted to do.

"Do you want to come with us?"

"*Squawk!*" the ban replied enthusiastically.

In the end, Ralf sent Papa a letter and got permission to bring the ban home with us. When I asked how he convinced Papa, he laughed and avoided the topic by saying he had his ways.

And what ways would those be?!

In any case, the ban would come home with us.

I had a feeling that a certain bird-crazy gardener at our house would be happy to look after him. I'd have to make sure he didn't completely steal my position as his owner!

7 - Fluffies Really are the Best!

“**LADY** Neema!”

A young girl ran at me at an impressive speed, her tails wagging wildly around her. It could hardly even be called running—she swept in with the speed and force of a hurricane. However, just as a car couldn’t stop instantaneously, her speed was so great that it propelled her right past me.

Or so I thought until the girl landed right on top of me with a reverberating **THUMP!**

“Agh...”

Of course, there was no way I could catch someone so much larger than myself... Luckily, just as I was about to be smushed to the ground, Lars came up behind me to help support both our weights.

Sandwiched between a soft, warm body and Lars’ fluffiness, I had a hard time dredging up any complaints!

“Spica, calm down!”

Spica—the girl who’d landed on top of me—hugged me with enough force to rival even my older sister.

Pleeeease, calm down! My intestines will pop out of my mouth if you keep squeezing so hard!

Several seconds behind Spica, Gosei and Rikusei pounced on me as well.

You guys!!

“Spica, Gosei, Rikusei! *Sit!!*”

In response to my command, Gosei and Rikusei sat back on their haunches obediently. For some reason, Spica sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, like Japanese elementary school students in gym class.

“In any case! I’m glad you made it safely. Where is Sicily?”

Just as I asked, the rest of the kobolds came into sight.

They looked even more haggard than when I’d last seen them. Before anything, I needed to lead them to a place where they could relax so we could talk.

Looks like the time has come for the hot spring cave to prove useful!

I had them push on just a little further to the mountain’s peak, then descend into the cave via the stairs we’d created. I couldn’t keep up on my short little legs, so I hitched a ride on Lars’ back.

I need to build up some endurance. When we get home, I’ll have to increase my dance practices or undertake a regimen of special training that involves playing tag with Dee!

When we finally arrived at the hot spring, I expected the kobolds would be eager to soak in the hot, invigorating water, but more than a few outright refused to get in.

I guess no matter the world, dogs are always afraid of taking a bath!

That said, Spica, Gosei, and Rikusei were among the group that jumped right in without hesitation. To my surprise, Gosei and Rikusei were observing proper manners and enjoying the hot spring quietly.

I could picture the uproar it would cause if Spica went splashing around in the hot spring butt-naked, so I preemptively made her wear a towel and ordered her to stay still and behave herself.

Spica puffed up her cheeks in indignation at being forbidden to swim, but as it was a direct order, she had no choice but to comply. The next thing I knew, she started to sink under the water’s surface since she was already so far out that her feet couldn’t touch the bottom.

The knights and royal guards accompanying us jumped in to rescue her, and the earth magic users set to work rearranging the ground to make a larger, shallower area where everyone’s feet could reach the bottom.

It quickly became apparent that without some adjustments to make it so the

kobolds' feet could reach the bottom, they'd quickly exhaust themselves by treading water and drown.

In the end, the earth magic users leveled out the bottom of the pool into a series of wide, stepped platforms that would allow bathers to stretch out their legs comfortably.

Previously, we'd only stuck our feet in the water, so I'd failed to realize it was such a deep-bottomed pool. Now that the issue of depth was resolved and drowning was no longer a concern, Sicily and the family leaders entered the water.

I was anticipating a sexy scene from Sicily, but unfortunately, I was doomed to disappointment, as her fur covered all of the important areas. That made sense; if high kobolds and werewolves had evolved to walk on two legs, their fur would naturally develop to protect their exposed stomachs.

The next to enter the hot spring were the children. Seeing Gosei and Rikusei floating happily in the warm water must've stoked their curiosity.

Water splashed up in all directions as the young kobolds dove in.

It's always so cute to see dogs playing joyously in the water!

As I was fondly observing the young kobolds, I noticed a change in Gova, the leader of the Strength Family.

"Gova, your ear!"

These folded ears were the pride and joy of a fearless, brave Rottweiler. Yet, unbelievably, half of Gova's left ear was missing.

Those ears were the only thing even slightly softening Gova's terrifying appearance!

I'd hoped to have the elemental spirits protect the kobolds on their journey here, but they'd said it was impossible.

I guess it's beyond even the elemental spirits' power to protect such a large group? Oh man, I should've at least had some magical items sent from home to lend to the kobolds to help them protect themselves...

"After we parted ways with you, we were attacked twice," he said.

The men in our group perked up.

Probably because, even though we've heard stories from Shinki and Sicily, we've yet to encounter any agents of Runohark personally. They were eager for any information we could glean about them.

"They appeared the moment we headed south as if they'd been watching and waiting for this exact thing. Fortunately, no one was killed, but some were injured severely enough that they can no longer fight."

Sicily was wearing a pained expression.

The fight had been almost as tough as the one against Red Hlaada.

"Gova, you and the other fighters protected the rest of the pack. Thank you for that." I was just relieved to hear that no one else had died. "It must've hurt, right?"

I got Gova to crouch down so I could stroke the stub of his shorn-in-half ear. Discouragingly, even his fur seemed to have lost some of its luster.

"Hanley treated me right away, so it wasn't too bad," he said.

Oh, that's right! I haven't seen Hanley yet! I frantically searched the crowd, only to find him stretched out languidly in the hot spring, lounging in the hot water.

He seems to be enjoying the hot spring very much!

In any case, I set about introducing the kobolds to Karna and explaining the plan for making Hanley stuffed animals to her so she could get to work on it.

"Oh my! This is incredible...!" Karna exclaimed.

Hehe. Karna seems very fond of Hanley's fur.

Before I knew it, she was already in deep discussion with Ralf and Will about what spells might best be able to recreate the texture of Hanley's fur.

Karna had taken an instant liking to one more person—Spica. She didn't seem to care one bit that Spica was a beastperson; Karna focused on how adorable Spica looked all tangled up with me. She even mentioned something about getting Auntie Olive to make some clothes for Spica, so Auntie Olive was also

going to be dragged into my sister's wild plans.

Karna enthusiastically declared she wanted to bring Spica home with us, but despite what she might wish, Spica wouldn't be going anywhere until the kobold pack had settled into their new home.

For the time being, we made the kobolds promise that under absolutely no circumstances would they go down the mountain and into the village. We explained that they were free to roam the mountain so long as they stayed away from the village and were welcome to settle in any of the vacant caves if they wished.

While we were at it, we explained that the sirens would also be joining Project Shiana and instructed the kobolds to get along with them as they'd be neighbors of a sort from now on.

With this, I think everything we need to do at the moment has been taken care of? We'll probably be heading back to the royal city tomorrow. That means I need to squeeze in as much petting of Hanley's incredible fur as possible today!

*Here I come, Hanley! **Charge!***

I spotted Hanley mingling with a group of kobolds who'd gotten out of the hot spring to cool down. An Afghan hound wind magic user was using the wind like a fan to cool the area down. The way the gentle breeze stirred the long-haired kobolds' fur looked very pleasant. The outer layer of Hanley's fur swayed in the breeze as well.

Ahhh, I want to touch it!

"Hanley!" I threw myself headlong at his massive body.

"Lady Neema?!"

I could feel his whole body jolt with surprise. But that's not what I was focused on!

The luscious fur pressed against my cheek! I rubbed my face into it, relishing in its plushness. An irresistible urge that I couldn't even find the words to describe beat down on me.

I want to wrap my entire body in this heavenly coat of fur!

“I’m honored you’re so fond of my fur, Lady Neema, but why don’t you snuggle up with one of the children, or at the very least, a female?” Hanley suggested, looking troubled.

Children?!

“The family leader of the Healer Family has children?” I asked.

“His children have children.”

Meaning he has grandchildren?!

Hanley let out a bark, and a group of children playing at the edge of the water all turned and ran over to us. The puppies bounced playfully as they galloped toward us, their droopy ears flopping up and down with each bound. Although they were puppies, they were already about the size of a full-grown, mid-sized dog.

“Lady Neema would like to play,” Hanley said.

The kobold children’s eyes lit up.

Some children bounced gleefully in circles around me as if inviting me to play. Others nibbled gently on my hands as if begging for attention. One of them even tried to climb under my skirt. The children all expressed their enthusiasm differently, but my reaction was simple.

THEY’RE SO CUTE AND FLUFFY!!!

The children’s top coats were softer than those of an adult like Hanley and extremely fluffy. The individual hairs making up their fur were finer than an adult’s, resulting in a ticklish sensation wherever they touched my bare skin.

And the puppy-like, roly-polly way they moved and the childish behavior they displayed were just so stinkin’ cute! The force of this cuteness was enough to level an entire country.

But they were massive, as one might expect from even a baby large-breed dog. I was pushed to the ground and licked all over every inch of my face.

Wait, wait, wait! Don’t lick my nostrils! And not my mouth either! If you really want to kiss, that’s fine, but no tongue!



Agggh! Gosei, Rikusei, save meeee!

Buried under a pile of wriggling puppies, I mentally called out frantically to them for help. Hearing my plea, Gosei and Rikusei rushed the children, barking chidingly.

I was saved from being squashed to death, but now even more children joined the fray, running and bouncing around me like it was an athletic festival or something.

Hey, I wanna join the festivities!

While I was playing with the kobold children, Ralf and the others were having a secret meeting.

That night, a barbecue was held in one of the vacant caves.

It seemed Ralf remembered me saying I wanted to camp out and have a barbecue with everyone.

The knights, royal guards, and even the members of Purple Gandal, joined us. Kobolds and sirens, humans and beastperson, a holy beast and monsters, and even an animal, all spent a wonderful evening together grilling meat and vegetables, eating, and chatting.

It was a fun barbecue!



THE following morning, we bid farewell to the chief of Zigg Village and set off on our way back to the royal city. Before leaving, we sternly reminded Healran and Uncle Phillip's party to be careful and not do anything reckless.

And, of course, we didn't forget to bring the ban home with us!

I decided to name the ban Pluma.

It means wing. Not very original, I know, but I'm running out of ideas—or rather, I used all of them up on the baby slimes. Although I did give the baby slimes all color names, which I'll admit was also not very creative.

Teleportation circles could also transport large animals, so Pluma could teleport home with us without issue. If he couldn't have teleported with us, I

would've had to hire either the postal guild or the adventurers' guild to transport him like a piece of luggage, which would've been kind of sad.

In Fauxbe, we parted with the unit leader and the other knights.

"Thank you for all your help!" I said.

"I think we'll meet again very soon, but in the meantime, please try to keep your mischievous tomboy ways within reason."

Eep, now I'm receiving a stern lecture from the unit leader!

"Yes, sir!" I answered enthusiastically.

Then, the unit leader shouted out orders to his men.

"Entrust your swords!"

The knights took up their swords. Without removing them from their sheaths, they raised them to their chests, then pointed the hilts toward the royal guards.

The royal guards grasped the hilts of the swords, pronounced "Sword accepted!" and then placed the hand that had gripped the hilt over their hearts.

That's so cool!

According to Will, this was a ritual they performed when transferring duties to another unit. The sword represented the duty the knights had undertaken and their sincerity toward that duty. Those entrusted with this duty would give their all to carry out their assignment to the best of their ability.

Lastly, they paid homage to Will and held that pose until we disappeared.

I want to see them do that ritual again next time we meet!

Now then! We're finally going home for the first time in a very long and busy fifteen days!

When we arrived, Papa, Mama, and all of the servants came out to greet us.

"Father! Mother!"

I feigned running toward Papa but switched directions at the last moment and hugged Mama first. Lately, I'd been taking a perverse amount of pleasure in making Papa make those totally uncool faces.

Just as expected, he seemed shocked and looked like he might cry. I couldn't help feeling a little bad and promised myself I'd make it up to him by snuggling up to him later.

Suddenly, a loud voice called out, "Lady Neema!

"Isn't that a bandu forvoste?!" our bird-crazy gardener, Ayle, asked feverishly.

"Yeah, it's a ban-something..." I said.

"A bandu forvoste."

"Yeah, a bandu forv..."

I can't pronounce it! Ban is fine!

"His name is Pluma!"

Hearing me say his name, Pluma let out an obnoxious "*Squawk!*"

"You're going to keep him here as a pet, right?"

"Yeah."

"Please do me the honor of entrusting me with his care!"

"Only when I'm not around."

"That's no fair!"

"Neema, could you please explain what's going on?"

...Huh? Mama's voice sounds incredibly cold. Don't tell me Papa didn't tell Mama?!

With help from my brother and sister, I began detailing everything that had happened on our journey, starting with the goblins and Gratia. Mama seemed fine with this much—it seemed she'd already heard this part of the story from Papa.

But when I got to the part of the story that involved the slimes, kobolds, and sirens... Mama's aura turned downright frigid.

Karna jumped in, talking about how cute the slimes were, their ability to eat magic, and explaining about Spica. That eased the tension in the air slightly.

Next, Ralf attempted to distract Mama by talking up the benefits of me being

parasitically inhabited by a slime and interesting her with the tale of the super-rare male siren, Kai, and his many useful abilities.

Continuing, he argued that, above all, all of them were crucial to the success of Project Shiana and that, in the long run, their various, unusual talents would benefit the Osphe family.

“Cerulia, Neema is undeniably beloved by the God of Creation. Things beyond our imagining will inevitably continue to occur around her,” Papa said.

...Is Mama going to be convinced by that?

Because I’m sure not convinced!

Tch! Whatever...

In any case, I decided to introduce Gratia and Haku to Mama. Once she saw them, Mama quickly withdrew her frigid aura and broke into a smile.

“They really are deviations,” she said. “I wonder what kind of special abilities they possess... Slimes can eat anything, right? I wonder if they could digest something with a Preserve spell cast on it...”

Uh-oh, her researcher’s heart is showing! This isn’t good; at this rate, she’ll snatch them both away from me!

“Neema, you’ll help me out, right?” She smiled.

Ahhh! Are you subtly threatening me to hand these two over to save my own skin?!

“...Will you hurt them?” I asked.

“No, I won’t do anything to harm them. We just need to determine their anatomy and abilities. Then, you can leave the rest to me.”

That’s not at all reassuring! What exactly are you planning to do?! But if we want to live to see tomorrow, we can’t very well deny her!

In the end, I vaguely promised to visit the Magical Research Center in the near future. And, of course, Mama hadn’t forgotten about Shinki.

I hoped it was just my imagination that Mama looked like a totally different person while whispering, “I’m looking forward to seeing what elemental magic

can do!”

Small Talk: Healran Dewitt's Happy Days

AT first, I'd believed her to be nothing more than a typical, spoiled aristocrat's brat. Before long, I realized she was mature, far beyond her years, and downright fearless.

No, that's not right. She's just a bit unique and hasn't experienced much in her short life to instill a sense of fear in her.

She had a frost spider deviation as her close companion, and at some point, she got some pet slimes as well. And to top it all off, she ended up involved with goblins and kobolds.

Yes, she certainly is a surprising child.

Meeting the youngest daughter of Duke Osphe, the prime minister of the Kingdom of Gaché, might just have been a stroke of luck for me. There were times that Lady Neema would work forcefully to get what she wanted, which was not unusual for an aristocrat. However, it was likely because of who she was that those endeavors usually went off in an unexpected direction.

I would never get sick of watching her.

That one sentence pretty much said it all.

I had to vow upon my name more times than I could count during my short acquaintance with Lady Neema. That just showed what kind of trouble I was unwittingly dragged into. On the other hand, though, more often than not, I felt amused, if not thoroughly fulfilled, with the life I now led.

It turned out all sorts of suspicious, underhanded dealings were going on in Lenice, as my investigation soon uncovered. Since I had plenty of experience in my past role conducting undercover investigations for the espionage department, I never let my guard down. But I also wasn't worried about failing in my mission.

Of course, Lady Neema didn't know about my past, so she was concerned for

me. I never dreamed she'd go as far as to assign elemental spirits to watch over me.

Elemental spirits were holy beings that only those beloved by the God of Creation could see. To me, elemental spirits had always seemed like nothing more than a myth.

I separated from Lady Neema and the others to work on the solo mission I'd been assigned. I was wandering through the streets of Lenice, doing my best to act lost and downtrodden. One reason was to familiarize myself with the city's layout, but the other was to observe people's movements. What were the locals doing? How were the adventurers who'd gathered here passing their time?

One thing was for sure: Lenice was different from the town of Cass, where I'd previously lived. Shops of all kinds cluttered the main streets, and normally, this area would be bustling with shoppers. But currently, only the largest stores were open, and glancing inside revealed hardly anyone was out shopping.

When I caught sight of some of the price tags listing prices three times higher than normal, I could easily understand why. I checked several open stores, but each carried the exact same items at the exact same prices.

The only other establishment open was the tavern. Drove of adventurers gathered there starting around noon, pounding down drink after drink. I witnessed some trying to weasel out of paying their tabs and others starting trouble with members of the royal knighthood. By all appearances, the adventurers seemed to be of low moral character overall.

Like all other guilds, the adventurers' guild had ranks, and any adventurer who caused trouble wouldn't advance in rank. The adventurers' guild was vigilant in observing their members. They looked at the adventurers' behavior toward the guildhall staff and customers, how they conducted themselves in public, their fighting skills, and even their ability to gather information.

When it came to higher-ranked members of the adventurers' guild, not only were they skilled fighters, but their consideration for those around them and manner of interacting with others set them apart. Not to mention that their ability to pick up on and glean information from the tiniest things was often on

par with members of the espionage department.

I'd been worried my cover would be blown if any high-ranked adventurers were around, but I didn't spot any.

Next, I headed into the slums.

Emaciated children slept on the streets. It had been nagging at me since earlier, but the number of children greatly outweighed the number of adults.

Where did all the adults from the slums go...? I'll stake out the area and see what I can observe.

I wandered around the slums, searching for a conveniently located abandoned building.

At last, I found an abandoned house with an entrance that wasn't on the main street that afforded me a vantage point from which to covertly observe people's movements.

It was technically a tenement building, but more than half of the units were unoccupied. I let myself into a vacant tenement with a good view of the main street and positioned myself where I wouldn't be visible from the outside but could see clearly.

Now, all that was left to do was stay concealed and watch the main road.

From time to time, I heard children's voices, but the only adults I ever spotted were elderly people walking slowly past.

As the sun was setting, I finally spotted several women I assumed to be mothers.

Once night fell, I spotted several men, but they all appeared drunk, inevitably stumbling off somewhere and disappearing.

As I suspected, there really aren't any adults.

As the night wore on, I left the abandoned house and explored the slums on foot, leaping from one rooftop to the next, stopping periodically to glance around and confirm there was no other movement in the night besides myself.

At one point, I heard a noise.

Clatter! Thump!

It was the sound of something large and heavy being carried. I followed it until I came upon a group of people dressed all in black.

“You really think an old hag like this will sell?”

“It’s fine. The way things are right now, the slavers in Icoux will take anyone at all, as long as they’re an adult.”

“Hehe, that’s strange. Normally, you’d think they’d only want young girls.”

“But we’ve already exhausted the prey in this area. Let’s give it a rest until after our next transfer.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

It wasn’t an unfamiliar sight.

I’d previously infiltrated an illegal human trafficking ring and even taken down foreign slavers who’d come to the Kingdom of Gaché to conduct illicit business.

But this group was specifically targeting adults to kidnap and sell into slavery? Not only that, but something about the way these criminals moved told me they were not amateurs.

They moved like battle-hardened warriors—like adventurers or knights.

What exactly have I stumbled upon...?

It was too dangerous to interfere to save the kidnapped woman. For now, I’d have to follow them and see where the group of men in black headed. I trailed behind them, being careful not to get caught. Before long, we arrived at a familiar location: the mayor’s manor.

Had the “transfer” the men spoke of been about the knighthood’s unit deployment? Based on what I’d heard, this had started long before they came to this city.

I’ll need to investigate and discover whether any other cities have experienced a rash of unexplained disappearances...

Then, I realized the futility of that line of thought. The men had thought this through before targeting the inhabitants of the slums. No one would be looking

for these people if they went missing, and it was likely no one had even bothered to report them missing.

Damn it. This has gotten past what I can handle on my own. For now, I'll see if I can infiltrate the knighthood and get my hands on proof of any illegal deals; anything at all is fine. Once I have that, the espionage department or even His Majesty's shadows can use it as justification to delve further into the human trafficking.

But I wonder why they're specifically targeting adults?

As the criminal himself had said, normally, women and children were targeted because they were easy to subdue. Young women especially fetched the highest price on the black market. Although I didn't even want to think about it, some twisted aristocrats had a fetish for causing pain to young children.

As far as I knew, there had never been another case of a human trafficking ring that indiscriminately targeted "anyone at all, as long as they're an adult."

That made me wonder if this was somehow related to Runohark, too.

What if they were up to something involving not just monsters, but also humans?

... I'm not going to figure it out pondering it over by myself. More importantly, how am I going to infiltrate the royal knighthood?



CONSIDERING *how we're in the middle of a crisis, one might expect the knights to be more on their guard than ever, and yet...*

A job among their ranks had all but fallen right into my lap.

I'd taken up the guise of an adventurer who'd been separated from his party and was drinking at the tavern from the moment they opened when a knight on patrol came up to me.

At this time of day, all of the crooked and lazy adventurers were still in their beds. And the hardworking adventurers who *were* awake were all either training or patrolling outside the city walls, not drinking in the tavern.

In conclusion, he found me suspicious and decided to question me.

I spun my woeful cover story, lamenting how my party had ditched me, and I was all alone, and the knight bought it.

The knight was, surprisingly, a genuinely good person.

