

FLUFFY PARADISE

4

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Fluffy Paradise Volume 4

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Karnadia Osphe
NEFERTIMA' S OLDER SISTER.

Paul
A BUTLER IN THE
OSPHE HOUSEHOLD.

“IT WAS WORTH ALL
THE WORK THAT WENT INTO
CREATING IT TO SEE YOU
SO HAPPY, NEEMA.”

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.

“AHHHH!”
“THANK YOU, KARNA!”



"SCREECH!"

Nox
A RAINHAWK.

Pluma
A BANDU FORVOSTE.

"WELCOME HOME, NOX!"

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

"NEFERTIMA,
SLEEP NOW, UNTIL YOUR
WOUNDED SOUL HAS HEALED."

Gresiole
THE GODDESS OF
MERCY AND REBIRTH.





Dee
A SNOW WOLF.

“DEE!
THAT TICKLES!”

1 - Shinki Sure Is Popular!

TODAY, I was restless because there hadn't been much to do lately, and I was getting bored.

Progress was being made on Project Shiana without me. It wasn't necessarily that adults were handling tasks that couldn't be left up to a child, but rather that people had taken the ideas I'd come up with and run with them on their initiative. In some cases, they transformed them into something almost unrecognizable from my original concept.

For example, Ralf dragged guild master after guild master into our plans... No, that's an uncharitable way of saying it—he successfully pitched the business model. As a result, the merchants' guild, the blacksmiths' guild, the carpenters' guild, the innkeepers' guild, and the apothecaries' guild all agreed to participate in Project Shiana.

The carpenters' guild and innkeepers' guild had already gotten to work. The carpenters' guild members were sent to survey the area, determine potential build sites, and take measurements.

I was grateful to be kept in the loop, but they might be getting ahead of themselves. Come to think of it, Mama also said that she would send staff from the Magical Research Center to conduct a survey as well. As for Papa, he was following up on reported sightings of a group of people dressed as adventurers believed to be part of Runohark.

Karna was throwing herself into trying to create a Hanley stuffed animal.

And I'd asked Sol to search for someone who knew how to use the birth control spell. I was willing to bet that at that very moment, there were wind elemental spirits devoting themselves to the search. Sol had promised to inform me as soon as they were successful, so I'd have to wait until he got back to me.

So, I was left with nothing to do but try and stave off boredom.

Playing with Dee at home was all well and fine, but I was getting restless from the lack of exercise.

With how many snacks I've been scarfing down lately, I might have to worry about growing sideways instead of vertically soon! This calls for a slightly more aggressive approach to physical fitness! But going without snacks isn't an option, not for me! I'll ask Marjace to prepare for me to go out.

The only place I was allowed to go without supervision was the royal palace, but I figured that playing with the cuties at either the beast stables or the dragon stables would provide plenty of exercise.

"Paul, please inform Marjace that I'd like to go to the royal palace," I said.

"Yes, my lady. Please be careful and have a safe trip."

Paul was shaping up and had become noticeably more butler-like lately.

Shortly after Paul left to deliver my message to Marjace, a maid came to my room to help me change for the outing. I asked her to choose something easy to move in, and she brought me an orange dress from Auntie Olive packed full of written spells.

Come to think of it, whenever I announced I was going to the royal palace and requested clothes that were easy to move in, the servants always chose vibrant colors.

"That's quite a bright color," I remarked.

"Do you dislike it, my lady?" the maid asked.

"No, it's fine. I was just curious why you picked it."

"His Grace instructed us to dress you in colors that are easy to spot when you go to 'play' at the royal palace."

This is to prevent me from getting lost, right? A brightly colored dress would probably be memorable for anyone who saw me... But children hardly ever visit the royal palace, so all the servants already know who I am. So I guess it must be to make me easy to spot if I get lost or run into trouble? But elemental spirits are always following me, so I doubt locating me would ever be difficult.