He listened compassionately to my sad story, making the occasional comment to assure me he was listening, and at the end, commiserated with me about how I'd been handed the short end of the stick. At one point, I actually thought he was about to cry out of sympathy.

I included a kernel of truth in my cover story by explaining that I used to work in accounting. That unexpectedly paid off in the form of an invitation to come to their headquarters because they desperately needed help with their bookkeeping.

The knight who scouted me might have been highly ranked because the temporary employment contract was prepared at record speed. I'd expected to at least be required to vow upon my name to ensure my loyalty to the knighthood, but I wasn't.

It was enough to make me suspicious; that's how unbelievably lax they were in their security. I wondered if these knights were up to something.

Either way, it worked out in my favor, so I went along with it.

Before encountering the knights, I'd witnessed something intriguing. And I'd infiltrated the knighthood even more successfully than I'd dared to hope. However, I was well aware that it was when things were going well, more than ever, that I couldn't afford to let my guard slip or I'd be in danger.

My duty was to ensure that the danger didn't extend to Lady Neema.

I was led to the knighthood's temporary base of operations, received a brief explanation of my job requirements, signed the temporary employment contract, and immediately put to work.

I did mention that I'd already been drinking that morning but received the alarmingly blasé response that I seemed coherent enough, so it was fine. Of course, I hadn't actually been drinking, but the reek of alcohol filling the tavern had clung to my clothing enough to maintain my ruse.

The job was incredibly simple. But, as I knew well from my time in the royal palace, the knighthood's money management was sloppy. It was enough to make me feel sorry for whoever would have to audit this mess. They really should keep their records better organized!

Using my status as a newcomer and fervent desire to quickly adapt to my new role as an excuse, I took it upon myself to look around.

Under the pretense of "going through old records," I searched for any evidence of tampering. However, there were no signs that anything had been tampered with; the only thing that caught my attention were several instances of unexplained funds. They had vague but plausible annotations, but I couldn't help but question them.

I kept at it until evening fell before finally calling it quits for the day, figuring I'd look suspicious if I stayed any later.

I was carrying a stack of finished documents, planning to submit them and then leave for the day, when...

I spotted a familiar group of people walking toward me. I was pretty sure they wouldn't say anything to blow my cover even if they recognized me, but either way, it would be bad if the knights realized their guests knew me.

I quickly bowed, concealing my face so I wouldn't be recognized.

But I could tell that *she* recognized me regardless.

Neema's whispered voice carried to my ears.

"Report in tonight."

I see. So this is the power of the elemental spirits.

There was no way I should've been able to hear Lady Neema when she'd whispered so quietly that no one else reacted, but I heard her as clear as day.

I gave the faintest nod to convey that I'd received her orders.

If Lady Neema and the others were here, I didn't need to linger.

Once darkness fell completely, I snuck into the mayor's manor, being careful to avoid being spotted. I made my way to Lady Neema's room, where I found

Prince Wilhelt and Lord Ralfreed.

Lady Neema appeared to be missing.

“Oh, it’s you, Healran. How’s the investigation going?”

If Lady Neema wasn’t here, then this was the perfect timing.

I didn’t want to discuss something so dark in front of her. If Lady Neema needed to hear of it, Lord Ralfreed would likely be better equipped than I to explain such things to a child, anyway.

“First, I have another matter to report on.”

I told them about what I’d witnessed late the previous night.

Slavery was strictly outlawed in the Kingdom of Gaché, so Prince Wilhelt’s face took on an impregnable severity as he listened.

The young prince leapt into action, asking wind spirits to search the mansion for the woman I believed had been kidnapped and hidden there. Within moments, he announced that she was in the basement. Then, he summoned one of His Majesty’s shadows and issued orders to look into the human trafficking ring.

He said he would also send a letter to the royal palace to inform them of this matter and have reinforcements dispatched immediately to deal with the issue.

However, there was one concern.

“If Icoux is endorsing this operation, this will quickly become a troublesome issue,” I said.

“Indeed. But they should’ve thought about that before. Anyone foolish enough to start trouble in *our* country is going to get what’s coming to them.”

He really is His Majesty’s child. Both of them are without mercy when their people are threatened.

The conversation made me the slightest bit nostalgic, but once Lady Neema returned, the matter was dropped.

Next, I laid out what I’d discovered so far regarding the knighthood’s suspicious dealings. I had no proof but suspected that the supplies the proxy

lord had sent were being diverted and sold for profit in the stores. I also explained the suspected collusion with crooked adventurers and the unexplained funds I'd noticed in the financial records.

The only proof I had was a scene I'd witnessed at the tavern before meeting the knight who hired me: I saw a knight dressed in street clothes taking money from an adventurer.

As expected, His Highness said he needed more concrete proof than that.

I'd already been planning to try following the money trail to find the source of the unexplained funds, but apparently, His Highness was familiar with the knighthood's abysmal record-keeping because he speculated that this would probably be difficult.

The knighthood's accounting is such an infamous mess that even His Highness is aware of it? And I can't believe he's even heard about the legion commanders getting chewed out by people from the accounting department for sloppy record-keeping...

Hold on a minute. That's it!

"They're submitting inflated claims!"

I'd been focusing all my attention on the flow of money, but it was possible that if the amount of equipment and supplies the knighthood ordered didn't add up to what they had on hand, it might be because they were submitting inflated claims, resulting in the unexplained funds.

I'd discovered a thread to follow that very well may lead me to solid proof.

"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."

I was surprised by his sudden declaration.

I'd already been entrusted with a short sword from Duke Osphe bearing his family's crest but never dreamed I'd also be entrusted with one from His Highness as well.

Did he know to choose a short sword simply because he's gotten to know me so well in such a short time?

No, there's no way the shadows assigned to him would've failed to look into my past and inform him of everything.

I accepted the short sword, easily recognizing it as no more than one of the serviceable weapons carried by the royal guards assigned to His Highness's protection detail.

That said, I doubt I'd dare to use it, even if my life were in danger.

I was more concerned about the crest being misused than about my safety.

Lady Neema was starting to look sleepy, so I decided it was time to leave for the evening, but before I could, Lord Ralfreed called out to stop me.

"Healran, don't do anything that would make Neema cry."

His tone was gentle, but I caught the faintest glimpse of deadly seriousness in his eyes.

Heh, I can see the family resemblance.

He was just like Duke Osphe.

I still remember receiving the same warning from the duke when he hired me.

Though, if I wasn't mistaken, there was also a touch of jealousy in Duke Osphe's case. But in the name of allowing him to save face, I would pretend not to notice that.

"Yes, sir. I owe Lady Neema a great debt for taking me into her retinue, so I will serve her with faithful sincerity."

I truly felt incredibly grateful to her for taking me in.

Rather than wasting away serving that wretched mayor, traveling around like this was much more suited to my personality.

"You're one of us, Mr. Healran—a friend."

I was shocked by Lady Neema's unexpected declaration.

I felt certain that when it came to Lady Neema, being named a "friend" indicated that she deeply trusted and cared for you. By rights, she should treat me the same as any other hired servant, and yet she honored me with the title of "friend." I wasn't certain whether she was just extremely magnanimous or

whether she sensed something that wasn't apparent to me.

I found myself inexplicably happy that she'd named me a friend.

"Goodnight, Neema."

In stark contrast to his frankly terrifying expression a moment ago, Lord Ralfreed's face had softened.

His Highness chuckled at how easily Lady Neema went to sleep.

Before long, the battle to save the kobolds would begin.

It appeared Lord Ralfreed was concerned that Lady Neema would suffer heartache in the process. From what I'd heard, it sounded like a difficult situation, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't care overly much either way, so long as Lady Neema was safe.

"It can't be helped. That is the path she's chosen. Even if it *was* mostly unconsciously."

In his position, His Highness understood the difficult path she'd chosen better than anyone else. Even if she were still so young, she would have to face the full consequences of her actions and decisions.

I wanted to do all I could to ease her burden, even if only a little.



FROM there, Lady Neema's true nature just continued rearing its head. I didn't think I'd ever get bored watching her. I could reconcile the slimes and, at least in theory, understood how she'd gotten friendly with the kobolds.

But it didn't stop there. Next were the sirens, and of course, she met and befriended a nearly legendary monster—a rare male siren.

According to Shinki, the goblin clan was pretty sizeable as well.

I decided to remain in Zigg Village for Lady Neema's sake, but boy, was it ever starting to look like I had my work cut out for me!

The night before Lady Neema and the others were due to return home, I went ahead with the plan I'd been concocting with the knights in secret.

Lady Neema had often spoken about wanting to have a barbecue and eat

together with everyone, but due to her station and the circumstances, this had been rather difficult to arrange.

However, in the remote area of this cave, there wasn't anyone around to know or care, and monsters didn't bother with things like social status.

After receiving permission from His Highness and Lord Ralfreed, I made the preparations secretly so Lady Neema wouldn't find out.

While Lady Neema was playing with kobolds, several knights returned to the village to procure meat, fish, vegetables, and other supplies. The three earth-magic users, including myself, created three large fire pits in the open area just outside the cave. After this, outdoor gear was sent via the knights' portable transportation tapestry, the growing mountain of equipment arriving one piece at a time, seemingly without end.

The unit leader had come up with some reason to request all of this from headquarters. I should probably ask His Highness to smooth things over later to ensure the unit leader didn't get in trouble for this. I was certain General Zelnan would permit it once he learned it was a surprise for Lady Neema, but...

The gear that arrived by teleportation circle included a folding griddle plate, eight folding barbecue grates, and an unbelievable quantity of eating utensils, food, and even seasonings.

Please bill us for the cost of the food and condiments!

Don't add this bill to the disaster that is the knighthood's accounting!

I swore to follow up on it later and make sure it was billed correctly.

The knights who'd gone to the village returned laden with even more supplies.

Lord Ralfreed had given the knights money to purchase these supplies, so at least the billing for these purchases would be simple and straightforward.

We stacked wood in the fire pits, and the knights who could use fire magic ignited the fires, which the knights who could use wind magic fanned to life.

While this was happening, the rest of us divided the labor, washing and cutting the vegetables. Before we knew it, sunset had begun coloring the sky.

We'd have to hurry up.

We still had to prepare the torches that would illuminate the area once night fell. Technically, the knights would take care of the torches, not me, so maybe "we" isn't quite the right word.

Just as the finishing touches were being made, His Highness's voice reached my ears and carried on the wind.

"We can't hold her off much longer. How's it coming?"

"We're ready at any time."

"Okay. In that case, I'll convey the message to the sirens as well."

Come to think of it, can sirens even eat food?

I'd feel bad feasting in front of them if they couldn't join, but I supposed that if nothing else, they could at least enjoy the festive atmosphere.

We were just starting to lay out the meat and fish that would take longer to cook on the preheated barbecue grills when Lady Neema and the others appeared at the cave entrance.

"...What's all this?!"

"Lady Neema, you've been saying you'd like to have a meal with everyone, so how about tonight?"

Her eyes sparkling, Lady Neema ran around looking at everything and exclaiming over and over again how wonderful and amazing it all was.

Her enthusiasm was contagious. Before long, Spica and the kobold children had joined in her antics.

Just then, the sirens arrived, their timing impeccable. They appeared to have flown here from the cave they lived in because they were all in their bird forms. They'd even somehow strapped all the baby slimes onto their backs.

"Mistress... Feed me, please!"

The male siren, who'd received the name Kai, clung to Lady Neema. He seemed oblivious to the death glares Lord Ralfreed and Lady Karnadia were shooting at him.

I couldn't help but be a bit impressed with his nerve.

The baby slimes seemed to remember who'd previously fed them magic because they crowded around those who could control the same element they were each affiliated with.

Almost before I finished the previous thought, the little slime named Kohaku bounced over to me, wailing, "*Ruu, ruu!*"

Seeing no other option, I summoned a bit of earth magic in the palm of my hand and offered it to Kohaku.

"Ruu, ruuuuuuuu!"

It certainly seemed pleased. Its cry was more like a warbling song than any actual attempt at speech.

"Let's eat!" Lady Neema exclaimed, already fully prepared, with a plate and eating utensil in hand.

Drinks were passed out, and finally, all that remained was for someone to formally start the party with a toast.

"Well then, Lady Neema. Will you do the honors and give the opening toast?"

"Huh? Me?!"

Lady Neema tilted her head to the side, bewildered, and Lord Ralfreed stepped in to whisper encouragement in her ear. She nodded in response, so I could only assume he'd given her some idea of what to say.

"Umm, well... Let's all continue getting along! Thank you all for all your work up to this point! Now, let's eat!"

It was an incredibly Neema-like speech. Even the normally stoic royal guards were smiling fondly.

Whoa, the royal guards have frozen in shock at the sight of Assistant Brigade Leader Danart smiling. Just goes to show what a rare occurrence that is.

As for whether sirens could consume regular food, it turned out that they could indeed. However, they couldn't feed themselves because they didn't have hands in their bird forms. The female sirens seductively beseeched the knights

to feed them, and the sight of the red-faced men tentatively feeding the sirens was terribly amusing.

His Highness teasingly offered to assist, but with a wry smile, Lord Ralfreed pushed Lady Karnadia forward instead.

As for Lady Neema, she'd been captured by what appeared to be the sirens' leader. Perhaps "captured" wasn't quite the right word for it. She seemed to enjoy feeding the siren.

When one siren playfully grabbed Lady Neema in a big hug, a snippet of Lady Neema's voice carried to me on the wind, with the only words I was able to make out being "...outrageous breasts!"

Elemental spirits! What are you up to, sending only that bit to me?!

And anyway, what does she mean, "outrageous breasts"? What characteristics qualify a pair of breasts as "outrageous," exactly?

Following that, no more of Lady Neema's words were carried to me on the wind, and I was left confused by the elemental spirits' actions and Lady Neema's words.

On another topic, the kobolds seemed to be divided into two factions: meat-lovers and veggie-lovers.

Fish didn't seem to go over with them, probably because they weren't accustomed to ocean seafood in their natural habitat.

I wasn't surprised to see the kobolds, who seemed to be fighters, gather around the meat while the long-haired ones flocked to the vegetables. I wasn't sure what the difference was between the different types of kobolds, but they all had one thing in common: they sure could eat!

Are we going to have enough food? Just to be safe, I'll ask the unit leader to send for a bit more supplies.

Lady Neema approached me just then, apparently worried I was too busy tending the grill to eat my portion.

"Healran, are you making sure to eat as well?"

"Yes, I'm eating. You make sure to enjoy yourself tonight, too, Lady Neema."

“Of course! I’m having a wonderful time!”

She flashed me a vibrant smile that made her look her age for once.

As long as Lady Neema was enjoying herself, that was all I needed.

8 - There Really Is No Place Like Home!

MAMA finally released me, and at long last, I took a break and caught my breath.

It felt weird entering my room and coming home after being gone for just a few short weeks that felt so much longer. Nothing had changed while I was gone. Everything was as it had been before I left.

Well, those flowers in the vase on the table weren't there before.

Normally, flowers were tastefully arranged in strategic places around my room. But currently, my room was practically overflowing with an abundance of all different kinds of colorful flowers.

I guess this means the servants missed me?

Nox landed on his wooden perch and groomed his feathers; Haku lay motionless on the bed, and Gratia moved restlessly atop my head. He seemed nervous about this strange new environment, but before long, he deemed it safe, probably after seeing how relaxed Nox was.

Gratia leapt off me and stood upright, balanced on his four rear legs. Then he waved his front four legs about in an unhurried manner. I had no idea what this meant.

...You really are dexterous, Gratia!

Satisfied, Gratia scuttled silently over to the table and agilely climbed up the tablecloth. Once he reached the top, he played among the flowers, leaping between them as if practicing parkour or something.

Ack, now look at you! You're getting covered in pollen!

In the end, I left Gratia to his own devices and was relaxing quietly in my room when there was a knock on the door.

"Lady Neema, I've brought your tea," a maid called out.

“Come in.”

Where there's tea, there's bound to be snacks!

“Pardon the intrusion.”

My maid, Leah, pushed a cart ahead of her into the room. She was a veteran maid who'd worked for us for over twenty years. And her husband was our head chef. We were fortunate to have both of them working for us.

Our family mascot accompanied Leah into the room.

“Dee!”

It felt like forever since I'd last seen him, and he seemed to have only gotten even more handsome. His face was chiseled like a noble wolf, and his long white fur was glossy and silky. His tail wagged almost violently before I even started petting him, suggesting he was happy to see me.

I'm happy to see you too!

It seemed that the servants had taken *very* good care of Dee in my absence, because his fur felt soft as a cloud under my fingers, and I could feel the gentle warmth of his body through all the fluff. I indulged in petting Dee to my heart's content.

By the time I was satisfied, the tea was ready. I was impressed that snacks were even prepared for Dee and Nox.

“Lady Neema, what would you like me to prepare for Gratia and Haku's snacks?”

Huh? That's a good question. What should I have her get for them? Haku could eat absolutely anything, and Gratia ate pretty much anything, too. Hmm, I suppose I can't go wrong with giving them the same thing as Nox?

“The same as Nox, please.”

With a quick “Yes, my lady,” Leah excused herself and left the room.

“All right, everyone, gather round!”

Everyone gathered around the table at my command. Except Gratia, who stood *on top* of the table. As expected, he was covered head-to-toe in pollen.

I'll have to ask Leah to bring me something to wipe him off with. Just as I was thinking that, Gratia jumped down from the table and made his way over to Haku. I was wondering how they communicated despite being different species when suddenly Haku swallowed Gratia whole.

“Haku! What are you doing?!” I cried.

I could vaguely make out the shape of Gratia wriggling around inside Haku's semi-transparent body.

“Spit him out! **Pleh!**”

I grabbed Haku frantically to rescue Gratia, and the little slime obediently expelled him. Gratia flew out of the slime, looking absolutely fine.

No, wait. He's better than fine... He's perfectly clean! Every speck of pollen is gone! Could it be that he asked Haku to help him by eating the pollen?

While I was frozen in shock, Gratia turned to Dee curiously and danced in front of the much, much larger dog in a mysterious fashion.

“Gratia, don't scare me like that!” Once I got my wits about me, I grabbed Gratia and held him up to Dee's nose. “Dee, this is Gratia.”

Gratia struck a macho pose with his front legs raised in the air as I introduced him.

Next was Haku. Dee poked his nose into Haku's side, causing Haku to jiggle like jello.

I hope they'll all get along...

While we all got acquainted, Leah returned with snacks for Gratia and Haku.

“Your room has certainly become lively, hasn't it, Lady Neema?”

It's always been lively!

Not only was Dee always following me around, but birds were frequently dropping in to play, and many of the neighborhood Rias visited often as well.

Our house is always full of animals! In any case, time for a snack!



THE past few days, I kept myself busy having fun.

We built a shelter for Pluma in the garden. I visited the dragon stables and the beast stables, and, in general, soaked up every moment, enjoying the comfortable rhythms of my normal, everyday life at home.

“Lady Neema, did you finish the assignment Miss Annalee gave you?”

My hand stopped mid-pet atop Dee’s back at Paul’s question.

...She did give me an assignment, didn’t she? I totally forgot.

“Not yet, I see. Miss Annalee will be here in three days, so please finish it in time.”

I’ve still got three days? No problem! Piece of cake!

“Please don’t put it off any longer, Lady Neema.”

Eek! Paul, your face is scary right now! When did you get so merciless?!

And that was how I found myself heading reluctantly to my desk.

All right, what was the assignment again? Umm... I think I just needed to write a reflection on my tour of the province? I think she said something about practical examples, but examples of what exactly?

I was clutching my head and trying to remember what Annalee had said when Paul came to my rescue.

“Please write in concrete detail about how you would go about fixing any problems you notice while shadowing your father on his inspection of the province.”

Oh, that’s right! Isn’t that a bit advanced for a five-year-old’s homework assignment, though? Besides, I was so busy that I hardly did any actual inspecting! I guess I’ll have to leave out Project Shiana and write about promoting tourism in depopulated areas?

The village we stayed in near the Needle Frost Forest had delicious giant boar stew. Maybe we could incorporate the appeal of local delicacies and wild-caught meat to create some kind of preserved food?

As for Lenice, that’s easy—they need security improvements and the

protection of a forest where a Guardian dwells. We could probably handle this by designating the less dense section of the forest as a national park, thereby bringing the entire thing under government protection.

And developing the natural hot spring into a bath house could easily transform Zigg Village into a center for tourism. It's a quiet, peaceful, idyllic spot close to the ocean and overflowing with wildlife, so leisure cruises would probably be popular as well. They could even cooperate with some of the surrounding villages to create local souvenir products related to seagoing industries.

After deciding what to write about, I got my brother and sister to help me figure out how to word the essay. I had Papa make sure no confidential information was accidentally included and that there weren't any misspellings or grammatical errors, and after several rounds of staring contests with the dictionary, it was finally complete.

Then, I had Karna give me a brush-up lesson on formal etiquette. Thankfully too, because she had to correct me several times. My posture had gotten worse in the few weeks I'd been gone. Maybe because I'd been doing little else but playing with monsters all day?

I didn't want Annalee to laugh down her nose at me, so I had no choice but to engage in an extreme training regimen to regain my original level of social grace!



AT last, the day of Annalee's arrival came.

I was ready for the battle ahead of me!

"I'm so glad to see you've returned safely." Annalee was her usual prim and proper self.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say it was a safe journey, but thanks to my father and elder brother, I had many valuable life experiences," I said.

"How fortunate."

A tense atmosphere was between us as if we were each testing the other.

"Now then, may I see the result of the homework I assigned before you left?"

“Certainly. I’m very confident in the quality of this essay.”

Being so careful in choosing every word I speak is exhausting! And it feels like I’m not even myself anymore. I hate this inauthentic feeling.

I handed the essay to Annalee, who sat elegantly on the sofa and began to read.

There was nothing for me to do while she was reading except sip my tea. I raised the teacup to my lips, painfully aware of every inch of my body, down to my fingertips.