In any case, better safe than sorry, right?

Once dressed, I climbed into the carriage, accompanied by Shinki and Nox. Unfortunately, Haku and Gratia would have to stay home. Those two were immediately identifiable as monsters.

I bet the researchers from the Magical Research Center would be happy to see them again, though...

Although pets were forbidden from entering the royal palace, birds like Nox, which could be used as a method of emergency contact, were permitted. Plenty of them were constantly flying in and out of the beast stables carrying messages, so it was far from a rare sight.

I greeted the gatekeeper, a man I recognized but whose name I didn't know, as we entered the complex. Once the carriage stopped directly in front of the palace, the chamberlain, who I was well acquainted with by this point, was waiting, dressed in a uniform similar to a butler's.

"Welcome, Lady Nefertima. Where will you be going today?" he asked.

If I said I wanted to play with Will, the chamberlain would escort me to wherever he was. If I said I wanted to go to the beast or dragon stables, he would contact Lestin or Dan for me. The position of chamberlain was originally intended as something like a private secretary for the king. Compared to the servants in our household, the position was similar to Mother and Father's personal butlers.

Due to his magnanimous personality, King Gauldi also had his chamberlain act as something of a concierge for visitors to the royal palace.

"Good day," I greeted in return. "Today, I'd like to visit the dragon stables!"

"Certainly. I'll call for someone to escort you. Until they arrive, please wait over here."

A maid always escorted me when I visited Will, but when I visited the dragon or beast stables, one of the knights would come to get me. Of course, if I insisted on walking there by myself, that would be fine as well. It wasn't an all-access pass for nothing!

I was served a cup of tea while waiting for my escort in a room close to the gate, and before long, a familiar-looking dragon knight arrived. That wasn't

saying much since I'd met pretty much all of the dragon knights and beast knights by this point.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Lady Nefertima!"

"Thank you for coming to get me. Let's get going!"

"Certainly. ...Oh, who's this?"

"His name is Shinki; he's my bodyguard. Does he need to get permission from the king to enter the dragon stables?" I asked. It had skipped my mind, but the all-access pass to the royal palace only covered me.

I wonder if Shinki needs to get permission directly from the king to enter the premises?

"If he's your servant, permission from Legion Commander Dan will suffice."

Hmm, I still think it would be easiest to have the king give Shinki an all-access pass, too, limited to when he's accompanying me.

"No, on second thought, I think it would be disrespectful to fail to consult His Majesty. Would it be possible to meet with the king today?" I directed this question to the chamberlain, waiting off to the side.

"Audiences have already ended for the day, but I will ask His Majesty directly. Please wait here."

"Thank you."

Oh, crap! I requested an audience with the king, but neither Shinki nor I are dressed appropriately for a formal occasion like that! Although, come to think of it, the only time I've ever worn formalwear to meet with the king was during that first public audience...

Even so, is this simple dress really okay?! I looked down at my clothes. Maybe I should call it off and come back another day?

I was still second-guessing myself when the chamberlain returned.

"His Majesty said he will see you now. Please follow me."

Whoa, it's really okay?! And I don't even have to wait?!

"I'll wait for you here, Lady Nefertima. Please return when you're finished,"

the dragon knight said.

Is it okay to have him wait for me? He must have other work to attend to...

“Don’t you need to get back to work?” I asked.

“You needn’t worry about that, but thank you for your concern.”

I was still doubtful but decided to take him at his word.

“I’ll return as soon as possible,” I promised.

Leaving the dragon knight behind, I followed the chamberlain to a place I’d been brought to once before by Lars.

Two royal guards stood at attention in front of an excessively ostentatious door. Although the sight was reassuringly familiar, I couldn’t help the nervousness crawling below my skin.

“I’ve brought Lady Nefertima,” the chamberlain announced.

The two guards confirmed my identity and then opened the door for us. At the chamberlain’s urging, I stepped into the room. I was relieved to see the chamberlain follow behind me.

I’d be way too nervous if it were just me and His Majesty!

The interior was practically bare, with little furnishing other than a bookshelf and a desk. It was the same as the last time I’d been here. Seated behind the desk, the king had removed his jacket, wearing only a finely tailored collared shirt, a reassuringly casual look.

Thank goodness, King Gauldi isn’t dressed up either!

“Welcome, Neema. What’s the matter?”

“Good day, King Gauldi. Umm, I actually came to ask a favor.”

First things first, I paid homage to the king.

“Be at ease. What can I do for you?”

I rose from the uncomfortable, deep curtsy, supremely grateful that he hadn’t required me to hold the position for long.

“You may have already heard from my father, but I’ve recently taken on a

bodyguard. I was hoping you might also grant permission for him to move freely around the royal palace. Only when he's accompanying me, of course..."

All right! I said it properly without embarrassing myself!

"Oh, yes, I've heard about him. And where is this fellow right now?"

Oh, right. I forgot that the king knows all about Shinki being a monster.

"He's waiting outside in the hall," I answered.

"Let him in," the king ordered, not to me but to the chamberlain waiting just behind me.

I heard the door open and felt Shinki come up behind me.

Hm? Come to think of it, which bow should Shinki execute? Should he pay homage? Prostrate himself? He isn't an aristocrat and doesn't work at the royal palace, so I guess prostration is more appropriate?

"Shinki, when greeting the king, you should kneel on both knees, place your right hand over your heart, and bow your head." I thought about whispering that to Shinki secretively, but, in the end, I gave up, figuring that there was no way King Gauldi wouldn't overhear in such a small room.

Shinki prostrated himself according to my instructions.

"Forgive me, sire, for failing to teach my servant proper social manners before bringing him before you," I apologized profusely, struggling with the formal language.

"There's no need to be so formal, Neema! You may rise, young man."

Even if Mama, Papa, and Will aren't here to see it, it's still rude to speak and act casually in the presence of the king, isn't it? But if he's the one insisting, then it must be okay?

"Thank you. If you're certain it's okay..."

I had Shinki rise to his feet and gratefully resumed my normal, less formal manner of speaking.

Formal speech is so unpleasantly stiff and uptight—good riddance!

"Look at my poor manners, keeping you standing this whole time! Come, sit

down, and then we'll talk," the king said.

Shinki and I sat side by side on the sofa at the king's urging, and at that moment, tea was brought in.

Was the chamberlain lurking around this whole time just so he could judge the ideal time to serve the tea?

"Don't mind if I do," I remarked, picking up my teacup and taking a sip.

I was just about to explain Shinki's situation while we drank our tea, but suddenly, the king spoke up.

"You are dismissed."

This was directed at the chamberlain.

I guess he doesn't want the chamberlain to overhear what I'm about to say?

"So, this is the monster Dayle was talking about, eh?"

"Yes. His name is Shinki."

I explained how, because I'd named him, Shinki was bound to me by his name and that he'd also vowed upon his name to protect me.

"And is it correct what I heard about him being able to use the power of all four elements?"

"Yes."

"Then my next question is for Shinki; can you explain what constitutes the 'balance of nature'?"

...Am I just seeing things, or does the look in King Gauldi's eyes resemble the look Mama often gets in hers? It's my imagination that his eyes seem to be shining almost fanatically, just like those crazy researchers' eyes, right? RIGHT?!

"The 'balance of the world' is the fundamental symmetry found in nature, as designed and implemented by the God of Creation. It is essential to the existence of this world," Shinki responded. "Although everything is changeable depending on the God of Creation's will."

"Oh, and you claim to know the God of Creation's will?"

“I don’t, but the elemental spirits do. Isn’t that good enough?” he asked.

Shinki! You’re speaking to the king here! You have to watch how you speak! ... Not that I can talk; I almost too readily agreed to use informal speech. I suppose King Gauldi himself invited us to dispense with formalities, but still...