My face softened at the gentle, pleasant aroma of the tea. I took a small, ladylike sip, enjoying the high-quality taste that spread across my tongue.

The servants in our house really were talented. Even only a handful of maids serving in the royal palace could brew such delicious tea. The most delicious tea I’d ever tasted had been prepared by the maid Her Majesty had brought with her from the Empire.

She used only the highest-quality tea leaves and was so attentive that she even went as far as to adjust the characteristics of the water to best suit that particular blend of tea. I’d heard that advanced-level water magic users could even change the taste of water.

I was sipping on the delicious tea and pondering all that when Annalee finally finished reading.

“Lady Neema, this is fantastic.”

...Did Annalee just praise me?! Is this a trick? Maybe she’s planning to get my hopes up so she can squash them completely?!

“There’s just one point I’d like you to clarify. I’m not familiar with the term ‘hot spring’?”

“It’s a place where hot water wells up from the ground, all naturally,” I explained.

“Hot water... Hmm. Why would a hot spring attract tourists when we already have baths in our homes?”

Heh. The time has come to unleash my passionate love of hot spring baths!

“The pool is luxurious and large, and the scenery is breathtakingly beautiful. Wouldn’t *you* like bathing in a place like that?”

“...Yes, I suppose.”

“We will construct the bathing pools and landscape the facility to suit our needs so we can make pools of various sizes, some with views of the ocean and others with views of the mountains,” I said.

Ocean views were nice, but in autumn, nothing beats bathing while gazing at the changing leaves! Not to mention, after getting out of the bath, you could visit the attached restaurant and enjoy a meal featuring the bounty of the sea and mountains! That luxury couldn’t be enjoyed here in the royal city, which made it all the more rare and valuable.

“I see. This facility would also be valuable as a place to rest and relax.”

I could hardly believe my eyes because I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen Annalee this enthusiastic about *anything*. Apparently, I’d sold her on just how wonderful hot spring baths were.

“It seems they are going to go through with this building project, so once the hot spring bathing facility is operational, I’ll give you the information so you can go and see for yourself, Annalee,” I said.

What I mean is that I’ll get you hopelessly addicted to the wonder of hot spring baths! If Annalee falls in love with the hot spring bath house and talks about it to her friends in high society, we’ll get tons of new customers by word of mouth!

Oh, but if that happens, we’ll need a fancy hotel for the aristocrats. I doubt they’d be willing to stay in a regular old inn with commoners. I’ll have to discuss it with Ralf later.

And so, the meeting with Annalee that I’d been so anxious about turned out fine. It wasn’t enjoyable by any means, but it had gone smoothly enough, so I’ll call that a win.

After Annalee left, I suggested creating a relaxing retreat for aristocrats to Ralf.

In terms of location, it would be on the seaside, a short distance away from the village and the mountain. Of course, it would need to have beautiful scenery. We would build baths of all different sizes, including single-person private baths, family-sized private baths, and, of course, a giant outdoor public bath.

Nothing beats leisurely enjoying the scenery of the four seasons while lying back in a hot bath and drinking a cold beer! Oh, and I bet massage packages would be popular among the female guests!

As Ralf and I discussed it, we kept coming up with ideas.

“It’s an interesting idea, but let’s finish the practice area for the adventurers before we start any new projects,” Ralf urged. “It will be difficult to develop the region as a tourist attraction if we don’t first get the commoners on board.”

“Why is that?”

“The nobility love the newest fad. So if an elite, aristocrats-only hotel opens in a location that’s already wildly popular among the common folk, many nobles will want to go with the hope that *they’ll* be the ones to bring the newest fad to the upper classes. Then, once the fad has been established among the nobility, all the other aristocrats will flock there, not wanting to be left out of the most recent craze.”

I see. Basically, he’s saying that instead of rolling everything out all at once, we should do it bit by bit while watching the trends in society.

“Besides, building things one at a time will be easier financially,” he added.

Oh, so he’s suggesting waiting until the first business recoups its initial investment, then using the profits to fund the next construction? This way, if it’s not popular, we can give up on building an entirely new facility and redevelop the existing facility into something else to minimize our losses...

...It’s starting to feel like we’re opening a company! Is this really going to be okay? No! There’s no room for doubt! Nothing is impossible for the Osphe family!

Project Shiana was slowly making progress as well.

Papa and Ralf were doing the bulk of the work while Mama and Karna gathered personnel.

As for me... I was just spending all my time playing.

It's not my fault—they won't let me do anything! They seem to have forgotten this was all my idea in the first place!

I had nothing else to do, so I went to the garden to play with Pluma.

Pluma wasn't the only resident of our private garden; a variety of other birds also lived there. But on this day, we had a special guest. The presence of this special guest had transformed our gardener, Ayle, into the spitting image of a stereotypical "creepy pervert."

"...Are you enjoying yourself over there, Ayle?"

"...You have no idea."

"BOCK-bock-bock!"

Ayle was lying prone on the ground, being stepped on by a massive migratory bird known as a diagloris. The specimen demonstrating its dominance over Ayle was the boss of its flock. As you may have guessed from its cry, the diagloris was a giant chicken!

It looked just like a gargantuan leghorn chicken.

However, this migratory bird had one interesting evolution, in addition to its size, that set it apart from a chicken—its crest stood straight up!

The diagloris flock visited our house twice a year during their yearly migrations. In spring, they traveled north to their breeding grounds, and in fall, they traveled south to their overwintering grounds.

I was sure the baby chicks must be adorable, but by the time migration season came around, they were already nearly full-grown, so I'd never seen a baby diagloris.

I bet they look like giant, fluffy chicks!

As for Ayle—still pinned beneath the diagloris's foot—he was taking a break from work to play with the birds. Somehow, that evolved into a crowing

competition, with the diagloris and Pluma each trying to outdo the other in terms of volume and projection of their cries.

“BOCK-BOCK-BOOOOOOCK!”

“SQUAWK, SQUAWK!”

...Pluma! Don't let out such a loud noise so close to my ear!

I couldn't stand the noise anymore, so I distracted them with some treats to hopefully shut them up.

Small birds called lornises frantically pecked at the grains the gardeners had scattered on the ground for them.

Oh, so there are some lornises here today, too, huh?

For Pluma and the diaglorises, there were fish.

Yeah, the garden of our house was chaotic today, to say the least.

Once I'd finished playing with the birds, it was time for me to have a snack, too! I was in the middle of enjoying my snack when Mama suddenly summoned me.

...But I'm sure I haven't done anything wrong!

“Neema, I received word from your father: the goblins are due to arrive at Mount Reitimo as early as tomorrow.”

Whoa, they made better time than we thought!

“How does he know?” I asked.

“It seems that a wind spirit conveyed the message to Lars, and Prince Wilhelm informed your father.”

The wind spirits sure do come in handy!

“Tomorrow, you and Ralf will return to Zigg Village to meet the goblins.”

“Okay!”

I hope Shinki is safe and well. And I wonder how Suzuko and Touki are doing?



THE next day, we set off to the royal palace as the sun began to rise.

This time, Will couldn't join us due to his royal duties. And since he wouldn't be coming, neither would the royal guard.

Perhaps to make up for some of the lost numbers, Karna joined us.

As a complete trio of siblings, we teleported to Fauxbe using the teleportation circle in the royal palace.

We all stood atop the magic circle, and Ralf shouted, "Fauxbe!"

Sparkles clouded my vision, and before I could finish registering the overwhelming brightness of the light engulfing us, we'd already arrived in Fauxbe. Disappointingly, I once again wasn't able to see the true form of the brilliant sparkles.

A familiar group of faces awaited us in the room that held Fauxbe's teleportation circle.

"We've been awaiting your arrival."

It's the unit leader and the knights under his command!

The previous night, Papa had said he'd officially appointed this unit of knights to work on Project Shiana and we were seeing that put into action right away.

It might be a little late to worry about this, but is it okay to drag members of the royal knighthood into a private project spearheaded by the Osphe family? Maybe he made some kind of deal with Grandpa Gouche? In any case, I'm not going to dig too deeply into adult affairs that I probably don't want to know the answers to anyway.

"We're going to be in your care again, unit leader!" I exclaimed.

"I see you haven't changed a bit, Lady Neema," the unit leader replied, smiling kindly and patting my head.

Normally, we probably wouldn't be able to interact so informally, but Ralf and the others watched on with indulgent smiles. The unit leader's personality was also likely a factor in making this friendly relationship possible. I figured it was probably okay as long as we kept it to informal situations.

More importantly, the extremely rare occurrence of seeing the unit leader smile distracted me!

“Now then, let’s make haste, shall we?”

Cutting our reunion short, we all piled into the waiting carriages.

The city of Fauxbe was especially active this morning.

A morning market went on today, as evidenced by people hauling fruit, fish, and other produce past us along the bustling street in carts. I spotted a maroo in a cage in one of the carts we passed.

That poor little guy is probably going to become somebody’s dinner. I wonder if maroo tastes just like pork...

We left the city of Fauxbe and found ourselves surrounded by neatly tilled fields as far as the eye could see. Once the seemingly endless farmland ended, we entered a forest filled with singing birds.

The fresh greenery of new spring leaves perfectly complemented the mild and peaceful morning. A handsome young man and a beautiful young woman rode together inside the carriage, conversing happily. It was just like a scene out of a movie or something.

“What do you think, Ralf?” Karna asked. “Today, I tried to make Neema match her bunny-backpack.”

“It’s really cute! Her hair looks just like bunny ears,” Ralf said.

“Yeah! And her hair accessories are fluffy, so they sway every time she moves. It’s adorable, right?!”

The contents of their “happy conversation” were rather pathetic, however...

My sister had appointed herself as my personal stylist for the day. My hair was done in pigtails and fastened with slightly unusual ribbons featuring pom-poms. That was her attempt at making me look like a rabbit, apparently.

My dress was a sunny yellow, and the skirt was as voluminous as a balloon.

I had Auntie Olive’s excellent fashion sense to thank for this one.

Once we exited the forest, we continued down a long, narrow road that led

straight to Zigg Village. We could see the ocean from here, so I pressed my face against the window to gaze at it.

“You sure do love the ocean, huh, Neema?”

“Yeah! It’s so big and beautiful!”

I’d grown up near the ocean in my past life, so seeing the ocean felt like coming home and filled me with excitement.

There’s nothing better than playing at the beach on a beautiful summer day! It’s still spring now, but even so...

I hope I’ll get a chance to swim in the ocean this summer!



BY my estimation, about three hours had passed since we left our house.

At long last, we arrived in Zigg Village.

After greeting the village chief to let him know we’d returned, we hurried onward to Mount Reitimo. At this distance, I could sense Shinki’s presence and was able to lead Ralf and the others.

Less than an hour after beginning our trek up the mountain, we spotted Shinki.

“Shinki, over here!” I called out to him.

“Oh, it’s you, Miss Neema...”

Shinki looked very, very weary.

“Mistress!” two voices, neither belonging to Shinki, called out in tandem.

Hm?

The figures that appeared from behind Shinki were those of a male hobgoblin even more muscular than Shinki himself and a slender, almost delicate female goblin with a small head and big, doeish eyes that was hard to believe was actually a goblin at all.

No, she’s definitely a goblin... Just an incredibly un-goblin-like one...

I can’t believe how much they’ve both changed!

“Suzuko, Touki!” I greeted them.

“Mistress! Me kill giant boar! Touki do it, by meself!”

Wooow. He not only evolved into a hobgoblin but also took down a giant boar and even found time to learn to speak!

“Good job, Touki!” I praised.

“Mistress, I also evolved!”

So, Suzuko managed to evolve as well. That’s great, but I’m not happy she’s surpassed me in height!

Suzuko was still considerably smaller than Shinki or Touki, standing just a bit shorter than my sister. If I had to guess, I’d say she was somewhere between 4½ to 5 feet tall.

I’m sad I have to tilt my head back to look up at her now, just like everyone else in my life!

“Your speech has improved as well, Suzuko!”

Her previously halting manner of speaking had become much more fluid. She still wasn’t perfect, but our speech was on approximately the same level now.

Shinki explained that they’d lost a few goblins to animal attacks and bumbled attempts at hunting along the way, but the losses had been fairly minimal. Unlike the kobolds, the goblins had no natural defenses, so I supposed I should count it as a win that the casualties had been so few.

From here, I would introduce the goblins to the kobolds and then let them rest for a bit in the hot spring.

After that, it would be time to hunt for their dinner!

Just because they’d safely arrived at their new home didn’t mean the hard work and danger were over—not by a long shot!

“All right, everyone! Press forward to the mountain’s summit!”

The goblin clan set off, following my order.

At long last, the goblins and the kobolds were going to meet face-to-face.

I wonder if they'll be able to get along? But, more importantly...

“Shinki! Pick me up!”

I was exhausted from walking without having Lars to carry me, so I'd have Shinki carry me the rest of the way.

9 - Can't We All Just Get Along?

WE rambled along until, finally, we drew close to where the kobolds had taken up residence. Caves dotted the area, and the scenery looked different from when we'd last visited. Through the gaps in the trees, what looked like farm fields could be seen.

Looks like the Green Family has wasted no time getting right to work! Huh? Is that a human standing among the kobolds...? I paused to look closer, and...

"Healran?!"

What's he doing in a place like this?!

"Lady Neema?" Healran turned and walked toward us, a baby slime perched atop his head.

"Is there some kind of problem?" I asked.

"Not at all," he said. "I'm indebted to the kobolds for all their help, so I'm repaying the favor by assisting the Green Family in creating fields."

"...I do hope you'll explain how this all came about," I said.

After we left, Healran camped out in the forest with Uncle Phillip and the other adventurers to avoid burdening the village chief and his wife any further. The adventurers had set up camp close to where the kobolds were staying because they wanted to explore the caves.

When she saw this, Sicily had reached out and told them they were free to use the caves as well, and that was how Healran, Uncle Phillip, and the adventurers began living together with the kobolds.

Then, the family leader of the Green Family approached Healran, asking if he wouldn't mind using his earth magic to help them create fields.

I see. Now it all makes sense!

I felt a little guilty in retrospect for not setting Healran up with someplace to

live before we left—maybe a small but serviceable little cottage at the base of the mountain.

But what about the baby slime on Healran's head? What's it doing here?

Based on its brownish-yellow color, I assumed this was the slime I'd named Kohaku, meaning "amber" in Japanese.

"How did Kohaku get out of the cave?" I asked.

"Apparently, they've been asking the sirens to bring them out," he said.

Oh, I suppose there is that method.

If the slimes got Kai to bring them to the sirens' cave, the sirens could transform into their bird forms and carry them outside.

I hope Shizuku knows that its babies are going on outings by themselves...

"Kohaku, did you get your parent's permission before leaving?" I asked the little guy.

"Roooooo-ru!"

Phew, I'm glad Shizuku's on board!

Healran and Kohaku joined us, and together, we continued to the kobolds' cave.

Oh, right, I can't forget to introduce Healran to Suzuko and Touki!

"This is Healran," I said, getting straight to the introductions. "When Shinki's not around, consult with him, please."

Suzuko's face turned sad in response to my instructions. "Mistress and boss will both leave?"

"I'm sorry. But we'll come back soon!" I promised.

I had a feeling we'd be visiting regularly until Project Shiana got up and operational. I did my best to console Suzuko as we walked. Before long, the cave came into view.

The area around the mouth of the cave showed distinct signs of life. There was a large clearing with a fire pit and a pot bubbling over the fire. Ropes had

been strung up between the trees and draped with clean laundry hung out to dry. It wasn't big enough to be mistaken for a house, but a small storage shed had been erected off to the side.

Only around ten days had passed since the kobolds arrived, but already there were signs that they'd settled in and were getting on with life here.

Just then, I spotted Sicily, deep in conversation with the family leader of the Green Family.

"Sicily!" I called out to her, but before Sicily could even reach me, something—or rather, *someone*—dropped down from above.

"Lady Neema!"

Not again!

It was Spica who'd dropped down directly on top of me. Just moments before she crashed into me, Shinki snatched me out of the way.

"Mind yourself, girl," he warned.

Oh? Shinki sounds seriously ticked off!

"If you claim to be the lady's faithful servant, then you must avoid any actions that might cause harm to your mistress," Shinki instructed.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but his cold, matter-of-fact tone was somehow even more terrifying than if he were yelling.

"...I'm sorry." Spica's ears lay flat against her head, droopy with dejection.

Does she understand why she's being scolded?

"Spica, where are Gosei and Rikusei?" I asked. I was surprised that they weren't here if Spica was.

"They're training with the leader of the Herb Family," she said.

I'm glad to hear they're working hard!

"Good day, Spica," my sister called out to Spica, smiling brilliantly.

"Lady Karna!" Spica's tails wagged furiously behind her. She didn't notice them smacking Shinki, or perhaps she just didn't care.

“Mistress, what sort is she?” Suzuko asked, pointing to Spica with a look of cautious confusion.

“She’s the younger sister of the kobolds’ leader,” I explained.

I’m not sure that entirely answers her question, but... I suppose it will do!

“She seems very close to you,” Suzuko noted. “Are you her master as well?”

What’s with all the difficult questions all of a sudden, Suzuko?! How should I explain Spica? In terms of how long we’ve known each other, I met Suzuko and the other goblins first, making Suzuko Spica’s senior.

But Spica is a beastperson, not a monster, so she’s not bound to me by her name. Although I intend to employ her in the future as a bodyguard-slash-lady’s-maid...

Hmm, since they both live in clan-oriented societies, they must be very concerned with their place in the social hierarchy. In any case...

“Sicily, could we please use the hot spring?” I requested.

It’s easy to get irritable when you’re tired, so we should all rest and regain our energy in the hot spring.

“You don’t need to ask me; you’re free to come and go as you like,” Sicily said.

That’s nice of her to say, but I don’t feel right intruding without at least asking! Especially not with such a large group of monsters from another species. But since she said it’s fine, let’s go! Time for the goblins to get their first taste of the wonders of hot spring bathing!

The cave containing the hot spring showed signs of change as well. A faint glow illuminated a section of the stairway leading down to the cave.

“Why are the stairs glowing?” I asked Sicily, who’d accompanied us, about it.

“We got the sirens to let us use some of the baalrite from their cave.”

“...What’s baalrite?” I asked.

“I don’t know much about it, but the leader of the Philosopher Family said it was a type of luminescent stone.”

Hmm, I guess that’s what the glowing stalactites in the sirens’ cave were

made of?

Despite being described as luminescent, the light was only enough to make out our footing, so it couldn't be used as indoor lighting.

We reached the end of the long staircase, and the heat and humidity of the hot spring greeted us.

Speaking of the hot spring, it, too, had been expanded. The original spring still fed into the large main pool, but several smaller pools had been created, feeding off the first. There were shallow pools intended to be laid down in, and they'd somehow even created a waterfall shower.

Sicily explained that members of the Philosopher Family who could use fire and water magic were working in shifts to maintain the pools at predetermined temperatures, some hot, some warm, and others cool.

...It looks like they've grown very fond of hot spring bathing! They've practically transformed this place into a full-service health spa!

Shinki explained the basics of how the bath worked to the goblins. He told them that some sections were deep and they needed to be careful because they could drown if they ventured too far out. He also sternly instructed the goblins not to splash around in the water, as it would disturb other bathers. Despite his warnings, or perhaps because of them, all the goblins seemed too terrified to even enter the water.

In the end, because no one dared to enter the bath of their own volition, Shinki resorted to picking up goblins and tossing them into the hot spring.

Shrieks of “*Gii, giiii!*” filled the cavern, but soon enough, the screams died out as the faces of the goblins who'd been thrown into the hot spring transformed into expressions of delight.

After seeing this, the other goblins must've determined that it wasn't dangerous because, while still reluctant, they followed their friends into the water. Once the others had all gotten in, Suzuko, Touki, and Shinki also sank into the pool.

Touki closed his eyes and let out a delighted sigh.

Your goofy, blissful face is kinda cute, but at least close your mouth, Touki! I can see your fangs, and it makes you look scary!

Once again, it was time for another hot spring business meeting!

The first order of business was to determine where the goblins' territory would be. Having them live with the kobolds would never work, but they would need somewhere to take shelter from the wind and rain, preferably a large cave.

Sicily and I sat on the edge of the pool, dipping our feet in the hot water as we discussed the issue with Shinki.

The kobolds had already claimed this system of caves as their territory, and the only other system of caves was the one where the sirens lived. That was the sirens' territory, so the kobolds had made a point of avoiding it.

It made sense; if kobolds or goblins lived in the sirens' caves, it would scare away all the wayward humans the sirens counted on as prey.

We were puzzling over this dilemma when Sicily informed us of a small grotto under the mountain.

"It's not very large and not as deep as this system of caves," she said. "I don't think it's large enough to house a clan this size, but..."

I can't say either way until I see it with my own eyes, but it might be possible to use earth magic to enlarge the space to make a den for the goblins.

"Lady Neema! Look, look!" Spica called from a short distance away.

I glanced in the direction her voice had come from to find Spica on the far side of the large pool.

"I learned how to swim!"

Spica! Don't you know it's bad manners to swim in a public bath?! Besides, it's dangerous to go so far out that your feet can't touch the bottom!

"Spica, come back!"

Spica obliged my request by earnestly doggy-paddling toward me with all her might.



She was a wolf beastperson, so “doggy” paddling seemed an accurate descriptor, but despite how determinedly she was swimming, her speed was incredibly... slow.

I'll have to find some time to teach her the crawl or the breaststroke one of these days. But first! Now that she's back safely, she's in for a scolding!

I lectured Spica on the importance of proper manners when using a public bath.

“Don’t cause problems for mistress!” Suzuko quipped, glaring at Spica.

Uh-oh, this looks like it might become a problem.

“Hehe, you’re so adorable, Suzuko! You’re jealous because you think Spica’s going to take Neema away from you, right?” Karna said with a smile, but this was nothing to smile about!