“I see.”

Hold on, King Gauldi—don’t tell me you understood that explanation?! It was complete gibberish to me!

“I don’t think there’s any need to worry about this, but I’ll say it anyway just to be safe... If you name an elemental spirit, it will become stronger. However, on the other hand, it draws them closer to the world of man, and they become unable to hear the will of the God of Creation,” King Gauldi explained.

...The elemental spirits can be drawn closer to the world of man?

“You mean the elemental spirit would stop being an elemental spirit?” I asked.

“No, but their connection to the God of Creation would be weakened.”

“And if they can no longer interpret the will of the God of Creation, that would mean it’s possible for them to become ‘fallen’?” Shinki concluded tentatively.

Oh, I think I get it now. The elementalists gave names to elemental spirits. Because of this, the elemental spirits became stronger but also lost their connection with God. Without that innate understanding of God, the elemental spirits couldn’t judge whether the things the elementalists asked of them went against God’s will and, therefore, the possibility of becoming “fallen” and getting “obliterated” increased significantly.

...Wait. Does that mean I shouldn’t have started referring to the elemental spirits as “nanos”? That’s all right since it’s not an individual name, right? I hope...

“That’s right. Elemental spirits exist solely to carry out the will of the God of Creation; it’s for this purpose and this purpose only that they possess their powers,” King Gauldi continued. “If the elemental spirits destroy a country, that

means the country has become useless to the God of Creation. On the other hand, if they save a country in danger of collapse, that means the country is still necessary to the God of Creation. The same goes for the lives of men.”

“So basically, what you’re saying is not to borrow the elemental spirits’ power recklessly?” Shinki summarized.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. You’re pretty sharp, young man.”

Whoa, Shinki! The king himself praised you; that’s really something! But, you know, we are already getting a whole lot of help from the elemental spirits! Especially from the wind spirits, having them carry messages back and forth for us covertly.

“King Gauldi, is it bad for the elemental spirits to help us out a lot?” I asked nervously.

“Oh, it looks like I’ve accidentally scared you, huh? Don’t worry, Neema. Using elemental power through holy beasts like Lars and the fire dragon is entirely different.”

Um... I don’t see how it’s any different. In any case, I guess it’s best not to have Shinki use elemental power more than absolutely necessary?

“They get pretty annoying if they’re left too long without anything to do, though,” Shinki observed wryly.

“The elemental spirits love you, eh, young man? In that case, if you start going down a bad path in your life, the elemental spirits surrounding you will probably dissuade you from making poor choices.”

The two of them seem to be on the same wavelength! This feeling of being left out that I have right now is very familiar; I experience it often when I’m with Ralf and Will.

“All right then! I will grant you permission to come and go as you like within the royal palace as well. The only requirement is that you must be accompanying Neema. However, I’d like you to come have a chat with me every now and again.”

Huh? What does he mean?

“What I mean is, Shinki has special permission to visit me personally, even when you aren’t present.”

I must’ve been tilting my head in confusion because King Gauldi tacked on that last bit by way of explanation.

...Whoa, what?! That means Shinki has an all-access pass to meet with the king whenever he wants?!

“Just so you know, I’m *much* more knowledgeable about elemental spirits than Cerulia!”

It felt like I’d witnessed a rare sight, seeing King Gauldi brag like a proud little boy.

But, you know, it’s not fair that no matter what expression they make, it always looks good on handsome noblemen! I suppose Papa is a handsome nobleman, but he doesn’t pull it off nearly as well as King Gauldi.

“Of course, you can come see me whenever you like, too, Neema.”

Oh? Did my all-access pass just get upgraded, too?!

“Really?”

“Absolutely! Come to visit any time; no need to hold back.”

And so, Shinki unexpectedly found favor with the king and obtained his own all-access pass. Before long, our audience was complete. King Gauldi seemed to want to keep chatting but restrained himself because he still had work to do. I got the feeling that King Gauldi had previously done extensive research about the elemental spirits.

...Wait, hold on. How could King Gauldi and Mama have been co-disciples if he was researching elemental spirits and Mama specializes in magical engineering? I’m pretty sure Elder Salzar’s specialty is written spells, but could I be mistaken?

Or maybe it’s okay to take on disciples with different specializations? I’ll have to ask Mama when we get home.

With King Gauldi urging us to visit again soon, we left the small office behind.

Hmm, I can’t shake the feeling that it’s inappropriate to interact so casually

with the king. Is it really okay?

In any case, we made our way back to the room where the dragon knight was waiting, and now—for real this time—we would have him escort us to the dragon stables.

I'm going to stop worrying so much and focus on playing to my heart's content!

"The babies have grown up a lot since the last time you visited."

On the way to the dragon stables, I asked the knight how the dragons were doing.

The baby lindblossoms and lindrakes, born in early spring, were growing strong and healthy.

I want to play with them and all the dragon knights again! You know, I always think this, but the dragon stables sure are far away!

It was a good twenty-minute walk from the room where the dragon knight had waited for us to the dragon stables. Although, that was how long it took us to walk at a child's pace. An adult probably could've made the trek in ten to fifteen minutes. It was the perfect distance if you were walking as a form of exercise, though—a challenge for sure, but not unmanageable by any means.

When we finally arrived at the dragon stables, the first order of business was to say hello to Dan. I had to introduce Shinki to him after all.

"It's been too long since we last had the pleasure of your company, Lady Nefertima."

"Thanks for letting me visit again, Dan."

Dan was wearing work coveralls and held a farm tool that looked like a pitchfork. He looked just like a farmer from some quaint little farm in the European countryside.

"Legion Commander, please at least put down the pitchfork," the dragon knight who'd served as our escort said, grabbing the pitchfork from Dan with an exasperated expression.

"Sorry, I was right in the middle of changing the hay," Dan explained

sheepishly, looking a bit embarrassed about being scolded by one of his subordinates.

The dragon knights sure are close! Since they were knights, you'd expect them to be rigid about rank and status, but they constantly took good-natured jabs at one another. *We probably have Dan's easy-going personality to thank for that.*

"Dan, this is my bodyguard, Shinki," I said, introducing them. "The king gave him permission to accompany me freely around the royal palace, so would it be okay for him to enter the dragon stables as well?"

"It's fine with me as long as he's with you, Lady Nefertima," Dan replied, giving his approval easily.

Come to think of it, I wonder if the dragons here will be alarmed by Shinki's presence. They wouldn't attack on sight just because he's a monster, would they?

...I'd better introduce him to Ghizel first, just to be safe.

We entered the fence that encircled the dragon stables, and I wasted no time calling out to Ghizel.

Several other dragons who'd heard my voice started making their way towards me, but a single cry from Ghizel—who appeared suddenly, descending from above—caused them to stop in their tracks.

"Ghizel!" I threw my arms around Ghizel, giving him a big hug. His scales felt cold, maybe because he'd just been flying in the sky.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Neema."

I could hear Ghizel's words in my mind at the same time as my ears picked up on the rumbling sound coming from his throat.

It's been a while since I experienced this strange sensation of double-hearing.

"Ghizel, my bodyguard is accompanying me today. Is it okay for him to get close to the flock as well?"

I introduced Shinki to Ghizel. For his part, Shinki just stood there as if unphased by the massive lindbloom before him.

“There’s something different about him. He’s not human, is he?”

Way to go, Ghizel! You hit the nail right on the head!

“I promise I’ll explain later. Can you wait a little bit?”

“I don’t get a bad feeling about him, so I suppose it’s fine.”

“Thank you!”