“Suzuko, I want to have a private talk with you and Spica later,” I said.

“...A talk?”

“That’s right. I gave Spica her name. That means you are both my important friends, so you’ll have to learn to get along.”

Suzuko seemed unhappy about it, but she finally nodded her reluctant agreement.

“You too, Touki.” I called out to Touki, who was fully immersed in enjoying the hot spring bath a short distance away but was beginning to drift off to sleep because he didn’t reply. “...Shinki, please wake Touki up. He’ll drown if he falls asleep in the bath.”

In response, Shinki slammed his fist down on Touki’s head.

The *THUMP* that echoed across the cavern was so loud that I worried whether Touki was still alive after that.

“Don’t sleep in your mistress’s presence, idiot,” Shinki barked.

Hold on, that’s not the problem here! He’s welcome to nap—just not in the bath because it’s dangerous!

In the end, I scolded Touki on public bathing manners as well, including why it

was dangerous to fall asleep in the bath, and then told all of them that we'd be having a private named-by-Neema group meeting later.

After everyone finished bathing, we had the goblins procure something to eat for dinner on our way to check out the grotto Sicily had mentioned. I asked Shinki and Sicily to iron out the details of each group's territory lines between themselves.

And so, after we'd finished refreshing ourselves in the warm water of the hot spring, the entire group went back down the mountain. As soon as I suggested hunting for dinner along the way, Suzuko leapt into action, barking out orders to the others.

"Gii, gi-gii!"

The goblin language doesn't seem to have any sounds other than different intonations and enunciations of "gii," huh?

Following Suzuko's orders, the goblins formed into groups of four or five. Then, they scattered into the forest. After a quick word to me, Suzuko and Touki followed after the others.

"Oh, but how will they find their way to the grotto after?" I worried.

"It'll be fine; we can have the nanos carry a message to them," Shinki said.

For a moment, I had no idea what Shinki was talking about.

What are nanos?

...Oh, that's right! The elemental spirits! I can't believe I almost forgot when I was the one who gave them the nickname.

The remaining goblins who hadn't gone off hunting were mostly children. At some point, the goblin children had made friends with the knights, and several were even riding on the knights' shoulders.

...I'm jealous! I want to ride on the unit leader's shoulders!

"It sure is an unexpected sight," Ralf commented.

"Indeed. I suppose you could say this is a miracle of Neema's making?" Karna replied.

“Who would’ve thought our little sister would turn out to be one of God’s angels?” Ralf mused.

“It really does have a nice ring to it, though!”

Hey, sister-complex duo! Knock it off, will you?! You’re embarrassing me by saying such strange things!

“I thought that butterflies were God’s servants?” I asked.

“Maybe you were a butterfly in your previous life, Neema,” Karna suggested.

Nope. I was 100 percent a super-ordinary Japanese citizen! I did meet with God, but it was only once...

Although, come to think of it, I don’t think even revered holy beasts like Sol and Lars have ever actually met God in person...

“I’m sure I must’ve been your younger sister in all my past lives, Karna, so I couldn’t have been a butterfly unless you were, too,” I said.

“Awww, Neema!”

Eep, now I’ve done it!

I’d been attempting to divert the conversation, but instead, I’d accidentally tugged on Karna’s heartstrings, working her into a frenzy.

I give up! Let goooo, Karna! Your hug is so tight I can barely breathe!

“I’ll always be your older sister in all our past and future lives, Neema!”

“Karna, you’re hurting Neema. Let her go,” Ralf ordered.

Gasp!

Karna’s hugs are seriously dangerous!

“Oops, sorry, Neema!”

And so, as we three siblings were fooling around, the grotto came into view.

The entrance, at least, was fairly large. Shinki stepped inside to check it out and immediately concluded that the interior was “Too small.”

Next, I asked the knights who could use earth magic to determine whether magic could expand the grotto. It would’ve been faster to ask the earth spirits

to do it, but I still didn't want to reveal to everyone that Shinki could use elemental power, so I asked the knights instead.

According to the knights, the bedrock was strong, so it would hold even if they weren't especially gentle.

"All right, let's do it then!" I said.

And so, the knights set to work expanding the grotto. It would need to be at least large enough for all of the goblins to be able to lie down on the floor to sleep. Any further changes they might want to make, Shinki could take care of himself using elemental power once the knights had left.

"I'd better assign someone to act as a lookout," Sicily observed, befuddling me.

"A lookout? For what?" I asked.

"We're planning to use magic to set traps all around the borders of our territory," she explained. "I'll assign someone to watch the borders to make sure no goblins accidentally stumble into the traps if they come to use the hot spring or speak with us."

Ohhh. Yup, I can totally see these guys getting caught in magical traps.

"Please assign a lookout," I requested.

Fortunately, the matter of territory was easily settled.

The top of the mountain would belong to the kobolds and the bottom to the goblins. The area in between would be a shared hunting area.

We didn't bother specifying a territory for the slimes. Shinki and Sicily were happy to allow the slimes to come and go as they pleased, so the entire mountain would be their playground.

I asked what would happen if one of the slimes got caught in the kobolds' border traps, but that wouldn't be a problem for slimes. In principle, they were immune to all physical attacks, which also extended to booby traps. I was still a bit apprehensive, though, considering these would be magical traps...

"Slimes will be able to spot the magic in the traps from a mile away," Shinki said. "I've never heard of a single instance of a slime being caught in a trap."

The biology of slimes continues to amaze me...

In any case, the sirens' cave was declared strictly off-limits. Both kobolds and goblins were instructed to pass any inquiries to the sirens through either Healran or myself.

I think that covers it for now?

By the time we'd ironed all these details out, the goblins were beginning to return from hunting. Shinki had informed them all of the location of the grotto while I wasn't paying attention.

Shinki sure works fast!

The first group of goblins brought back a mamushi.

Oh yeah, those are tasty!

The next group had gathered some fruits.

I wonder where they found those.

Suzuko and Touki's group had caught a giant boar and a maroo.

Hold on a minute, Suzuko! A hobgoblin single-handedly dragging a dead giant boar back to camp is too scary! Not only will it ruin your cutesy image, but you're painting a target on your back that will draw the attention of all the adventurers participating in Project Shiana!

"Mistress! We got giant boar!" Touki crowed, his fangs flashing in delight. It looked slightly threatening, but I was sure he was just smiling. It was hard to be sure at first glance.

"That's great, Touki! Did you catch it all by yourself?" I asked.

"...Suzuko interfered..." Touki looked at the ground, shamed-faced as if worried he was going to be scolded.

"You were the one who got distracted and looked away!" Suzuko protested.

...I'm guessing Touki was in danger, so Suzuko jumped in to save him?

"You've gotten stronger, Touki. Good job." I patted the top of Touki's downcast head soothingly. He didn't have any hair, so his head was smooth.

He's not bald... But it's also not a buzz-cut... So, I guess maybe he is bald?

I was curious about Touki's head, but the issue of letting himself get distracted while hunting was more pressing at the moment.

"But you mustn't let your guard down in front of an enemy!" I said strongly. "If Suzuko hadn't been there, you might've died."

"..."

Nope, you can't just stay silent in this situation!

"When you've made a mistake," I said, "you have to take responsibility and say, 'I'm sorry.'"

"I-I'm sowwy?"

"That's right. Now, can you say, 'Thank you' to Suzuko?"

"...Tank... you?"

"Yeah. When you realize you've done something wrong, you should apologize by saying, 'I'm sorry.' And when someone helps you, you should express your gratitude by saying, 'Thank you,'" I explained.

"Touki understand. Mistress, thank you!"

Oh! Looks like he really does understand!

"You're welcome." I smiled.

Next, Touki turned to Suzuko and thanked her properly as well. Suzuko turned her face away, pouting, but I could see her trying to hide a blush. I was trying to conceal a smirk at the amusing sight when Shinki called out to me.

"Miss, when would you like to hold the 'group meeting' you mentioned earlier?"

Oh, that's right. No time like the present!

"Everyone, gather up!" I called out.

Shinki, Suzuko, and Touki were already there, but Spica ran over, and Nox flew down from somewhere in the trees above, surprising me by landing on Shinki's shoulder.

Did he miss him while we were apart?

Gratia climbed down onto my shoulder.

What are you always doing hiding in my hair, anyway?

Gratia was truly a mysterious creature.

“Haku?”

I didn’t immediately spot Haku. Looking around, I finally found it settled cozily on Sicily’s lap.



So even Sicily's not immune to the special healing properties of slimes...

Once it realized I was looking for it, Haku wiggled out of Sicily's grasp and bounced over to me.

"Myuuu!"

Is it just me, or does it sound like Haku's saying, "Thanks for saving me!" Hold on, Haku! Most people would be seriously jealous of you for being lucky enough to receive a massage from a babe like Sicily!

I stroked Haku, enjoying the slight chill of its soft exterior. Ever since I'd seen Gratia sucked inside of Haku the other day, my incessant curiosity had plagued me...

What would it be like if I were sucked into Shizuku? I bet it would be softer than the most luxurious bed!

Anyway, everyone's here now.

...Oh, except for Gosei and Rikusei.

And Kai and Shizuku...

But I suppose this is the best we can do for now.

"Suzuko, why are you having such a hard time getting along with Spica?" I asked.

"...She puts you in danger, mistress."

"What do you think, Shinki?" I asked.

"If you say you want to keep her by your side, Miss, then she needs training and discipline."

I think the fact that she's still young and excitable is to blame for most of the problems... What kind of 'training' does he have in mind, anyway?

"What do you want, Spica?" I addressed the person in question.

"You're all members of Lady Neema's pack, right? I want to join too!"

I was surprised by Spica's declaration.

My pack? I did accidentally become the goblins' boss, but really, I'm leaving all

the decision-making to Shinki. I'm pretty sure the other goblins are going along with it because they hear Shinki and Suzuko referring to me as their master.

"It's a little different from a pack. A pack is a family. Miss Neema is our master," Shinki explained.

"I really just consider you all as friends..." I said. "Oh, except for Nox, he's family."

Haku and Gratia seemed to deflate at these words.

"Er..."

Haku didn't even have any eyes, but its stare weighed heavily on me. Gratia, too, clicked his fangs together in protest of some kind. I could all but hear them asking, *"What about us?!"*

But, but! Nox is like a pet, the same as Dee... And besides! He's the only animal out of the entire group! He doesn't have any special abilities like the rest of you!

"Screech!"

Nox shrieked and leapt down from Shinki's shoulder to land on the ground at our feet. In response, Gratia jumped off of my shoulder and made his way over to Nox. Coming to a stop directly in front of Nox, Gratia waved his front legs in the air and repeatedly leapt back and forth in a strange, dance-like movement.

Next, Haku joined in, extending its body first vertically, then horizontally, while jumping up and down furiously.

What the heck...?!

"Screech, screech!"

"Well, it looks like one matter has been put to rest, at least," Shinki said.

"What do you mean?!"

Don't tell me Shinki understands the meaning of all this bizarre behavior?!

"The hierarchy. This means Nox is higher-ranked."

Huh? When did they decide that? And how?!

"Umm, like Nox is an older sibling or something?" I ventured.

“I suppose if you’re comparing the group hierarchy to a family, that would make those two like younger siblings to him,” Shinki said.

I don’t think that is a very accurate metaphor...

Maybe it would be more accurate to compare the group hierarchy to social ranks than a sibling relationship?

“Although, if you’re ranking everyone by seniority based on when you met them, that would mean the kobolds should be at the bottom...” Shinki pointed out.

Hmm... There’s also the baby slimes to consider, so the kobolds aren’t quite at the bottom. In any case, if determining ranks will make the group dynamics run smoother, I suppose it’s fine?

“I guess that makes you the eldest brother, right, Shinki?” I said.

Shinki’s the oldest brother, and Nox is the second brother. I met Nox first, but Shinki fits the “oldest brother” role better. Suzuko’s the oldest sister, and Touki is the third brother. Oh, and Shizuku is the second sister...

Is it just my imagination, or do Haku, Gratia, Spica, and Kai all fit the stereotypical image of a big pack of wild youngest siblings?

Gosei and Rikusei, at least, seem a bit more mature, not to mention that they are indeed older than the others.

But the baby slimes are undisputedly the babies of the family.

“Between Haku and Gratia, who is higher ranked?” I asked.

Both of them froze as soon as I said this. They stared unflinchingly at each other.

Just as I was getting uneasy about the intense tension in the air, Haku suddenly leapt high into the air.

“Myu, myu-myuuuuu!”

“Haku says it’s higher,” Shinki translated.

How on Earth did they decide that?!

In any case, Haku had taken the rank of fourth brother.

That means Gratia's at the bottom. The baby slimes are the babies, and he's just above them in the sibling ranking.

Besides, Gratia is still young; he's nowhere near as big as his mother was yet.

In that case, Gosei and Rikusei are the fifth and sixth brothers in this family, just like in their biological family, eh? Spica is the third sister. That technically places her above Gosei and Rikusei. Kai is the seventh brother, Gratia is the eighth brother, and the baby slimes are the babies of the family.

...I should've thought of this earlier, but is Haku male or female?! It's not going to give birth to baby slimes when it gets older, is it? Come to think of it, do slimes even have two sexes like most other species?

"Is Haku a boy or a girl?" I asked.

"Miss, slimes don't have biological sex," Shinki informed me.

I thought not. In that case, I'll count Haku among the females since there are a lot of males in our group. Haku can be the third sister, and Spica the fourth. It's a little strange, considering Spica is physically larger, but I met Haku first, so Haku is Spica's senior in the family hierarchy.

"So it's settled—Suzuko is Spica's older sister!" I declared.

"Older sister?!" the two shouted simultaneously.

What a beautiful harmony!

Their facial expressions were anything *but* harmonious, though. Suzuko looked shocked, while Spica's eyes were gleaming happily.

"If Spica does something dangerous, it's your job as her older sister to kindly but firmly teach her to be more careful, Suzuko," I said.

"...Older sister, huh?" Suzuko didn't say anything else, seemingly lost in thought.

"Mistress, what about boss?" Touki asked gravely. He'd been following our conversation carefully.

"Shinki is everyone's older brother!"

"Older... brudder?"

Pfft! The way he pronounces brother is adorable but ruins his tough-guy image! He can't go around saying "brudder" like a toddler with a straight face like that!

"Why don't you just call him bro?" I suggested. "It's an abbreviation for brother, but should be easier to pronounce."

"Bro?"

Right! If Touki keeps calling Shinki "brudder," I'll be in danger of pulling a muscle from laughing too hard.

He wasn't a battle-hardened mercenary or anything, but Touki *was* tough-looking and handsome, so "bro" suited his image much better than "brudder."

"I have a new older sister!" Spica cheered. "Can I call her 'Big Sister Suzuko'?"

"Of course, you're honorary sisters now! And Shinki and Touki are your honorary big brothers," I said.

Spica's tails wagged feverishly. She was *ecstatic* about gaining a whole host of new brothers and sisters. "Big Brother Shinki! Big Brother Touki!"

Touki seemed to not entirely hate being called big brother if the faint blush he was trying to conceal was anything to go by.

I spotted Shinki run a hand over his face in exasperation, though...

What's up with that pained-looking expression, huh, Shinki?!

A loving family relationship is much better than pack hierarchy, don't you think?! I mean, I know plenty of families in the world don't get along, but...

Sometimes "families" that aren't blood-related turn out to be the closest and most supportive.

"I'm her... older sister?" Suzuko asked. "And she's my younger sister?"

"That's right! Spica, Haku, and Gratia are all your younger siblings."

Gratia did one of his mysterious dances, trying to convey well wishes to his new "siblings." As if picking up on the mood, Haku joined in the dance. For some reason, this was incredibly reassuring.

"Let's be the best of friends, Big sister Suzuko!" Spica said with a grin.

“Tch! Don’t get the wrong idea; I’m only agreeing to this because it’s what my mistress wants!” Suzuko huffed.

That does not fill me with confidence...! But it’s cute to see her protesting so much; I can tell she doesn’t dislike Spica nearly as much as she claims to.

“Next, let’s call Gosei, Rikusei, Kai, Shizuku, and the baby slimes and tell them what we’ve decided!” I announced.

We’ll look like quite an unusual family when we’re all gathered together! I’m looking forward to it!

10 - Shinki Comes Home With Us

THE named-by-Neema group were all getting along now, so that was one problem solved!

I headed back to the kobolds' territory after that, but Shinki stayed behind for the time being to discuss the plan moving forward with Suzuko. That and to add a few "finishing touches" to the grotto. I was excited to see how it would turn out.

When we reached the kobolds' cave system, Gosei and Rikusei came out to greet us. Hanley accompanied them, and just seeing him made my tension melt away.

But before I could leap on Hanley, Karna darted past me.

"Excuse me! Would you please allow me to collect a sample of your fur?" she asked.

"My fur?"

"That's right. Neema says she wants a stuffed animal with fur just like yours, and as her older sister, I want to do everything in my power to grant her wish!"

The look in Karna's eyes is scary! That's the same expression Mama wears when she looks at Haku and Gratia—the eyes of a researcher!

"...I don't mind, but will that really be enough to replicate my fur?" Hanley asked.

"Hehe, you know what they always say—things worth doing aren't always easy!"

She's really getting into this!

In any case, it had certainly been a productive day. Karna collected a sample of Hanley's fur while I petted and snuggled with him to my heart's content. Even the knights got in on the action, playing with the kobold children.

I would never tell a soul how the knights' faces became almost droopy with light-hearted joy when Hanley's grandchildren surrounded them to protect their cool-guy image.

We made our way down the mountain before sunset and spent the night at the village chief's house again. The following morning, we met back up with Shinki at the base of the mountain, where we all loaded into the carriage and set off for Fauxbe.

We didn't have enough time to visit Kai, Shizuku, and the baby slimes this trip, so I'll have to shower them with love next time we're here!

Our return journey was swift and uneventful. We'd almost spent more time traveling than actually at the destination this time. I was curious to see what Shinki would think of his first visit to our house.

When we reached the house, Marjace, Paul, Dee, and Pluma came out to meet us.

"Welcome home, Lord Ralf, Lady Karna, and Lady Neema."

"Thanks for coming out to meet us, Marjace and Paul," Ralf acknowledged.

"It's good to be home!" Karna said cheerfully, sounding dignified and ladylike as ever.

What should I say? It would come off as tacky if I said the same thing as Karna...

"We had a safe trip!"

In the end, all I came up with was a report on our safety. Luckily, Marjace and Paul didn't seem bothered and welcomed me home with smiles.

"We've prepared tea. There are also some of your favorite snacks, Lady Neema."

Snacks?! All right! Oh, but first...

"Dee! I'm home!" I exclaimed.

Dee wagged his tail energetically as I gave him a tight hug. Dee smelled of fresh sunshine, just as he always did. And his fur was just as luscious as usual!

The silky fur flowed through my fingers without catching a single tangle. I could feel the fluffiness against my palms, which was not diminished at all by its thick and glossy texture.

This proves that they've been taking good care of him and not neglecting his grooming while I was gone. But today, it's my turn to brush his fur!

"Ba-gyaa!"

Pluma spread his wings open as if to remind me he was there as well.

"Were you a good boy while I was gone, Pluma?" I asked.

"Squawk!"

Pluma butted his head against my hand, begging for pets, and I happily obliged. As I stroked the top of his head, he closed his eyes in apparent bliss. What most drew my attention, though, was how much the health of his feathers had improved since coming to live at our house.

The stiff outer feathers felt less brittle and more bouncy. My fingers glided over them, meeting only a faint, pleasant resistance. I couldn't help but think that these feathers would make the perfect stuffing for a feather mattress.

I was certain we had our gardener, Ayle, to thank for the improvement in Pluma's plumage. *He definitely did something when I wasn't looking! I'll grill him later to figure out how he accomplished this!*

"Would you please introduce the gentleman accompanying you?" As Marjace said this, I followed his gaze to find it fixed on Shinki.

Oh, that's right! How should I explain Shinki...?

"His name is Shinki. He'll be Neema's bodyguard from now on," Ralf explained before I had a chance to say anything.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Shinki. My name is Marjace Dasnee. I am currently the steward of this manor."

"My name is Paul Dasnee. I am currently serving as a butler for the young ladies of the Osphe family. Please feel free to ask me if there's anything you don't understand."

The two introduced themselves politely. I was surprised to hear that Paul had been appointed Karna's and my butler without my knowledge.

I guess that means the other apprentice butler was assigned to Ralf?

"I'm Shinki. Nice to meet you both." Shinki lowered his head and bowed respectfully to the two men.

It was likely just an observed and mimicked gesture, but either way, it was my first time seeing Shinki bow properly. When he met Miss Belle, he'd merely nodded at her, after all.

Dee cautiously approached Shinki. He stared up at Shinki, his nose twitching and his body stiff. Even his tail stood straight up behind him.

Looks like even Dee's nervous about meeting Shinki for the first time.

"His name is Dee," I said. "Dee, this is Shinki. Please try to get along with him, okay?"

Dee and Shinki stared unblinkingly at one another.

What should I do? I get the feeling I probably shouldn't interfere...

Shinki was the first to move. He knelt on one knee, bringing himself to eye level with Dee.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Dee."



“Woof!”

All the tension seemed to leak out of Dee, and he barked once as if saying, “The pleasure’s all mine!”

What was that about?

“What just happened between you and Dee?” I asked Shinki, unable to hold back my curiosity.

“We determined our ranking in the hierarchy. Lord Dee has been with you much longer than I, so my rank is below his,” he said matter-of-factly.

Umm... So I guess that means Dee is number one, ranked before everyone else? Normally, hierarchy is determined by physical strength, so this logic is unexpectedly human. I’m surprised to hear it coming from a monster. But if this means Shinki’s been accepted into the family, I won’t question it!

After a bit of indecision, I made my peace with the situation.

But before I can safely declare Shinki welcome in our home, there’s still the considerable hurdle of obtaining Mama’s approval to overcome! She wouldn’t tell me to take him back after we’ve already come all this way, right?