Now that Ghizel had given his permission as well, there were no more barriers to Shinki being able to play with me at the dragon stables. And so, without seeming bothered, Ghizel allowed Shinki and me to ride on his back.

“...So this is what it feels like to fly in the sky, huh?” Shinki had been unperturbed by meeting with the king and Ghizel, but finally expressed interest when it came to flying.

“It feels nice, right?! When I ride on Sol’s back, he uses his magic to make it so I won’t feel the wind on my face.”

It was a much more visceral experience when you were soaring through the sky with the wind beating against your skin. Even if it was a bit cold, I could deal with it as the price of being able to experience the sensation of wild freedom that came with flying.

We landed in a grassy field where the other dragons were hanging around relaxing. As soon as they caught sight of us, the lindblossoms and the lindrakes gathered around us.

“It’s Neema!”

“Did you come to play?”

“What game should we play? Tag? Hide and seek?”

“Hey, there’s some strange guy with her; I’ve never seen him before...”

I get it! You’re all happy to see me! But please calm down! When you all pounce on me at once, it feels like I’m going to be crushed, and it’s kind of scary!



“Settle down, all of you!” Ghizel roared, freezing the lindblossoms in their tracks.

He sure is intimidating—as to be expected from the boss!

“My bodyguard, Shinki, is accompanying me today. Please be nice to him!” I said.

At this, all eyes turned to Shinki. *How can you be so calm with so many dragons staring you down, Shinki?!*

“He’s not human, is he?”

“No, definitely not human.”

“Then what is he?”

Interesting; they can tell he’s not human but can’t figure out what species he is.

“He used to be a goblin,” I explained.

“That’s no goblin.”

“Goblins are much smaller than him.”

With my ears, I could hear a commotion of screeching cries, but the words that the dragon orb translated into intelligible speech for me were so stinkin’ cute!

“God allowed him to evolve; that’s how he got so big,” I said.

“God?”

“What’s ‘God’?”

“I want God to make me big, too!”

The dragons fell silent as my words settled in before a chorus of “Me too!” rang out.

Hold on, guys! We’re going to have trouble on our hands if you get any bigger than you already are! Wait a minute... Don’t tell me they actually want to become human?

“That way, I can play with Neema all the time!”

“I’ll have God turn me into a human!”

“O-Oh, really... Maybe if you pray really, really hard, God will grant your prayers...”

“If that happened, you wouldn’t be able to fly and run with Neema on your back anymore,” Ghizel pointed out, causing all the dragons to fall silent once more.

“No way!”

“I’ll stay how I am!”

“I love running with Neema on my back!”

And so, with Ghizel’s help, the bizarre uproar of dragons wanting to become humans was laid to rest.

These guys make decisions spur-of-the-moment based on a whim, don’t they? The dragon knights sure have their work cut out for them. In any case, it seems they’ve accepted Shinki, and we’ll all be able to play together, so all’s well that ends well!

The dragons seemed to find it amusing to test their strength against Shinki’s because a group of them was challenging him over and over. The challenge was exceedingly simple: Shinki would pull on the dragon’s tail while the dragon would attempt to stand their ground.

Even when they lost, they seemed highly amused about being dragged across the ground. However, a seemingly never-ending queue of lindrakes lined up to have Shinki pull on their tails. That was all well and good, but dragging the dragons over the grass was destroying it.

I’ll have to tell Dan about it later and have him see what he can do to fix it.

Anyway, if we don’t get going soon, we won’t have much time to play with the babies!

After briefly consoling the dragons, whining that they still wanted to play some more, I got Ghizel to bring us to the dragon knights’ office.

“See you later, Ghizel!”

"Don't make us wait so long for your next visit," Ghizel said before flying off.

Aww, he wants me to come visit more often! You really are a tsundere, huh, Ghizel?

When I told Dan that the grass in the field was torn up, he dejectedly responded, "Not again!"

"Again?" I cocked my head.