“Where is Mother?” I asked.

“Her Grace is in the conservatory,” Marjace said.

The conservatory, huh? I don’t like that place...

The conservatory was larger than a sunroom but smaller than a greenhouse. Essentially, it was a glass-paneled room attached to the main house. Rather than decorative flowers, it contained a plethora of research plants. Frankly, it was more like a jungle than a garden.

Most of the plants in this world use the sun’s energy to grow, just like the plants on Earth. I wasn’t sure if the process was quite the same as photosynthesis or not, though. However, there were a small number of plants that survived by feeding on magic.

All of the plants in the conservatory were the magic-consuming type. They were incredibly colorful, sometimes overwhelmingly so. Even the leaves and

stalks of the plants were brightly colored, with blues, reds, and various other shades. It was enough to make you dizzy looking at them all.

Even knowing that they weren't dangerous, I couldn't help but unconsciously expect these plants to come to life at any moment and chomp down on me like a Venus flytrap.

When I'd asked Mama why she kept these plants in the conservatory if they didn't need sunlight to survive, she explained the colors looked more vibrant in natural lighting.

There were also several varieties of *dangerous* magic-consuming plants, but those were kept in the greenhouse at the Royal Magical Research Center. I'd gotten the staff to let me view the dangerous plants through the window while remaining safely outside the greenhouse, but they were *scary*. Anyone who didn't use magical protections before entering the greenhouse would literally be eaten alive.

Seeing them in person, I'd had a hard time believing those plants weren't considered a sub-species of monsters.

In any case, I did my best to shake off those unsettling thoughts and lead Shinki to the conservatory.

I knocked on the door, and a moment later, Mama's butler answered.

"We've come to inform Mother of our return home," I said.

"Certainly. This way, please."

We all followed the butler into the conservatory, but Shinki stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Sorry, I was distracted by the flaeri."

I followed Shinki's gaze to a plant with meaty leaves like an aloe. The leaves weren't jagged like an aloe plant's and were blue, but the shape was similar. There was a large green flower at the center of the plant.

"This one?" I didn't know much about plants, so I couldn't identify which one he was talking about by name.

“Yeah, it’s very delicious.”

Huh?! You eat this crazy-looking plant?!

My reaction was pretty similar to how I’d reacted to learning he ate mamushi.

“...What does it taste like?” I asked.

“It’s sweet. The females and children especially love this plant, so I’ll be a hotshot if I bring some home,” he said.

Heh, it sounds strange to hear Shinki use words like “hotshot.” Where did he learn slang from, anyway?

If they like it so much, maybe I’ll bring the goblins some flaeri next time we visit. Oh, but I don’t really want to become a “hotshot” among the goblins, so maybe I won’t bring them any flaeri.

“Neema?”

Karna’s voice brought me back to my senses, and I continued to where Mama waited.

“Welcome home, you three.” Mama was sitting in an armchair, relaxing. However, a veritable mountain of papers was on the table beside her.

Was she working before we came in?

After announcing our return, Ralf apologized for interrupting her while she was working, so it looked like I’d guessed correctly.

“So you’re the Shinki I’ve heard so much about, hm?” she said. “I know this is sudden, but would you be willing to vow upon your name to protect Neema no matter what may come?”

“I’m not opposed to making such a vow, but is it necessary, seeing as I’m already bound to her by my name?” Shinki asked.

“I know that you are unable to disobey Neema’s direct orders or do anything to cause her harm. But you understand, of course, that as her mother, I want to cover all my bases just to be safe.” She wore a polite smile fitting for a noble lady, but her sharp gaze pierced straight through Shinki.

Oh, so that’s how it is? I didn’t know that naming a monster had those kinds of

effects.

Knowing this, a person might be tempted to go around naming monsters left and right to assert power over them, but it wasn't that simple. The monster had to recognize and accept their name for it to have any effect, so even if you told them, "Your name is Bob!" it wouldn't do anything if the monster in question didn't understand human speech.

That explained why there weren't any monster-tamers. I guess, in a way, you could argue that I was the first.

In that case, how could the dragons at the dragon stables be tamed? I'd learned from Dan that because dragons, in general, were highly intelligent, they were universally capable of vowing upon their name.

However, this wasn't necessarily the case for other monster species.

"I see... I suppose that makes sense. Very well." After saying this, Shinki knelt in front of me and, while staring solemnly up at me, vowed upon his name. "I vow upon my name that I, Shinki, will protect you, Lady Nefertima, for as long as there is life in my body."

"...Uh, th-thanks?" I froze, unsure how to respond, before eventually coming out with this short remark.

Well, Mama isn't scolding me, so I guess that's good enough!

"We'll need to prepare appropriate clothing for Shinki," Mama said, satisfied. "If he'll be accompanying Neema in society, he needs to dress properly."

Shinki was in simple peasant clothing: a long-sleeved shirt and serviceable pants. That was the best we could find in Icoff Village. Honestly, I thought we'd been fortunate to find *anything* in his size.

Mama's butler piped up, saying that he would see it arranged right away, which I took to mean that he would call for a tailor to visit the house.

Unless there's someone among our servants who can make clothes? I wouldn't put it past the nearly superhuman servants working in this house!

"Now then, we'll need to get everyone to agree to keep the fact that Shinki is a monster secret," Mama said. "That goes for you three, as well as the knights

and royal guards who accompanied you.”

I doubted that either the unit leader and his men or the royal guards would leak information gained in the line of duty, but was she planning to make it an official request from the Osphe family or have the king make it a royal decree?

“I understand the sentiment, but orders from members of the aristocracy don’t work on the royal knighthood, remember?” Ralf pointed out.

Oh, that’s right! The authority of the nobility is useless when it comes to the royal knighthood. In that case, I guess we’ll have to ask the king? Or maybe Grandpa Gouche?

“I will petition the king, so it shouldn’t be a problem,” Mama replied.

Huh? Even if we ask the king, there’s no guarantee he’ll agree. How can she declare so confidently that it “shouldn’t be a problem”?

“His Majesty was Mother’s senior classmate in their school days. Besides, if Shinki’s identity were made public, the citizens would suffer from the resulting chaos. We can be fairly certain that His Majesty will order the knights and royal guards’ silence to avoid that happening,” Karna explained to me in a covert whisper.

Ohh, now I get it. It would cause trouble for His Majesty, as well, if it got around that Shinki is a monster.

“But what about Shinki’s horns? They’re a dead give-away!” I said.

Shinki’s appearance was eye-catching, to say the least. The coloring of his blue hair and red eyes was rare but not unheard of. And the tattoo-like patterns all over his body could be covered easily enough by his clothes. But there was not much we could do to hide the two black horns on his head.

“Let’s pretend he’s a beastperson from the Beak Tribe,” Mama proposed.

Beak Tribe? I’ve never heard of them before!

“Who are the Beak Tribe?”

“The Beak Tribe were beastpeople believed to be descended from parmas. It’s said that the parmas were feared for their fantastic appearance and over-hunted until eventually, they returned to the arms of the God of Creation,” Ralf

explained.

By “returned to the arms of the God of Creation,” he means driven into extinction. This manner of phrasing is just an attempt to alleviate humanity of the guilt of driving them extinct.

According to the teachings of the Church of Divine Creation, creation and destruction were the jurisdiction of God alone. Since it was unbelievable that God would destroy a species he had purposely created, it was phrased as the species “returning to the arms of God.”

Destruction was believed to be a direct result of God’s fury, so when a country fell, it was concluded they must have done something to incur God’s wrath. However, due to the existence of Cresiolle, the goddess of mercy and rebirth, a fallen country could be rebuilt as a new country.

I thought it all was a load of bull, but it was written in the holy scripture. I’d only read children’s picture-book versions of it, though, so I didn’t know much about it.

I suppose it must be correct if Ralf says so.

“The beastpeople still exist, even though the parma are all gone?” I asked.

“I’ve heard that due to their appearance, many members of the Beak Tribe were mistaken for demons and sent to the arms of the Goddess. However, it’s said the few who remain are under the protection of the elemental kings,” said Mama.

It sounds more like a legend or myth than history...

But, in any case, I think what she’s suggesting is that we pretend to have taken in a super-rare type of beastperson?

“Wouldn’t it be rather suspicious for us to take a member of the endangered Beak Tribe under our protection only to assign them as Neema’s bodyguard?” Ralf questioned.

Ralf has a point... If we really had rescued a rare beastperson, the normal course of action would be to see them safely returned to their people.

“Hmm, but what if the person in question said they wanted to repay the

favor? If he pledged himself as his savior's bodyguard?" Mama suggested, looking amused.

Isn't this starting to resemble the plot of a dramatic soap opera or something?

That was far from an original story: a person who owes a great debt takes up the sword and becomes a knight to serve the person who saved their life while risking their own.

"Hehe. He escaped from slavers and was wandering lost in the forest when Neema saved him! Touched by her kindness, he decided to dedicate his life to protecting her..."

Helloooo, Earth to Karna! Come back to reality now, please!

Ugh, it's no use. She's gone off to a fantasy world.



I wanted to protest, “Which dime novel did you get that scenario from?!” but I also couldn’t come up with a better cover story, so I supposed that would have to do.

“You’re really excited about this, aren’t you, Karna?” Mama said. “So, does everyone agree with the cover story that Shinki escaped from slavers and was saved by Neema?”

The main character of this story seemed to have no interest whatsoever, and Ralf didn’t complain, so Shinki would pose as a beastperson from the Beak Tribe who I’d saved after he escaped from slavers.

In reality, goblins kidnapped me, and then we became friends, and Shinki achieved a mysterious and unexplained evolution, but...

“Now that that’s settled! Ralf, you’ve got meetings scheduled with the head of each guild tomorrow, right? And Neema, you’ll come with me to visit the adventurers’ guild,” Mama announced.

Nice! I can finally visit the adventurers’ guild headquarters in the royal city?! Absolutely! I’m there! Let’s go!

“How will three days from now do for bringing Shinki, Haku, and Gratia to the Magical Research Center?” Mama asked.

Oh, right. There was still that...

I’ll need to watch the entire time to make sure no one hurts them.

“I’m going too!” I declared.

“That’s fine, but you’ll need to behave yourself. Do you promise to be good?”

“I promise!”

I was still a little worried, but there was a possibility we might be able to determine what kinds of special powers Haku and Gratia possessed...

I’ll keep my guard up, but I have to admit I’m looking forward to seeing what they can do.

Once Mama dismissed us, I called for Dee and Pluma, and we played together for a while in the garden. Haku and Gratia competed to see who could jump

higher while Nox splashed around in the pond. Everyone was thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Dee and I played a game of tag.

It wouldn't do to let myself get out of shape. Besides, I wanted to build up my endurance.

Shinki sat in the shade, watching the rest of us play.

Before long, Paul came to fetch us, saying that the tailor had arrived.

So our super-multitalented servants aren't going to make his clothes in-house?

In any case, I suppose I'll cut my playtime short and go along to watch them take Shinki's measurements.

But I'm curious... Did Haku or Gratia win the jumping contest?

11 - I Finally Got to Meet This Species!

MAMA brought me with her to the adventurers' guild, as promised.

The guild house in the royal city was massive. It was at least five times the size of the guild house in Cass, where Miss Bell worked. It was still significantly smaller than our family's manor, but that didn't change the fact that the guild house was much larger than I'd expected.

Shinki had the day off—or rather, his new clothing wasn't finished yet, so he was forbidden from going out—and as a result, Mama was watching over me today. Of course, we also brought along a servant to act as security.

Mama tugged my hand, leading me into the building, where a young woman, who I presumed to be the receptionist, greeted us. She led us to a room at the rear of the building.

It wasn't a reception room but the guild master's office.

Is it okay for us to go in when the guild master isn't here?

The room had a very different feel from Papa's office. All manner of unidentifiable items—that I couldn't even guess the purpose of—filled it. The bookshelf that dominated one wall was packed to max capacity, and more books were scattered across the top of the desk.

Papa's office was strictly minimalistic, containing only the barest array of necessary items. A storage closet next to his office stored books and documents, so aside from his desk, the only other thing in his office was the lounge chair by the window.

Curious about the mysterious items filling this room, my gaze darted back and forth from one to the next. There was a statue that portrayed what the artist had supposed an elemental spirit might look like and a black sphere that I thought might be a fossil, just to name a few. There was also a taxidermy of an animal I'd never seen before. I wondered if it would be okay to touch it.

I glanced at Mama, taking dignified sips of her tea, and thought I might get away with it. Slowly, ever so discretely, I reached out my hand toward the taxidermy.

The animal looked almost like a rodent, wearing a jointed shell like a pill bug's. It was similar to the scaled shell of an armadillo, except it had overlapping plates like a pill bug's. Unlike a pill bug, though, this animal's shell was covered in glossy scales.

I suspected this animal could curl up and use its shell to protect its body, just like an armadillo, but the scales covering it were bright purple.

When I touched the shell, it was unexpectedly rough. The scales appeared smooth at first glance, but the texture against my fingers was bumpy as if covered by tiny spikes. Tapping lightly on it produced a dull and heavy sound that led me to believe it was considerably durable.

"My sincerest apologies for keeping you waiting, ladies."

Someone entered the room while I was distracted by the many mysterious items. They appeared to be the owner of this office.

"It's been a long time since I've had the pleasure of your company, Lady Osphe."

My jaw nearly dropped in shock when I caught sight of the speaker.

Ah! No, no—bad, Neema! Behave appropriately as a young noble lady, or I'll smear mud on Mama's good name! I am a lady— Time to act like one! I can do this!

I chanted those words over and over inside my head as if casting a spell for dignity and refinement on myself. The moment I realized what kind of person was standing before us, excitement coursed through my veins.

"As requested, I've brought the person who came up with the idea to meet with you." Mama was beaming as only a proud parent could.

"She's... a child?"

"Yes. She's my youngest daughter."

"Forgive me. It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady. My name is Riliardo Judar

Wagajeetar. I am the guild master of the adventurers' guild's central headquarters here in the Kingdom of Gaché."

I'm so sorry, but I did not get your name at all. Could you please repeat that?

"I am Dayland Osphe's youngest daughter, Nefertima."

I had to be on my best manners in front of Mama. Aware of every inch of my body, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, I elegantly greeted the guild master.

"Please call me Ardo."

Thank God, there was no way I would remember his name—I couldn't even understand it when he said it!

"Um... So, you're an elf, Ardo?" I asked.

"Yes, I am. Is it your first time meeting one of my people, Lady Nefertima?"

"Yes."

Whoa! He is an elf! I was a little worried I might embarrass myself by guessing wrong since he looks different from the typical image we have of an elf on Earth, but he really is an elf!

It was the ears that gave it away. They weren't the type that looked like human ears with a pointed tip—no, they were long and tapered like a bamboo leaf.

His hair was short and green, and his eyes were green. He wore a monocle on one eye, making him look wise, but he wasn't exceptionally beautiful. It wasn't that he wasn't attractive, just that his beauty wasn't at a level that stood out in our country, which seemed to have an unusually high proportion of beautiful people.

He wasn't particularly androgynous, as one might expect of an elf, and he was *tall*. I thought he might even be as tall as Shinki.

"Now then, if you'll please take a seat, Lady Nefertima..."

At Ardo's urging, I sat beside Mama.

I still can't believe I met an elf in a place like this!

“What made you want to implement this project, Lady Nefertima?”

Uh, is it just me, or does this suddenly sound like an interview? What should I say?

“Friends should be protected, correct?” I countered cautiously.

Our relationship dynamic is more like master-and-servant in some ways, but that’s too difficult to explain, so friends it is!

“But surely you’re aware that monsters cause harm to people?”

“That’s just more proof of why this project is necessary, is it not?” I argued. “Goblins and kobolds, if allowed to live freely and undisturbed in the forest, would have no reason to attack anyone.”

“You’re suggesting that they wouldn’t attack humans... or rather, other races, unprovoked?”

What is he trying to get at? Whether or not they’d cause harm to others depends on the situation.

“I see, so Ardo, you’re saying you wouldn’t fight back if attacked?” I asked.

“What? Of course, I would retaliate.”

I thought so. It’s only natural to strike back after being attacked to protect yourself.

“Well, there you have it,” I said. “Whether they cause harm or not is dependent on the actions of others.”

I’m sure there are exceptions. Take ogres, for example; they’ve got strongly ingrained combative instincts, which lead them to frequently attack other species. Although I admit, I don’t know much about ogres since there aren’t any among my monster army. If I ended up befriending ogres and orcs, there wouldn’t be room for everybody on that mountain!

That said, I can’t promise I won’t make friends with them if we happen to cross paths in the future...

I guess that’s all up to divine providence!

“So, then, why is it that you wish to involve adventurers in this project?” he

asked.

“It won’t help the monsters in the long run to simply be hidden away from the world, coddled, and protected,” I explained. “At some point, they’ll venture out into the world, so it’s best they learn how to protect themselves.”

I’d realized this after seeing the kobolds, but as long as we were protecting them all in one place, we’d eventually reach our limit. Even if we did our best to control the population, all living creatures have the instinct to thrive and prosper.

And if we merely sent off the excess population to live elsewhere, it would essentially be the same as breeding monsters for proliferation. If their population continued to grow outside of the protected area of Project Shiana, humans would eventually subjugate them.

Currently, the threat posed by Runohark had greatly decreased the overall number of monsters.

But once that threat was gone?

The number of goblins and kobolds would naturally increase due to the relative safety of Mount Reitimo, and some would inevitably break off and set out on their own. Some might even be stronger individuals who’d received names, and many would likely be skilled fighters. As a result, the death rate would decrease, and the breeding rate would increase.

...Hold on, isn’t this ultimately going to lead to a distortion in the balance of nature, like Papa was talking about?

“You seem like an intelligent girl, Lady Nefertima. I see you’ve realized the flaw in your plan.”

Ardo had been watching me think. The fact that he’d used the word “intelligent” to describe his observation just showed that he was a decent guy.

I suppose he’d have to be charismatic to become the guild master of such a large organization.

“I’m embarrassed to admit I have realized the flaw in my logic,” I said, refusing to let my smile waver. Even if I admitted embarrassment, I was not

about to let it be mistaken for weakness.

We'll need to have a meeting about this right away! The biggest issue is how to make it so that the monster's population doesn't grow too large.

To be perfectly honest, the goblin population would probably be thinned out naturally. With their incredible lack of critical thinking skills and all the dangers present on the mountain, it was inevitable that some would die.

But the kobolds... they were a different story.

Perhaps due to their propensity to name their children when they came of age, the kobolds evolved into high kobolds at a high rate, and their intellectual abilities were also quite high, likely in part because of their linguistic abilities.

Not to mention, they have tons of kids! Am I going to be forced to order their deaths to control their population?

That was a far cry from the "safe place" I'd promised Sicily.

I didn't want to take this path. But even if I ordered them not to reproduce, there was only so much they could do to resist their instincts, especially during mating season.

Hmm. When in trouble, ask Sol!

"Hey, Sol!" I said, communicating with him telepathically.

"What is it, young one?"

"Is there any magic that can prevent goblins and kobolds from over-reproducing?"

"Hm, that should be easy enough. Just don't let them have children."

Come on, Sol, get with it, will you?! The whole reason I'm asking you for advice is because I can't possibly prevent them from having children!

"Are you saying I can just tell them 'don't have kids' and they won't?"

"Just saying it won't do anything. You need to cut off their ability to reproduce."

Huh? Wait, whaaaaat?!

Sol, you're not suggesting I cut off the males' you-know-whats, are you?!

"Isn't that like castration?!" I asked, horrified.

"Ah, yes! That's what you call it. The weak-willed will produce children willy-nilly, even with partners who are not their mate. I'm certain there was a spell for this in the ancient magic..."

Of all the ridiculous nonsense! Are you seriously telling me it's possible to cast a spell for magical birth control?! I'm sure the only magic that can physically alter the body is healing magic...

"Could it be a type of healing magic?" I ventured.

"I believe it was a manifestation of the Goddess's Benevolence."

Hold on; let's try and summarize this.

First of all, as a form of healing magic, there's a spell that works like birth control. However, given that it's ancient magic, there's a likely possibility we won't be able to use it nowadays. If we can find some surviving literature on the topic, Ralf or Hanley might be able to figure out how to cast the spell.

...But wait. If a birth control spell exists as a form of healing magic, that means it was necessary for the greater good at some point in the past, right? Overpopulation would throw off the delicate balance of nature, so perhaps they used it to strategically prevent such a catastrophe?

"I have a question... Was there ever a time that the monster population grew wildly out of hand?" I asked out loud.

Ardo tilted his head to the side, puzzled by the sudden question that had no clear connection with the previous conversation. "Not to the best of my knowledge."

Could that mean that monsters capable of using magic or other species, such as elves or beastpeople, used that spell on animals and monsters that got close to overpopulation? If they were able to prevent overpopulation, that means there's a high likelihood that there's someone somewhere who still knows the birth control spell!

"Are there any elves who can use healing magic?" I asked.

"It's rare, but there are some who can."

I can have the elemental spirits search for an elf who knows the birth control spell! I remember reading in a book that elves can see elemental spirits, so it stands to reason that they should be able to communicate with them somehow, right?

If it were a beastperson or monster, I'd have to search the old-fashioned way...

But all we need is one person who knows the spell! If we can find someone who can teach us how it works, Ralf and Hanley can learn how to cast it themselves.

All right, I've found a path to follow!

"Thanks, Sol! I think this might work!"

"I don't know what exactly you're trying to do, but if I helped, then I suppose that's all that matters."

I cut the telepathic connection with Sol and turned back to Ardo.

"All right, how about this: we won't let any monsters leave the site of Project Shiana until after they've been castrated," I suggested.

"C-Castrated...?!"

"That's right. We don't have to worry about overpopulation if they can't reproduce, right?"

"I suppose that's true, but..." Ardo wore a conflicted expression, somewhere between amusement and distress.

"I thought you were being obstinately dense, but it looks like you've found a solution, albeit a strange and entirely unexpected one," Mama giggled.

"Dense"?! Ouch, Mama, that stings!

Hold on! The fact that Mama was sitting back silently watching all this unfold must mean that she'd already realized this, didn't she?! She already picked up on the weak point in our plan for Project Shiana, the fact that we'd be unable to control the increase in the monsters' population, and was keeping quiet!

In that case, Papa must also have been pretending not to notice?!

...Which must mean... My parents were testing me?!

“But how do you suggest we prevent the monsters from reproducing?” Ardo asked.

I was a little pissed but tabled it for the moment.

Ignoring Mama, I focused on Ardo. “Apparently, there was a birth control spell in the ancient healing magic. Do you know if the elves have passed it down?”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing, but I also haven’t encountered an elf healer in at least two ages.”

Huh?! Two ages?!

An “age” is equivalent to 100 years, so just how old is Ardo?!

On the continent of Larshia, one year was called a cycle. One hundred cycles, aka 100 years, was called an age. I’d never heard it used in conversation, but 100 ages were called a divinium.

The term “divinium” got its name from the “divine age” 10,000 years ago, when it’s believed that God used to walk the earth, but there was no concrete proof in modern times that he’d ever actually come down to the planet, so this was simply a myth.

It’s hard to prove anything about a time so long ago!

“Forgive me, but how old are you, Ardo?” I asked.

“I’m around 300 years old.”

He said that very vaguely... Don’t tell me he doesn’t even remember his exact age anymore?! I’ve heard that elves live a really long time, but if he’s 300 years old, that would mean he was alive for the founding of the Kingdom of Gaché, right?

“Finding a healer who knows how to use that spell will be difficult,” he said.

“I plan to ask the elemental spirits to help search for them,” I replied.

It’ll probably be a piece of cake for the wind spirits!

“I see. His Highness is also involved in this plan, so that might work.”

I could ask Will and Lars, or Sol, or even Shinki. Come to think of it, a lot of people in my life can communicate with elemental spirits, can't they?

"I'll ask Sol," I decided. "He was the one who gave me the idea in the first place."

"Sol?"

Oh, looks like Ardo hasn't heard about Sol.

"He's the fire dragon that lives in the northern mountains."

Mama! Why are you stealing my thunder?! I was just getting to that!

"You may have noticed her spacing out earlier; I suspect she was communicating with him telepathically," Mama said.

You're not wrong, but I was also lost in thought for a bit.

"Then she's bonded with the fire dragon?"

"He has considerably refrained from a true-name exchange due to her age. I suppose you could say they've unofficially bonded?"

Hey, hey, hey, Mama! Don't say it like that—you're clearly bragging! Let me speak for myself, will you?!

"I see. So the fire dragon long proclaimed the king of the primordial dragons has found his master at long last, eh?" Ardo mused.

Was I imagining things, or did he just say something unbelievably shocking?! I could swear he just said that Sol is the king of the primordial dragons...

...You know what? I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear anything. Sol's never mentioned anything about that to me, after all.

"In any case, how will the adventurers' guild proceed?" I asked.

"Yes, returning to the topic at hand; unfortunately, I can't give you a definitive answer at this time. The issue of the monster's breeding won't be resolved unless we can find someone who can use the birth control spell. Furthermore, it would involve the high possibility of losing some of our promising young members, which would be a blow to the guild."

Hmm... Essentially, he's saying the guild can't get behind this plan unless we

can remove the detracting factor of the possibility of adventurers dying. For that, we'll need the magical item Ralf mentioned that will prevent anyone from dying. I wonder how that's coming along?

I asked Mama about it.

"At this stage, the answer is that it's impossible to entirely prevent any deaths," she said.

Looks like it's going to prove difficult after all. How are they planning to prevent deaths, anyway? Teleportation magic won't work, and healing magic has its limits—not the least of which is that a healer needs to be present.

Maybe some kind of beefed-up protection spell?

"What kind of magical item is it?" I asked.

"I can't say here," Mama replied. "I will announce it once the prototype produces the desired result."

Grr, I think I might die of curiosity! But I guess it's a confidential trade secret since she can't talk about it in front of Ardo?

"I'll be looking forward to that announcement," Aldo replied.

I could hear the unspoken undertone he didn't voice out loud: Until then, the guild won't be doing anything that doesn't benefit us.

I think I'll leave these adult matters involving negotiation of interests to Mama, and I'll concentrate on searching for the birth control spell.

In the end, the adventurers' guild would not be participating in Project Shiana—for the time being, at least.

But don't think I'll cut my losses and give up here! This project has become a joint effort involving the entire Osphe family! We'll show you what we can accomplish working together!

We left the adventurers' guild behind, and once we reached our house, I bombarded Mama with questions.

"I understand why you were keeping quiet, Mother, but what would you have done if I hadn't been able to come up with a solution?"

“In regards to the monsters’ reproduction, I would leave it up to nature. However, we would have to choose where to release them carefully.”

Huh? Is she talking about letting nature whittle down the population? That doesn’t sound like much of a solution...

“If we released them in harsh terrain, nature would make sure only the fittest survived. And even if exceptionally strong individuals were born, we could turn them over to the knighthood to use for training.”

Uh... What?! She’s suggesting that whenever abnormally strong monsters are born, they should be handed over to the knighthood to be used as a guinea pig... or rather as a practice dummy?! Mama, I knew you were calculating, but that’s downright cold!

...Although I suppose I don’t have a right to judge others for using the monsters...

“Neema, we are members of the highest nobility,” she reminded me. “We have a duty to the citizens of our country above all else. That means using every resource available to us—yes, up to and including the monsters—to our benefit. If the knighthood is strong, the people will feel safe. Furthermore, with an enemy before their eyes to fight and a populace at their backs counting on their protection, the knighthood will be too occupied to turn their fangs on the country itself.”

...Am I the only person terrified of Mama from time to time?

I understood worrying about the possibility of a coup d’état if the knighthood became too strong, but wasn’t it just as likely that social unrest would erupt if the monsters’ population grew too large and they became too powerful?

“I wonder if it will go that smoothly...” I pondered aloud.

“Heh. Unrest is inevitable, dear. However, so long as the dissatisfied can feel accomplished, that unrest can be managed.”

I see. She’s referring to the sense of accomplishment from eradicating monsters and protecting the people. How tightly the dissatisfaction needs to be controlled would depend on the skill of the leader.

Mama's suggestion might work if we can't find a birth control spell, but I'd like to avoid relocating the goblins and kobolds to harsh terrain if at all possible.

Yeah, we need to get on finding that spell, pronto! Oh, and I'll also need to explain all of this to Sicily. Hmm, but I have no way of contacting her. What should I do?

I talked it over with Shinki, and we had the wind spirits deliver our words back and forth. I must've looked crazy, carrying on a complete conversation seemingly with myself.

"Sicily, can you hear me?"

After a short pause, Sicily's voice reached my ears.

"Lady Neema?"

Sicily sounded surprised, but once I explained that the wind spirits were enabling this conversation, she accepted it and even commented that this was a convenient way to communicate.

I know how you feel!

"We have to prevent the kobold and goblin populations from growing too large."

I summarized the important points of my conversation with Ardo, and by the time I'd finished, Sicily was growling ferociously.

Elemental spirits, you don't have to convey that part!

What sounded like a dog growling right in my ear was alarming. Especially considering I'd never heard Sicily growl before, no matter how angry she was. I could only imagine how enraged she was.

"Children are our treasures. If it comes to killing our children, we'll sooner fight to the death."

I see, so kobolds are that type of creature.

In nature, some species will kill their own young. Of course, it's always for a reason, and they only do it because it's ingrained in their instincts. But because the kobolds are highly intelligent, they're of the variety that considers protecting

their children as a crucial element of the instinct to carry on their species.

“I don’t think there will be any problem, in the beginning, for groups to split off and leave your pack. The kobold population has decreased significantly from what it once was. But in the future, if the population increases too much, you’ll be targeted for subjugation.”

If the kobolds who were born and raised on Mount Reitimo continued breaking off and leaving, not only would it likely turn out as Mama suggested, but at least some of them would almost certainly be hunted down.

I suppose you could argue that this, on its own, was a form of natural selection, but that wasn’t for me to say one way or the other.

“We are not afraid to die fighting. However, I will not allow you to steal the futures of the children meant to be born to us.”

Don’t get me wrong, I want to love those cute little baby kobolds too!

Hmm, this doesn’t look like it’s going to work.

I don’t think I’ll be able to get Ardo on board if they outright refuse to even consider using the birth control spell, but maybe we can compromise by agreeing that they’ll use it once they reach the limit of acceptable population size.

In that scenario, we’ll have to determine what a reasonable population size is, though.

“Do you think there are any kobolds who would be willing to use the birth-control spell to remain in your pack?”

“...There may be some...”

In that case, once the population reaches its limit, we could recruit volunteers willing to use the spell. But first, we’ll need to find someone who knows the spell! Then we can consult with them and maybe find another option for those who don’t want to use it.

It will require me to lie to Ardo, but as long as we make it so the kobold population doesn’t grow out of hand and there’s no detriment to the adventurers’ guild, he probably won’t find out.

The benefit to the adventurers' guild in this situation was the adventurers themselves, who would be a source of revenue. It sounded bad to phrase it like that, but at the end of the day, the entire organization depended on their existence.

"I won't plan on using the birth control spell, then, but can we at least agree to keep it on the table as a last-resort option?" I said.

We would reserve the birth control spell as a last resort and continue to look for another solution that didn't involve relocating kobolds to harsh terrain.

It can't hurt to keep our options open and have multiple backup plans, after all.

"...Very well. But if it looks like we're going to have to use the birth control spell, please inform me as soon as possible," Sicily requested.

"Of course!"

"Also, I will be the first to undergo the spell. If it has any negative effect that causes me to bring trouble to my pack, please put me down."

Whaaat?! She's offering herself up as a guinea pig?!

"But that would mean... Sicily, you would..."

"Kobolds have a code of honor. If we become weak, losing what makes us a kobold, and end up being nothing more than a burden to our pack, we'd prefer a clean end, fighting and dying with honor."

...Is this the code of the samurai or something?!

Despite both being monsters, the kobolds and the goblins are so different!

The kobolds are serious, the goblins are stupid, and the sirens are indulgent. Is it really okay for monsters to be like this?

In any case, I understood and accepted Sicily's passionate request.

The plan was still very hazy, but I'd gotten several good options I would have to discuss with Papa.

"I will do my best to find another option so that you don't have to undergo the birth control spell, Sicily!"

“Thank you, Lady Neema.”

It had been a somewhat grating discussion, but I had to keep trying to find a way to make it so we didn’t need to use the birth control spell for the sake of both Sicily and the hypothetical rolly-polly baby kobolds!

After the conversation with Sicily ended, I found myself musing on how it had been a lot like talking on the phone, something I hadn’t done in a long time. The only downside to this method of communication was that I couldn’t use it unless Shinki or Lars were around. There was also a bit of a time lag, but it couldn’t be helped given the huge distance between Zigg Village and the royal city.

Based on this incident, I decided next time we visited, I’d give the kobolds a magic circle tapestry for sending letters and a letter set complete with writing utensils.

I bet Sicily would look cute trying with all her might to write a letter with the pen gripped awkwardly in her paw! I always end up causing trouble for Sicily, but I need her to put up with it for a little while longer!

Now, then, Sol—please help me locate that spell!

12 - Secret of the Royal Magical Research Center

THE day I agreed to go with Mama finally came.

It was the same Magical Research Center I'd visited countless times since receiving my all-access pass to the royal palace from the king (with the caveat that I would be supervised when entering workplaces). But this time, I needed to be on my guard the entire time.

If it looked like Gratia or Haku were about to be mistreated, I would save them.

However, there was one thing I was excited about—the possibility of learning what kind of mysterious powers the two of them might possess.

I was familiar with the layout of the royal palace by this point, but it was a bit unusual to head straight to the Magical Research Center in the north building without first stopping at Will's room in the east building.

For the moment, Shinki, Gratia, and Haku were all on their best behavior.

I'd been surprised by Shinki's appearance when we all met up this morning at the appointed time. He wore a short jacket, unlike the longer frock coats that were all the rage among the nobility, and he had it tucked into his trousers along with his shirt. You'd think it would look uncool, but the thick belt he wore across his hips made the look.

The short sword strapped to his belt was simple, adorned only with our family crest. His clothing was dark red, and his shirt was a white, high-neck collared shirt.

I didn't think he was feeling overheated, but the way he had the sleeves of his jacket rolled up to reveal the sleeves of his shirt underneath looked a bit wild and suited his image well.

In short, his new clothes enhanced his attractiveness.

My regards to the tailor for a job very well done!

“Shinki, you look great!” I exclaimed.

“Really? I can’t believe you can tolerate wearing stiff clothing like this all the time,” he grumbled.

“You’ll get used to it soon enough.”

I suppose it makes sense that this fitted, proper attire feels stiff after wearing nothing but loose, casual clothing up until now.

Please do your best, Shinki—for my sake!



WHEN we arrived at the Magical Research Center, we made our way directly to the experiment building, a small annex building close to the north building. Since this was a dangerous area, my all-access pass didn’t extend here.

According to Mama, thanks to the special ingredient they’d used to create the protective barrier around the building, even if an experiment went wrong and caused a massive explosion, the damage wouldn’t extend outside the barrier’s perimeter.

When I asked what “special ingredient” was responsible for this near-miracle, I was told they used an elemental stone—a stone that stored elemental power. The only way to get ahold of them was to receive them from the elemental kings. Mama explained that the elemental stone currently maintaining this barrier was one that Will had received when he met the elemental kings.

Essentially, it was super rare, just like the dragon orb I’d received from Sol.

However, one thing concerned me: was it okay to use Will and Lars like this?!

They had to obtain the elemental stone, search for mates for the rhinoceroses, and who only knew what else.

Are you really okay with being used like this, Mr. Crown Prince?!

In any case, this would be my first time going inside the experiment building. I was nervously excited.

As we neared the door, Mama pulled out a broach shaped like a butterfly. Various jewels were embedded in its golden body and wings; it was obvious at

first glance that it was expensive.

She held the broach over what looked like a peephole, and almost immediately a loud *CLANK!* sounded.

“Shinki, will you please open the door?” Mama requested.

Shinki glanced at me, and I nodded, indicating that he should do as Mama asked.

Without further hesitation, Shinki slid the door forcefully to the side.

...It's a sliding door?!

I never would've guessed—it looks just like a push-door!

“Hm, good job noticing it was a sliding door, Shinki,” Mama remarked.

Huh? Don't tell me the door's designed like that on purpose? I don't understand how doors work in this country! Speaking of...

“Mother, is it possible to make doors that open using magic?”

I've wondered that for ages but keep forgetting to ask!

“Magically opening doors? I suppose it's possible, but there's no need.”

“Why not? The knights looked like they were having a hard time opening the gate.”

It must be a tough job to open and close such heavy doors over and over again.

“The fact that knights are present means that it's an important location in need of protection, right? If we made it so that the doors opened automatically with magic, they'd lose all meaning as a form of protection,” Mama pointed out.

Oh, so that's why! If anyone and everyone could waltz right in, there'd be no point in having a door. They intentionally designed the door to be opened manually to make it difficult for anyone to force their way in.

“So it needs to be hand-operated?” I asked.

“That's right. If an enemy attacks, the longer it takes them to get in, the more

time the knights have to prepare for battle, and the citizens have to flee.”

Sometimes, the most convenient option isn't always the most prudent, huh? They're intentionally choosing the less convenient option for the sake of security.

“Now, let's go inside, shall we?” Mama urged.

When we stepped into the experiment building, we found ourselves in a large open room that appeared to be an entry hall. However, the sizeable group of people gathered in the room, their eyes shining with anticipation, filled me with dread.

“Oh, you're all here...” Mama remarked.

“We couldn't wait, so we came to greet you!”

There were approximately twenty people, whom I presumed were researchers. All of them were staring at Shinki. Was he what they “couldn't wait” for?!

Is this going to be okay?!

Mama led us to a room where several dishes were lined up.

What is this?

“Please set Haku down here.”

Mama only asked for Haku to start. The “here” she referred to was a dish that looked like an opaque bowl. When I put Haku inside, the bottom of the bowl changed color.

“Its normal weight is 10 rui.”

Rui is a unit of measure used for weight, right? Umm, if I remember correctly, the units of measure for weight are gai, eki, rui, soki, and mei, right? To put that into pounds... I have no idea. But I think Haku weighs around half a pound?

“I'm going to have Haku eat the items in these dishes,” Mama said.

All of it?! You've got so many plates that it looks like you're prepping for conveyor belt sushi! Not to mention, a lot of them are things humans can't eat, like rocks and wood!

“Let's begin, shall we?”

At Mama's signal, the other researchers gathered around Haku. The first thing Mama picked up was a rock. That's right. A normal, old rock.

"Haku, can you eat this?"

"Mew!"

Haku was ready and raring to eat.

As Haku absorbed the rock, the color at the bottom of the bowl expanded slightly. I assumed this was due to the addition of the rock's weight.

Haku's body was milky white, so I expected we wouldn't see the rock once it was absorbed into the slime's body, but the rock was pretty clearly visible. It was like looking through a lace curtain.

Furthermore, the stone showed no signs of change.

After about five minutes had passed, the stone finally started to change. If you looked closely, the outline of the stone now looked blurry.

"It took about 2 segments."

Segment was an increment of time below color. To put it in earthly terms, I suppose it was similar to a minute? There were 10 segments to 1 color, so... 3 minutes or so? Yeah, it's a bit awkward to calculate.

Oh, and there was another increment of time, "unit," below the segment. I guess you could think of units as being similar to seconds.

Mama appeared to be using a magical item to measure the time, but I was curious how it worked. Was it like a stopwatch?

In the end, it took about 1 color for Haku to completely digest the rock. However, its weight remained the same immediately after eating the rock, so where the rock's mass had gone was a bit of a mystery.

"Next is this," Mama said, picking up another rock.

"You're feeding it the same thing again?"

"We've cast a Preserve spell on this one."

This experiment aimed to see if slimes could eat the same-sized rock if it had a Preserve spell cast on it. As it turned out, Haku once again digested the rock in

1 color, regardless of the spell cast on it.

“Hmm, it seems the Preserve spell has no effect on a slime’s ability to digest items.”

After that, Mama fed Haku several more items, one at a time, including wood, poisonous herbs, a magical stone, a lump of what appeared to be iron, and finally, a chunk of meat three times the size of Haku’s own body.

Haku was thrilled about the large piece of meat. It stretched its body out and wrapped itself around the meat, absorbing it. Slowly but surely, Haku’s body got larger, and by the time it finished digesting the meat, it was about twice its original size.

What surprised me, though, was its weight.

Although it had eaten over 2 pounds of “food,” Haku’s final weight was 15 rui. Assuming its original size was half a pound, 1 rui was a little less than an ounce, which would make 15 rui roughly three-quarters of a pound.

I tried picking Haku up to see for myself, and it was indeed a bit heavier.

The other researchers seemed surprised, but Mama’s eyes sparkled almost fanatically.

She’s the most dangerous one here!

“I wonder if Haku has poison...” Mama muttered.

Who knows? I know it has some kind of paralytic agent, if nothing else...

“Haku, can you use poison?” I asked.

“Myui!”

“It says it cannot,” Shinki translated.

“I see. And the only ability you’ve confirmed so far is inducing paralysis?” Mama inquired.

“That’s right. It used that power when we were fighting with the kobolds,” I said.

After pausing to think, Mama had the researchers bring over an animal called a rousseau, which looked a bit like a mouse. It had light blue fur and a short tail,

but the way it bustled about in its cage reminded me of a hamster.

Don't tell me she's planning to have Haku eat it while it's still alive?!

"This isn't food. Haku, you absolutely must not kill it, do you understand?"
Mama instructed.

Phew! I did not want to watch it go SPLAT inside of Haku!

"Yeah, Haku, no matter what you do, don't eat that little guy!" I reiterated
Mama's warning, just to be safe.

"Now then, please paralyze this rouche," Mama requested.

The researchers moved the cage containing the rouche closer to Haku. The
next moment, it began convulsing.

"I see... Is there anyone who'd be willing to test it for us?"

Does Mama understand what just happened? And by "test it," does she mean... Having Haku paralyze a person?!

"Shinki, what did Haku do?" I asked.

"It extended part of its body like a tentacle and paralyzed the rouche almost
instantaneously," he explained.

In short, Haku applied its paralytic agent to the rouche via momentary contact... But if the contact was that brief, the amount of paralytic agent absorbed couldn't have been very much. If a small amount of the paralytic agent caused instantaneous paralysis, then it must be strong and fast-acting.

"I'll do it," one of the researchers volunteered.

Even if it doesn't kill you, being paralyzed could cause difficulty breathing! That's dangerous!

"Thank you. Healing magic user, please be prepared to cast right away."

Oh, they have a healer on staff?

In that case, it should be fine... What am I saying? This is most certainly not fine!!

"Mother, it's dangerous to test it on a person!" I cried.

“Don’t worry, Neema. It’s common for everyone working here.”

Huh?! In what universe is being paralyzed by a slime a “common occurrence”?!

“Although, as a result, some of the researchers have developed such a high tolerance to poison that they can’t gather accurate results anymore...”

After hearing this, someone in the crowd chimed in, “Sorry!” It must’ve been one of the people she’d referred to, but I had no idea such a thing was even possible!

It’s still a little scary, so I’ll remind Haku to be extra careful.

On a side note, for the past few minutes, Kuro had been proudly boasting from inside my body that *it* was capable of using poison.

Pipe down and behave yourself, you hear me?!

I didn’t even want to think about what might happen if they got it in their heads to test Kuro’s poison on one of the researchers.