"Recently, the dragons have been making a game of destroying the habitats, tearing up the grass, and moving all the stones. Things like that. We've already repaired that field four times now."

Hmm, I bet they aren't enjoying destroying the habitat as much as they're enjoying causing trouble for the dragon knights.

Naughty little dragons!

I left Dan to deal with the field and headed to the shed known as "the hatchery," where I knew I'd find the baby dragons.

Each baby lindbloom and lindrake was assigned a knight to care for them before they even hatched from their egg. Until the baby could live on their own, the dragon knight would be with them constantly, going so far as to eat and sleep with them.

However, when the knights were busy with their other duties, the babies would be cared for as a group in the hatchery. In short, it was basically a daycare center for baby dragons.

Of course, at least one knight watched over the babies at the hatchery at any given time, but they worked in shifts, and even knights not currently assigned to a specific baby dragon took turns.

"Hello!" I burst into the hatchery, and a chorus of adorable chirping screeches greeted me.

Although it resembled a large shed from the outside, the inside was more like an indoor play center. The dragon knights had hand-made a variety of wooden toys and an assortment of playground equipment that I assumed had been created using magic for the baby dragons.

Hey, I bet I could play on these, too, couldn't I?

Off to one side were troughs full of water for the baby dragons to drink and a bedding area where they could nap.

I could use that, too! I suppose I don't lack good places to nap, though. Besides, whenever I want to nap at the royal palace, I've got a standing reservation with Lars' soft belly! There's no better place in the world to nap than that!

But enough about that—it's time to play!

I waded into the sea of baby dragons and immediately set to work, petting their round, pudgy little bodies. They had gotten bigger since the last time I'd seen them, but they still retained all their adorable baby chub.

"Skree?"

"Skree!"

The babies seemed curious about who I was but didn't act nervous around me.

"My name's Neema. Let's play together!"

"Skree!"

The second the word "play" had left my mouth, a baby lindbloom flew towards me. From behind, no less!

"Whoa!"

The force of the impact knocked me forward. I barely broke my fall with my hands to prevent my face from slamming into the ground, but the bad guy—or rather, bad dragon—was perched atop my back, looking proud of himself.

"Lady Nefertima!"

The dragon knight on dragon daycare duty ran over in a panic, but I was fine. My dress was a bit dirty, but I was otherwise uninjured.

"Skree!"

The baby dragon perched on my back let out a shrill cry, and suddenly, the other baby dragons around us turned and pounced on their dragon knight

caretaker.

“Hey, knock it off, you guys!”

The dragon knights trained daily, so he was much better suited than I for standing up to the baby dragons’ attacks, but eventually, he gave in to their incessant pleas.

“Fine, fine!”

The dragon knight got down on all fours, and the baby dragons piled on his back.

The lindblossoms flew with adorably shaky flaps of their stubby wings, and the lindrakes scrambled up his sides as if climbing a mountain. Once on his back, they let out triumphant cries.

I see, they’re playing horsey!

This might be fine and dandy for a buff dragon knight, but it was an entirely different story for a little kid like me.

This baby dragon sure is heavy! There’s only one on my back, and it’s still way too heavy! Come on, little buddy, why don’t you go climb on the dragon knight with your friends?

My plea must’ve been received because the baby dragon on my back flew over to join its friends on the dragon knight’s back.

Just to be safe, I put some distance between myself and the dragon knight they were still playing horsey with. I wandered over to peek into a play tunnel and found several baby dragons curled up together inside, fast asleep.

I studied their cute little sleeping faces intently while musing that they’d ignored the specially prepared sleeping area in favor of stuffing themselves in here together.

I could hear the faint sounds of little baby snores. They were out cold.

Maybe they like small, dark places? I bet it reminds them of being inside an egg...

I was watching the peacefully sleeping baby dragons when a loud *THUMP!*

came from somewhere behind me. I turned and saw two more baby dragons playing with a log.