It’ll be no laughing matter if someone dies during the experiment!

The researcher who’d volunteered slowly reached a hand toward Haku.

Haku sensed something because, this time, it reached out a tentacle at a speed visible to the naked eye and touched the researcher not on his hand but on the side of his neck.

“...Ack!”

The researcher grabbed his chest as if in pain.

Ahhh! I thought something like this might happen!

Unable to stay upright, the researcher fell to the ground and shook. His breath came out in labored gasps, leading me to believe he was also having difficulty breathing.

“Shurahze Cresiolle,” the healer chanted, and instantly, the man stopped shaking, and his breathing returned to normal.

“Oh man, that sucked! Cast the healing spell quicker next time, will you?!”

“But we needed time to observe the paralytic agent’s effect on your body.”

I stared in shock as the researcher who’d volunteered to serve as a test subject stood up as if nothing had happened and complained at the healer who’d just saved him.

...Is this seriously what these people do daily?!

That was scary!

“How was it?” Mama inquired.

“It was incredible! The very second I felt it touch me, I started having trouble breathing, and rather than going numb, it was just like all the power left my body!” the researcher eagerly described.

What the heck?! He sounds super excited about having just experienced all that! Do these people have something wrong with their heads?!

“It’s only a guess, but I suspect Haku unconsciously adjusts the amount of paralytic agent secreted depending on the size of its target. Despite the significant size difference between him and the rouche, the effect of Haku’s paralytic agent was the same.”

“I would love to analyze a sample of that paralytic agent!” another researcher, who clutched a magical item that looked like a stopwatch, excitedly declared.

They’re all batshit crazy, every last one of them!

...But I understand how they feel. If an adorable fluffy were on that table instead of a slime, I’d be just as excited as these researchers.

Gasp! Is that why God seemed so freaked out by my enthusiasm for animals when we met?! If I came off half as obsessed as these researchers, no wonder he was creeped out...

Now that it’s happened to me, I finally get it. I’m sorry, God!

I shook myself out of that particular train of thought and returned to observing Haku. The crazy researchers were begging for a sample of Haku’s paralytic agent.

But of course, it couldn't be that easy. Haku didn't know any way to secrete its paralytic agent other than by touching someone. I suspect, like animals on Earth, Haku probably created the compound inside its body and applied it to the target as a liquid.

I tried asking Haku to produce some of whatever it uses to paralyze, but it said it couldn't. It said it had never done this before and had no idea how to.

Kuro, who was still inhabiting me, also didn't seem to know, so it was possible that the poisonous and paralytic substances secreted by slimes were not liquid after all. However, no one could come up with any theories about what else they might be if not liquids.

But the crazy researchers weren't about to give up so easily.

"I offered my arm, but Haku went for my neck... That could mean it was calculating the flow of my blood..."

"Hmm, then if we drew the blood of someone while they were paralyzed..."

"All right, I'll try again..."

I became alarmed, thinking the same researcher was going to allow himself to be paralyzed a second time, but thankfully, the other researchers objected.

You might think they were worried about putting an undue burden on his body, but it was the opposite; they were jealous that he was trying to hog all the fun and began arguing about who would get to go next. I was becoming increasingly convinced that these researchers weren't all there in the head.

In the end, they chose another person, and what looked like a syringe was brought forth.

"If she has convulsions like he did, the syringe will be dangerous. Let's use a swarm instead."

The "swarm" Mama mentioned consisted of a small needle and tube like you'd use for an IV. Apparently, they would connect the syringe to this. I was relieved by how familiar this piece of equipment looked, but still thought it would be dangerous if she flailed around too much.

This time, the researcher lay down on the floor before we began. The other

researchers held her arms and legs securely, and another waited off to the side, holding the syringe.

As soon as Haku's tentacle made contact with the researcher, she displayed the same painful-looking symptoms. Several of her coworkers held her arm down at strategic points so she wouldn't accidentally move it, and another inserted the swarm's tiny needle.

The syringe attached to the end of the tube filled with bright red blood in moments. As soon as they collected enough blood and then removed the tiny needle, the healer cast a healing spell on the paralyzed researcher.

The researchers who'd drawn her blood were all cheering, but I wasn't sure what they were so happy about.

"Quickly cast Preserve on the sample. We still have the deviation frost spider and this Beak Tribe fellow to examine."

Mama's words snapped the celebrating researchers back to their senses, and they placed the syringe as-is into a mysterious box.

Then, they were off, preparing for the next specimen.

Another smaller bowl was brought forward, and I was instructed to place Gratia inside.

I'm guessing they're planning to start by weighing him, too?

"He's 60 eki."

Umm... If 1 rui is less than an ounce, and there are 100 eki to a rui, then...

What's smaller than an ounce?! If you put it in metric, that would make Gratia's weight... About 12 grams? I'm not feeling confident about that calculation...

You know what? I need to stop using Earth's units of measurement as a crutch and get used to thinking in this world's units of measurement.

We knew Gratia also possessed a paralytic agent, and another researcher offered themselves up as a test subject. But, unlike with Haku, we could collect a sample of Gratia's paralytic agent directly from his fangs, so a test subject proved unnecessary.

In Gratia's case, I suspected the paralytic agent was a type of poison, one that worked on the nervous system.

Huh? Does that mean Haku's is also a type of poison? Then what kind of poison was Kuro bragging about having? Oh well, I suppose that's not important right now.

When I asked Gratia what kind of poison he had, he said that he had a whole bunch. There was one neurotoxin that would weaken smaller prey until they couldn't move. And there was another that would freeze up larger prey, likewise rendering them unable to move.

In case you were wondering, Shinki translated all this for me.

We couldn't let the researchers find out that he could understand monsters' speech, so he whispered the translation secretively in my ear. I certainly couldn't make out that much detail on my own just from the strange gestures and fang-clacking noises Gratia made, that was for sure.

The poison that makes the prey too weak to move must work like a muscle relaxer, right? On the other hand, the poison that freezes up the prey's body must work by causing the muscles to contract?

Gratia also possessed a poison that he could apply to larger prey to melt their bodies and make them soft enough to eat, as well as one that would make the victim hallucinate.

Apparently, Gratia could rip smaller prey apart and eat them as-is.

When I asked which poison he'd used in the fight with the beast-master, he answered, *"The one to make them sleepy!"*

Furthermore, by mixing poisons, Gratia could create new poisons with various properties. In any case, I was more than convinced that Gratia was incredibly adept with poisons.

Normal frost spiders only produced the poison that rendered prey unable to move.

I learned a lot of information thanks to Shinki's help translating, but since we couldn't afford for anyone to learn about this ability, I conveyed the

information to the researchers myself, as if I'd been able to glean it myself due to the naming bond I had with Gratia.

"The poison that makes the subject sleep must be a sedative!"

"What kinds of things does a person see if they're afflicted with the poison that causes hallucinations?!"

With each new type of poison revealed, the researchers' excitement grew. Several researchers even announced that they'd like to test the poisons on themselves as long as they weren't deadly.

Please, I'm begging you, don't!

In any case, we asked Gratia to produce each type of poison one at a time for the researchers to collect samples.

Another of Gratia's abilities was the ability to create spider thread, but the researchers confirmed his thread was no different from that of normal frost spiders. However, with the various poisons in Gratia's arsenal, he could use the spider thread differently than other members of his species.

Frost spiders didn't use their thread to make nests; they used their thread for attacks and to carry their prey after capturing them. And, of course, no matter how large they grew, frost spiders could support their entire weight with a single thread to dangle from high places.

I took this to mean that their thread became stronger as they grew, but this took on a special meaning when it came to our Gratia.

At present, Gratia was moving around busily, dangling off a corner of the table by a string of spider thread. He kept repeatedly cutting off his thread and climbing back up before reaching the ground, then lowering himself off the side again using a new thread. Each time he climbed back up, he would dribble a small amount of some kind of liquid down the length of the previous thread, starting where it connected to the edge of the table. A small droplet of liquid dripped from the bottom of one of the spider threads, landing on the floor.

Gratia clicked his fangs together as if asking, *"What do you think? Pretty great, right?!"*

“Could it be that you’ve fashioned a trap by creating a curtain of threads and then coating them with poison?”

Gratia responded to Mama’s guess by dancing wildly as if saying, “*Correct answer!*”

Ahhh, he’s so stinkin’ cute!

I stroked Gratia’s head affectionately with my finger, and he stilled, enjoying being pet.

“Gratia, we’d like to collect a sample of your thread as well, but...”

How do you collect spider thread? I thought doubtfully.

Just then, one of the researchers brought over a transparent box. It was decently sized, large enough that you couldn’t hold it with just one hand.

“Do you think you could build a nest inside here?” Mama asked.

“Can Gratia even build a nest?” I wondered out loud.

His species don’t build nests, so he’s probably never built one before...

But Gratia replied eagerly, saying that he could do it.

It took about thirty minutes from start to finish, but when Grata was done, the box contained such a magnificent spider web that it could easily be called a work of art.

Normally, when you think of a spider web, you’d picture a round, flat web, but what Gratia created was three-dimensional.

First, he strung durable threads that would support the web’s weight and then shored them up with support threads. At this stage, the threads were strung in a seemingly erratic pattern, but an empty space remained in the center, similar to scaffolding. Then, he went back and connected the framework he’d already created, forming three cocoon-like structures in the hollow space between the support threads.

Gratia made a final sweep of the entire web, then crawled out of the hole he’d left open at the top of the box.

I wouldn’t have been able to believe this was a spider web if I hadn’t seen it

woven with my own eyes.

Are the places where the light's glinting off like glitter where he used poison to connect the threads?

"Gratia, this is so incredible!" I cried, showering praise on Gratia's impressive masterpiece.

Gratia looked a bit weak, probably because he'd just produced a huge amount of spider thread.

"Good job, you worked hard," I said, acknowledging Gratia's hard work as I scooped him up and placed him in his usual position on my shoulder. From there, he quickly scrambled up to hide himself in my hair.

Gratia's getting extra dinner tonight; he earned it!

Now, all that was left was Shinki.

Mama had decided we wouldn't hide that he could use elemental power. That was part of the reason she'd suggested pretending he was a member of the Beak Tribe—because it wouldn't be strange to believe they might be able to use elemental power.

The Beak Tribe were under the protection of the elemental kings, after all, so it would be believable that they'd learned to wield elemental power for defense. Mama had seemed confident that, because so little information was known about the Beak Tribe, no one would ever figure out if it was a lie.

Mama, is this kind of reasoning okay for a researcher?! Well, I guess we can't exactly tell everyone the truth, so there's not really any other option, but still...

But there was no way we could have Shinki use elemental power indoors, so we all moved to the yard behind the experiment building.

"Now then, Shinki, do you have any idea of the strength and range of your elemental power?" Mama asked.

"I haven't thought about it. Anything is possible, as long as the nanos say they can do it."

I see... Elementalism relies directly on the elemental spirits' assistance, so it makes sense that strength and range would also depend on them.

“Then I will direct my question to the elemental spirits. Honorable spirits, how far are you willing to go at Shinki’s request?” Mama addressed this question to the open air.

It was believed that elemental spirits existed everywhere around us at all times, so she must’ve been asking the question open-endedly to whichever spirits happened to be hovering around us at the moment.

I had a feeling, though, that most of the elemental spirits in this particular area were either surrounding Lars or assigned to me by Sol.

After a moment, Shinki answered. “They say that, so long as it doesn’t go against the will of the God of Creation, they can even topple countries.”

The researchers collectively gasped in shock at this unexpected response.

I don’t blame them—I’m shocked myself!

“...I see. What is the will of the God of Creation, then?” Mama asked.

“They say it’s to preserve the balance and flow of nature and rectify distortion.”

Come on, elemental spirits! Can’t you make it a little easier to understand than that?! Umm, so if I understand correctly, anything goes as long as it doesn’t directly contradict their job of maintaining balance in the world? So, if God decides to destroy this country, would destroying it be the elemental spirits’ job?

So, then... If I decide that humans need to be wiped out, will the elemental spirits have to do it? I know it’s a seriously delayed reaction, but... God, you’ve given me a terrifying task, you know that?!

I should still have plenty of time to decide, though. I am going to have to consider everything very, very carefully before deciding.

“And what would happen if one acted against God’s will?”

“It depends on the extent of the transgression, but they would either become ‘fallen’ or be ‘obliterated.’”

“Are you referring to the elementalist or the elemental spirit?”

“The elementalists. If an elemental spirit deviates from the straight and narrow path, they would be ‘obliterated’ on the spot.”

According to Shinki, if an elemental spirit agreed to a request that went against the balance and flow of the world, they would be wiped out of existence immediately before it was even carried out.

“I see... Now I finally understand the great mystery of ‘the Elementalists of Greevelt.’”

The Elementalists of Greevelt? Never heard of them!

“What’s Greevelt?” I asked.

“It’s a very old tale. They were a group of elementalists who lived long, long ago before the Kingdom of Gaché was even founded,” Mama explained.

It was a famous story among those who studied elemental spirits.

To put it simply, a group of elementalists who lived in a country named Greevelt attempted to use elemental power to protect their country. However, the power never manifested, and the elemental spirits who’d partnered with them vanished. The elementalists became “fallen,” their country fell, and their elemental spirit partners disappeared, and in the end, they all died cursing God.

This unexplained phenomenon of why the elemental spirits had disappeared had stumped researchers for centuries.

The elementalists who’d lost their elemental spirit partners had been loyal; they’d dedicated their lives to the study of the elements and the protection of the weak. Far from mistreating their partners, they were known for deeply respecting and loving the elemental spirits. All of this was clearly documented, so it made no sense why this had occurred.

But based on what we’d just learned from Shinki, it became apparent that the destruction of Greevelt had been mandated by either the balance of nature or the will of God.

The punishment for those who’d tried to oppose it had been swift and decisive; the elemental spirits were “obliterated,” and the elementalists became “fallen.”

“I think today we’ll have Shinki teach us about the nature of elemental spirits instead of providing a demonstration of elemental power.”

The researchers all seemed disappointed by Mama’s declaration.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Those guys were all hyped up to show what they could do,” Shinki commented.

I wasn’t sure what the elemental spirits had been so hyped up about, but if they were that excited, it probably would’ve been an impressive demonstration indeed.

“Let’s have some tea. While we’re drinking, you may each ask one question to the elemental spirits,” Mama proposed.

At this, the researchers let out a raucous cheer. They were overjoyed to learn they would get the rare opportunity to ask the elemental spirits a question directly.

Just a moment ago, they were all moping about not being able to see the elemental spirits!

But I guess this has taught me a valuable lesson as well: elemental power is dangerous. I’ll have to be extra careful so that Shinki doesn’t become “fallen” and none of the elemental spirits get “obliterated.”

Side Story - Shinki's First Safari Park 🎵

TODAY, to pass the time, I visited the beast stables.

Of course, I dragged Shinki along with me. After explaining to Lestin that the king had given his permission, we decided to have Uwaz and his friends take us around the grounds of the beast stables.

Lestin summoned Uwaz with his usual two-fingered whistle.

“...I wonder what's the matter?”

Usually, Uwaz would come running, overjoyed at being summoned by Lestin, but, for some reason, today, he was keeping his distance. He was within our line of sight, so it was highly unlikely he hadn't heard Lestin calling to him.

Lestin whistled again. This time, Uwaz moved closer to us, but only a little. Uwaz took his role as the boss of his herd seriously and was twice as cautious as anyone else.

However, although he'd been cautious around me when I'd first come here, he'd at least come when Lestin called. That's why I'd figured this new stranger named Shinki would be fine, but...

We weren't getting anywhere, so we changed tactics and tried summoning the wild bear pack a short distance from Uwaz's herd.

But they wouldn't come either.

The wild bears' boss was Dan's former partner. He was obedient and would normally never disobey Lestin's commands.

Lestin seemed perplexed by the animals' uncharacteristic behavior.

In any case, we returned to the office to see if we could figure out what was going on. When we made it back to the beast knights' office, one of the beast knights was moping around, looking incredibly dejected.

“What's wrong with him?” I asked.

“Oh, him... The beast he wanted as his partner rejected him,” Lestin said.

“Partner” was what the beast knights called their beast mount. In Lestin’s case, that was the warhorse, Uwaz.

I can see why he’d be depressed if his chosen partner turned him down!

“Come on, man, it’s gonna be okay! Look, I’ve brought Siloux!”

Another beast knight led in an animal called a flarehog, which resembled a pure white pig. Then he pressed a treat into the hand of the rejected beast knight.

The flarehog named Siloux picked up on the scent of the treat because she immediately began oinking enthusiastically. The rejected beast knight reluctantly held up the treat and fed it to Siloux.

Siloux chowed straight through the treat in no time flat, and once she’d finished it, she rubbed her snout against the rejected beast knight’s leg, begging for more.

“Oh, Siloux! *You* still love me, don’t you, girl?!” The man suddenly threw his arms around Siloux and shouted in a loud, joyous voice.

No matter how you look at it, it’s obvious that what she loves are treats!

“Siloux soothes all of our troubled and weary souls.”

So Lestin claimed, but what about this hungry-hungry-piggie was so soothing, hm?

I suppose she does look awfully cute when she’s eating...

“She soothes your souls?” I asked.

“That’s right. When the animals are cold toward us, sometimes a knight will start suffering from an illness of the heart, wondering if all animals hate him and if he’s not cut out to be a beast knight. Siloux is a kind-hearted creature who loves anyone who feeds her a treat, so spending a little time interacting with her is enough to restore a knight’s spirits.”

I think I get it... No matter how much they get rejected, the affection Siloux lavishes on them makes them feel like they can keep trying. She’s like a Band-

Aid for their poor, battered hearts.

But, you know, she has a tasty job! All she has to do all day is eat and let them pet her? I'm jealous!

All right, I'll benefit from Siloux's healing powers myself! Let's see just how soothing feeding treats to a cute piggie can be!

I asked Lestin, and he had someone fetch me a treat to feed Siloux.

I joined the rejected beast knight and tried to feed my treat to Siloux, but for some reason, she suddenly became antsy and refused to even look at the treat in my hand.

...Don't tell me I've lost my special ability?! That can't be! ...Right?

Hey, God! What's going on here?!

"What's wrong, Siloux? Are you feeling unwell?" The rejected beast knight stroked Siloux's back, concerned.

I hesitantly reached out toward the flarehog, and she didn't shy away.

Unfortunately, Siloux didn't have any fur. Her hairless, bare skin was so plump, moist, fresh, and youthful-looking that it would be the envy of ladies around the world.

I want to have skin like this in the future!

But if this wasn't a case of my special ability disappearing, that must mean... Siloux was afraid of something?

That only leaves Shinki as a possibility, but...

"Shinki, can you come stand next to me, please?" I called Shinki over to test if he was the source of Siloux's anxiety.

Shinki walked over to stand beside me as I'd asked, and Siloux's frightened reaction was incredible to behold.

The rejected beast knight grabbed her to stop her from struggling, but that only caused her to shriek as if the world were ending and flail even more violently as she tried to break free and escape.

That proves it—Shinki really is the problem!

“Calm down, will you?! It’s okay. No one’s going to eat you!”

She didn’t buy a single word the rejected beast knight was saying because the instant she finally shook him off, she fled faster than the wind.

“It seems that animals are afraid of Shinki.” Lestin, picking up on it as well, regarded Shinki with a pitying glance.

The rejected beast knight and the other beast knight, who’d watched the entire exchange, both wore shocked expressions. But, after a moment, they, too, whispered to each other...

“...If Siloux was that terrified of me, I don’t think I could bear to go on living.”

“Me either. Just imagining what it would be like to be hated by animals is almost enough to make me cry.”

Beast knights chose their profession because they were committed animal lovers, so it made sense that they felt that way, and I understood their feelings so much that it hurt.

“It will be okay. All of the animals here are very sweet, so once they get used to you, I’m sure they’ll come around,” Lestin attempted to console Shinki.

“I really don’t care,” Shinki replied bluntly.

No matter what you say, Lestin, I think this is the animals’ primal instincts at work! They must instinctually recognize that Shinki’s a monster, which is why they’re afraid of him and run away.

But Shinki did seem impressively unbothered by the whole thing.

“That’s right! Many species live here, so there might be some animals who aren’t afraid of you!” the onlooking beast knight said, trying to encourage Shinki.

“It’s fine, really.”

Shinki wasn’t a very expressive guy; that’s just how he was, but his nonchalance was being mistaken for an attempt at acting tough. Or maybe it was just a case of the beast knights being overcome with pity for anyone whom all animals seemed to hate.

“Come on, we’ll show you around!” one beast knight offered.

“I can’t leave my lady’s side...”

“Lady Nefertima will be fine; she has Brigade Leader Les with her!” the other beast knight insisted.

“You don’t mind, do you, Brigade Leader Les?”

“Not at all. Since I’m sure Shinki will be coming here often with Lady Nefertima from now on, it’s best if he gets used to the beast stables as quickly as possible.”

Lestin probably meant it as a kind gesture, but Shinki’s face clearly stated how troublesome this all sounded to him.

The way things stand, I won’t be able to see any animals as long as Shinki’s with me, so personally, I’d prefer he hang out with the beast knights!

“Why don’t you go with them, Shinki?” I suggested.

“...If that is your wish, Miss...”

Shinki seemed to have given up because he obediently let the two beast knights drag him off with them.

All right, now I can cuddle with fluffy animals to my heart’s content!

“Shall we get going too, then?” asked Lestin.

“Yeah!”

When Lestin and I exited the building, Uwaz was already waiting for us just outside. He rubbed up against Lestin as if apologizing for his behavior earlier.

“Sorry, Uwaz. You were scared of Shinki, right?”

Uwaz neighed in agreement.

I’m so sorry to all the animals on Shinki’s behalf; he’s unintentionally terrifying!!

Once Lestin finished lavishing Uwaz with attention, we moved on to the wild bear pack. As soon as he spotted us, the wild bears’ boss, Bae, ambled up to us.

“Bae!” I ran to Bae and was greeted by his deep, rumbling purr. No matter

how many times I heard it, it always sounded like he was snoring.

I got Lestin to pick me up and set me on Bae's back.

Bae had plenty of fur, but it was coarse and wiry.

It reminds me of a plastic-bristled duster!

However, the fur around Bae's face and at the base of his ears was fluffy and felt pleasant.

We were wandering around exploring the grounds of the beast stables when a herd of rhinoceroses appeared in front of us!

"Les, I want to touch a rhinoceros!"

Previously—by coincidence, I swear—I'd been able to touch a rhinoceros at the New Year's parade. On that occasion, I'd focused exclusively on its horn. Thinking back on it now, I couldn't help lamenting the wasted opportunity.

Okay, so I *did* pet the rhinoceros's skin briefly, but my only lasting impression was that the texture was prickly.

The incident that occurred *after* I petted the rhinoceros was so shocking that my other memories of that day were vague in comparison.

"Absolutely not."

Why is he smiling so cheerfully while turning me down flat?! Ugh... Well, I did expect that's what he'd say, but still...

I doubted Les would budge on this matter, so I gave up on the rhinoceroses and moved on to the next animal.

Next, we made our way to the forested area of the beast stables.

It would be difficult for Bae, with his massive size, to move through the dense forest, so we proceeded on foot. Bae curled up in a sunny spot, where he would wait for us to return. He looked halfway to sleep before we even disappeared into the woods.

This area was brimming with various animals that lived high up in the trees.

I heard a cry that sounded like that of a monkey coming from somewhere above, but I couldn't spot the animal that had made the noise.

All right, I'm eager to see what kinds of animals we'll encounter here!

"Lady Nefertima, a group of tolquegs is headed this way."

Tolquegs? They look a bit like squirrels and love to eat flower nectar, right? Although I guess pottes look more like squirrels than tolquegs...

Come to think of it, based on their identifying characteristics, tolquegs were probably more like tree shrews. The skeletal structure of tree shrews resembled that of monkeys and moles. At one time, they were believed to be a subspecies of monkey. That was determined to be incorrect, and they were ultimately given their own classification, tupaia.

Like squirrels, they primarily lived in the trees, and their physical appearance and behaviors resembled monkeys and moles, which, in my opinion, qualified them as a rare and interesting species.

"Come here, Rianne," Lestin called, facing up toward the treetops. In response, a small animal leapt agilely from branch to branch until, with one final bound, it jumped down and was caught mid-air by Lestin.

"Her name is Lianne," Lestin said, showing me an adorable little tolqueg that was small enough to easily fit in the cupped palms of an adult's hands.



Her eyes were small, but almost as if making up for the size of her eyes, her ears were huge. I suspected tolquegs must have stronger hearing and weaker eyesight.

Lestin passed Lianne to me, and I peered eagerly down at her, trying to take in every detail. The tolqueg's head wasn't elongated, exactly, but its nose protruded out from the rest of its face, reminding me of an anteater.

Lianne clutched my thumb in her tiny hand, which, despite being much smaller, seemed like a human hand. The long, multi-jointed fingers would help it climb in the trees. It must be a trait honed by evolution to allow the tolquegs to grasp onto things.

Each hair making up Lianne's fur was thick. It felt like running a brush across my hand as I stroked her fur. Her fur comprised at least half her entire body mass and was delightfully springy and voluminous.

When I curiously parted her fur to see inside, I found another layer underneath of shorter, more densely packed hairs dispersed amongst the longer, thicker hairs. Those must be responsible for the volume of her coat.

"Your tail sure is cute!" I exclaimed.

While I played with Lianne's tail, Lestin explained its function to me.

"The tolquegs' tails help them balance while walking along branches, but their primary function is actually to help regulate their body temperature. As you might guess from the large amount of fur they possess, tolquegs don't have a very high basal body temperature. They make up for it by using their tails like a blanket."

I see... So on cold days, they curl their tail around their body to help preserve their meager body heat? And since they live in groups, the tolquegs can gather together in a group huddle! I would give just about anything to see them all pigpiled together, snuggling up for warmth! But I wonder what kind of job such a small animal does here at the beast stables...

"What is Lianne's job?" I asked.

"The tolquegs carry messages and small parcels to knights stationed in

forested areas.”

“And they can quickly locate the knights?”

Don't tell me they're like the toetails and have memorized the individual scents of every single knight!

“We carry these with us when we're on a mission in a forested area.” Lestin produced a small cloth bag. “This scent bag helps the tolquegs identify their allies, the beast knights, from other humans and enemy soldiers. Tolquegs can recognize the scent of their favorite food, flower nectar, no matter how great the distance, so we use that.”

I was impressed and mildly amused by the tolquegs' highly selective noses, which could identify *only* the scent of their favorite food and no other scents at great distances.

I concluded that the tolquegs' long noses were probably another evolution to allow them to scent out flower nectar and then use their long tongues to deftly suck it out of the flower.

We continued, traveling further into the forest, taking Lianne with us.

A variety of birds were in these woods, but Lestin explained that these were all wild birds.

That makes sense; all the birds that work with the beast knights live in a separate area designed especially for them.

“Oh, there it is,” Lestin said.

The next creature we encountered looked like a clump of moss.

“What is it?”

“It's called a jishihelge.”

That's a jishihelge?! I thought they were supposed to look like gorillas!

“It looks different from the picture in the illustrated encyclopedia...” I muttered.

In the illustrated encyclopedia I'd read, the jishihelge was drawn walking on all fours like a gorilla.

Gorillas were well known for their pronounced pectoral muscles and their human-like behavior. Jishihelges, likewise, were renowned for being extremely powerful. The moss-like green hair covering this one's body concealed it a bit, but it wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say its entire body was just one big muscle.

I'd heard jishihelges could knock over a tree with a single punch. And, if a wild jishihelge caught a human, it could disintegrate the human's bones with its bare hands just by squeezing.

As for how this jishihelge was different from the one I'd seen in the illustrated encyclopedia... Well, the jishihelge in front of us seemed to be doing some kind of dance. A dance accompanied by thumping and crunching noises.

There hadn't been any mention of dance in the illustrated encyclopedia, and this didn't strike me as a display designed to attract a mate. If I had to guess, it looked more like a war dance?

"Previously, one of the knights thought it would be amusing to teach him to dance. Now, whenever he's in an especially good mood, he starts doing it."

I guess that means that dancing gorillas—er, I mean dancing jishihelges—are incredibly rare then! But if dancing means he's in a good mood, maybe he'll be willing to play with me?

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Kibeela."

Lestin didn't immediately forbid it, so I guess it's safe to take that to mean I'm allowed to play with him?

"Kibeela!" I called out experimentally.

I didn't shout, but Kibeela noticed immediately and moved toward us. He continued dancing the entire way, never missing a step of his strange dance.

Something tells me he'd get along well with Gratia.

Gratia loves doing strange dances, too.

"Harumph!"

The jishihelge's deep, huffing cry was the kind of noise I'd expect it to make based on its appearance.

"Do you like dancing?" I asked politely, and he threw himself into his dance with renewed fervor as if answering, "*Isn't it obvious?!*" The dance was clumsy and awkward, but you could tell just from watching how much he was enjoying himself.

Oh! I should try and teach him a simple dance of my own!

Our country had some solo dances. The more active dances involved athletic leaps and twirls, but the simpler ones only required the dancer to bounce a bit.

Let's give it a try!

But first, I stopped and handed Lianne over to Lestin for safekeeping. She seemed frightened of the large jishihelge because she climbed atop Lestin's head and attempted to nestle down in his hair to conceal herself. I suspected she was pulling his hair, but if it hurt, Lestin didn't let it show.

He's probably enduring it for Lianne's sake. Now that Lianne's safe with Lestin, let's dance!

"I like dancing too!"

Step, step, jump! Step, step, jump!

The steps were small, energetic strides, and the jump was a springy bounce on the spot.

The dance was exceedingly simple since it only involved repeating this basic pattern. Normally, you would adjust the speed of the steps and jump to the music faster when the music was fast and slower when the music was slow.

Step-step-jump!

Steeeeep... steeeeep... juuuump...

I let the music play inside my head and danced in step to the music only I could hear. Seeing this, Kibeela recognized it as a dance because he began clapping his hands together as if applauding.

"Would you like to try, Kibeela?"

Changing roles, I stopped dancing and began clapping my hands together, setting the beat. Then Kibeela repeated the simple steps he'd seen me do.

Step, step, CRASH!

Crunch, crunch, THUMP!

Oh, crap... I only ended up fanning the fire of his war dance...!

Crash, crash, BAM!

Crack, crack, THUMP!

"Les, I'm so sorry..." I apologized.

While I watched the trees around us fall victim to the jishihelge's enthusiastic dance, I felt compelled to apologize to Lestin.

"...It's fine. We'll figure something out."

Maybe it was just my imagination, but Lestin's face looked the slightest bit tense.

How much time and money will it cost to fix the forest after this? Even with magic to encourage the growth of new trees, it will still take time...

We'd have to pray that Kibeela would soon grow bored of dancing.

"See you later, Kibeela!" I said goodbye to Kibeela, eager to move on to the next animal and divert myself from the deforestation crisis.

But apparently, Kibeela wasn't keen to part so soon because he came up beside me and rubbed against me as if saying, *"Aw, you're leaving already?"*

Unfortunately, I couldn't support Kibeela's much larger body.

I think he might be even bigger than a gorilla! He's almost as big as Bae.

I estimated that Bae was at least as big as a grizzly bear, if not bigger, so Kibeela probably *was* bigger than a gorilla.

Lestin helped hold me upright so I wouldn't be knocked over by the enthusiastic jishihelge as I affectionately stroked Kibeela's head. The color and pattern of his hair looked just like moss, but it was as soft as a blanket to the touch. It would be the perfect blanket to wrap yourself in on a cold day.

However, the muscles covering most of Kibeela's body were as hard as rock, so the ideal spot for cuddling was probably his stomach.

He would make a great living heated blanket!

Next time I wanted to take a nap, I'd get Kibeela to join me.

We finally pried ourselves away from Kibeela and were heading deeper into the forest when we encountered a strange sight.

"It's a group of falphaniuses," Lestin said.

That sounds like the name of an ancient Roman hero or something...

The creature was a bipedal monkey toddling along on two legs. It wasn't a tailless monkey like the ones in Japan; it was a long-tailed monkey like a ring-tailed lemur or something.

The monkey walked with its long tail standing up, pin-straight behind it. I had to admit that it looked pretty darn cute walking like that. It bent slightly forward with its butt sticking out, I assumed for balance.

However, its friends, laying around eating fruit and grooming themselves, reminded me of a bunch of middle-aged men on their day off!

"Heralios!" Lestin shouted, startling the entire troop of falphaniuses.

All of them leapt to their feet and froze, their tails standing straight up behind them.

They look kind of like an army of soldiers!

One brave soul ventured out from amidst the ranks of the frozen falphaniuses.

"Roo-ee!" he cried adorably, raising his right hand.

It looked like he was trying to shake hands.

"This is the falphaniuses' leader, Heralios."

Oh, so "Heralios" is a name!

When they stand upright, they look more like one of those verreaux's sifakas that are famous for sideways jumping than a ring-tailed lemur. The falphaniuses

are white, just like the verreaux's sifakas, and the way only their nose is black is another thing they have in common if I remember correctly.

"Nice to meet you, Heralios!" I crouched down to the same height as Heralios and was surprised when he gave a very well-mannered bow.

What a good boy he is!

"You're such a good boy, Heralios!"

I stroked the top of Heralios's head, and he leaned into the touch, rubbing his head affectionately against my hand.

The falphaniuses were short-haired animals, as the hair covering Heralios's body was much sparser than most other animals I'd encountered today. It wasn't that he was balding or anything; it just seemed that, as a species, they didn't have very much body hair.

What I was most interested to see, though, was that although their hands were similar to human hands, their feet had six toes, separated into a group of two and a group of four.

I suspected this accounted for their ability to balance themselves well enough to walk on two legs.

Aside from that, there was also the fact that hands and feet with jointed digits were a common feature in creatures that lived in the trees, allowing them to hold onto branches while climbing.

It's still interesting, though. Five fingers and six toes, huh? I don't think there are any animals like that on Earth...

Oh, but I think pandas have an extra digit that functions like a finger that's referred to as a "sixth finger," don't they? So, if you count that, pandas have six fingers but only five toes?

Hmm, I don't remember! How many toes do pandas have? I was always so focused on their tails that I didn't notice their feet!

I was absent-mindedly petting Heralios when he suddenly let out an energetic cry.

"Roo-ee! Rooooooo-ee!"

In response, the other falphaniuses, still standing frozen in place, began to move. They seemed to be... taking something out of a hollow tree?

After passing the item to Heralios, they again froze at attention.

They really do move like a group of soldiers!

“Roo-ee!” Heralios held out the item in his hand toward me.

“You’re giving it to me?”

“Roo-ee!”

The item he handed me turned out to be a brown fruit that resembled a clementine.

Hm? I’ve never seen one of these before...

I asked Lestin about it, and he told me this fruit was called a talenchy.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, considering how much animals seem to love you, but it’s a big deal for the falphaniuses to give you one of their beloved talenchys.” Lestin seemed to be half speaking to himself, but I got the impression that to the falphaniuses, these fruits were a precious treasure.

“Can I eat it?”

“Yes, it’s ready to eat now. This fruit is meant to be eaten after it rots.”

Huh?! It’s rotten?! But if you’re meant to eat it like this, I guess you could consider it a type of fermented food?

Hmm, well, I guess I’ll give it a try!

“Here goes nothing!”

I took a huge bite before I could think better of it, and instantly sweet, nectar-like juice filled my mouth and escaped to dribble down my chin.

Whoa, it’s so sweet!

“It’s delicious!”

The flesh of the fruit was soft and tender. It almost seemed that the more I chewed, the sweeter it became.

It was so sweet and delicious that I devoured the entire thing in moments.

Only after swallowing the last bite did it occur to me regretfully that I should've eaten a bit more slowly so I could've savored the flavor for longer.

"Thank you, Heralios!"

"Roo-ee!"

However, maybe because the fruit had been so sweet, I found myself unbearably thirsty.

Come to think of it, I think the servants packed me a thermos of iced tea in my bunny-backpack before I left this morning.

I dug around inside the bunny-backpack until I found my thermos, then quickly unscrewed the lid, which could be used as a cup, and poured the tea into it.

The thermos was on the smaller side, maybe about the size of a water bottle, so it only contained two or three cups worth of tea. The servant who'd prepared it had told me that they gave me iced tea today since it was a warm day, and this proved to be true—the tea was still refreshingly chilled when I poured it into the cup. I suspected the entire thermos itself was a magical item.

I took a sip and let out a satisfied sigh as the delicious tea immediately quenched my intense thirst. It was disappointing that it washed away the lingering sweetness of the talenchy, but I couldn't bring myself to mind too much because this tea was one of my favorite blends.

Heralios was watching me intently, which gave me the idea to let him try my tea.

"Les, is it okay if I give Heralios some cheralieudi iced tea?"

"Sure. I'm not sure if he'll like it, but it won't hurt him any."

Cheraliuedi was a flower that could be dried and made into tea. I suppose you could say it was a type of herbal tea?

I held the cup out to Heralios, and he took a cautious sip. His tongue flicked out, lapping up the tea, and then he jumped backward as if in shock.

What an amusing reaction!

I offered the cup again, and Heralios lapped up a few sips of tea before jumping back with a surprised “Roo!”

It seemed that the faint, minty aftertaste of the tea kept surprising him. I was so amused by Heralios’s reaction that I decided to test the tea on the other falphaniuses as well.

One by one, I fed the cheralieudi tea to each of the falphaniuses standing behind Heralios. When the first falphanius tasted the tea, it pressed its hands to its cheeks in a gesture that reminded me of the “speak no evil” monkey and leapt backward with its mouth open in surprise.

They sure are agile; I have to give them that!

The next one reacted by throwing its arms up in the air in surprise before leaping backward, but the footing where it landed was uneven, and it fell on its butt.

“Lady Nefertima, let’s stop playing with the falphaniuses now, okay?”

Oh crap, did I overdo it? I hope Lestin’s not angry with me...

“We should probably head back soon anyway. I bet Bae is getting bored of waiting for us,” he said.

Oh, that’s right! I forgot that Bae’s been waiting for us this whole time.

We attempted to leave the group of falphaniuses behind and head back, but they seemed intent on following us through the forest, so we let them do as they pleased. Some ran through the forest at a lurching gait, while others chose to swing through the trees. Serenaded by a chorus of adorable cries of “Roo-ee! Roo-ee!” we finally arrived at the boundary between forest and field.

“Please wait here for just a moment.”

I initially thought Lestin was going to go somewhere, but then I noticed that the number of wild bears had increased.

Look at that little wild bear lying curled up next to Bae!

Lestin removed a pack strapped to the smaller wild bear’s back and passed out whatever was inside to Heralios and the other falphaniuses. They seemed overjoyed by this because they raised the items over their heads triumphantly

and proceeded to jump up and down.

“What did you give them, Les?”

“This is what talenchys look like before they rot. They’re entirely inedible like this, though.” He showed me a cheerful yellow fruit that reminded me of a lemon.

The falphaniuses, thrilled with the presents, retreated into the forest, waving the talenchys around excitedly.

“And this is for you, Lianne,” Lestin said, handing Lianne a thin glass bottle.

Lianne let out a chirping cry like a bird, then, with the bottle grasped firmly in her hands, she stuck her long tongue inside and began devouring the contents.

“It contains the nectar of the hayabikeg tree, one of tolquegs’ favorites.”

So this is a reward for all her hard work?

...Or maybe it’s a thank-you present for putting up with me?! Nah, I’m just being paranoid... right?

In any case, a treat is a treat!

After licking up every last drop of the nectar, Lianna looked down at the bottle longingly.

No matter how much you look at it, it’s not going to magically refill!

“Okay, Lianne, time to go back to your friends now.”

Lianne responded with a dejected “Chee!”

I felt bad for her but forced myself to harden my heart. If she continued to work hard, she would surely be given many more treats in the future.

Lianne continued glancing over at me, but by the time she finished climbing up the nearest tree, she finally gave up because she quickly scampered away, disappearing into the forest.

Lestin and I climbed onto two wild bears and rode back to the office for the fun of it.

Come to think of it, I wonder how things went for Shinki after the beast

knights dragged him off with them...

When we arrived at the office, we found the two beast knights bent over, weeping.

“What’s wrong?!”

I was shocked by the unexpected sight, but as I listened to what the knights had to say, I, too, felt like crying.

“We thought that even if the gentler animals were all scared of him, the fiercer and more powerful animals would probably be fine, but when we tried introducing Shinki to them, even Yafelli and Banarlus were afraid of him!”

I was sure Yafelli and Banarlus were the names of animals living here at the beast stables, but I had no clue what species they might be.

“They flashed their claws and fangs at *us*, their beloved caretakers, and some were so terrified they passed out!”

“There was nothing we could do...!”

“I just feel so bad for Shinki, poor guy...!”

I know it’s hardwired into their survival instincts, but I can’t believe the animals all hate him so much! If it were me, I’d completely lose the will to go on living! I don’t think I could survive if I couldn’t pet fluffy animals!

“It must be because he’s a member of the... Beak Tribe,” Lestin concluded pensively.

Parmas, the species of bird believed to be the ancestors of the Beak Tribe, were known to be extremely volatile and were touted as the strongest species of flightless bird on the land.

Unfortunately, the parmas had all “returned to the arms of God,” aka gone extinct. But it wasn’t a stretch to believe that their descendants would still trigger the fear of becoming prey in other animals, even now.

The parmas must’ve been seriously terrifying if all this is true! The fiercest flightless bird on Earth is probably the southern cassowary, but I doubt it’s so intimidating that even apex predators would fear it. Southern cassowaries are omnivores, but their primary food source is fruit, after all.

I can't say for sure since they don't live in the same natural habitat, but something tells me that in a fight, a lion or tiger could take down a southern cassowary. But I guess if you picture a big, carnivorous southern cassowary, you've essentially got a parma?

Hold on, this train of thought is invalidated by the fact that it's not a parma or a member of the Beak Tribe all the animals here are afraid of—they're afraid of Shinki because they can sense he's a monster.

But I'm not about to correct Lestin and the others for the misunderstanding; it works out in my favor this way.

"We feel very sorry for him, but there's nothing else we can think to try!" the knights cried.

It's okay! Shinki doesn't seem to mind!

"That's okay... I guess from now on, I'll have Shinki wait here in the office when I come to visit the animals?" I proposed.

"That would probably be for the best," Lestin agreed.

It wouldn't be good to put too much stress on the animals.

"If that is your wish, miss, I will obey," Shinki stated.

"Oh! In that case, we'll keep Shinki company in the office when you visit. We can tell him lots of amusing stories about things that happened here at the beast stables!"

I guess they're attempting to give him the next best thing by telling him stories about the animals, even if he can't touch them? They are really going out of their way to be kind to Shinki, huh? And, anyway, I want to hear those amusing stories, too!

"...I'd appreciate that," Shinki accepted.

He seems to have realized there's no way for him to graciously turn down their kind offer. His social skills are really starting to improve. At this point, I bet people would have a hard time believing he's a monster, even if we told them.

And that was the story of how Shinki came to be warmly accepted by the beast knights.

Where should we go next time?



Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

By Makino Maebaru illust Yoko Maturika

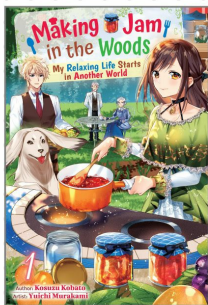
When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now

By Suzume Kirisaki illust Cosmic

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World

By Kosuzu Kobato illust Yuichi Murakami

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



Author: Iota AIUE Artist: Misa Sazanami



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