As I watched, a lindbloom flew up and landed on top of the log, where it promptly laid down. Then a lindrake attempted to climb up on it, too, but the log rolled as the lindrake clumsily attempted to climb it, spilling both dragons onto the ground.

The lindbloom flew up again and laid back down on top of the log, and the lindrake attempted to follow, rolling the log and causing them both to fall off once more.

This same pattern kept repeating itself over and over. I felt bad for the lindbloom after the third or fourth time. Not too bad, though—both dragons seemed to be having fun.

Eventually, I gave in and held the log steady so the lindrake could finally climb on.

“Skree!”

I’ll take that as a “thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I stroked the baby lindrake, and it happily rubbed its head on me. It had little bumpy protrusions on its head like an adult lindrake, but they weren’t nearly as hard as an adult’s. That’s not to say they were soft because they weren’t. But it was nice to enjoy a different petting experience than I’d already had with the adult lindrakes.

While I was playing with the baby dragons, the dragon knights, who’d finished their shifts, began arriving to collect the babies assigned to their care.

“I’m here to pick up, Myria,” one of the knights announced to his coworker on dragon daycare duty as he hurried straight over to one of the baby dragons and scooped it up in his arms. The baby dragon did not seem to appreciate being picked up because it struggled and let out angry little shrieks.

“Tonight for dinner, I’m making your favorite—ralcoff!”

The baby dragon stopped fighting the instant it heard the word “ralcoff.”

...He sure knows what he's doing!

Ralcoff was a fruit that resembled a red melon and seemed to be that baby dragon's favorite food.

Heh, it looks like whether they're humans or dragons, all little kids are easily won over by the promise of their favorite food.

After that, the dragon knights poured in one after another, and without hesitation, each headed straight over to their assigned dragon.

"How do you tell them apart?" I asked curiously.

"I guess by their coloring and the sound of their cries? Well, these babies are like our own children, so there's no possibility of mixing them up."

The dragon knights could tell with a glance which baby dragon was theirs.

If that's not a labor of love, I don't know what is!

Before we left, I asked Dan if he could tell the baby dragons apart. It made sense for the knights assigned to care for a specific baby dragon day in and day out to be able to identify it on sight, but what about Dan, who wasn't directly involved with their day-to-day care?

"Of course I can. Their faces and bodies are completely different."

Apparently, Dan and I lived in alternate realities.

Once they became adults, the differences became slightly more obvious, but as babies, I thought they all looked alike.

Hm, I'll need to concentrate more next time on noticing their markings.

Papa came to get me after finishing work for the day, and we traveled home together. Someone notified Papa and Mama whenever I visited the royal palace. They were informed when I left as well and would know to come retrieve me if I was still there when they finished work. Today, Papa gently chastised me for staying so late.

I'd been so caught up in playing with the adorable baby dragons that I lost track of time, and night had already fallen over the city.

Mama arrived home a short while after we returned to the manor and

scolded me as well. I promised to return home before the sun went down from now on and was eventually forgiven.

It's easy to lose track of time when you're indoors. Oh, I know! I'll have Shinki carry a pocket watch! That way, he can tell me when it's time to head home.

2 - Elder Salzar Comes to Visit!

TO stave off boredom, I made it my mission to introduce Shinki around the royal palace.

Unfortunately, all the animals were terrified of him.

When we visited the beast stables, Uwaz wouldn't come near us; all the birds flew away, and the dogs backed away with their tails pressed against their bellies in fear.

The animals' instincts recognized that Shinki was a strong monster and cautioned them to keep their distance. There wasn't much I could do about that, so I decided to have Shinki protect me from a distance whenever I visited the beast stables in the future. Even if he kept his distance, the animals still seemed wary of him, but they'd have to work with me and get used to it.

To my surprise, Lestin and the other beast knights really liked Shinki. They took pity on him for—by their assumption—being intimidating to the animals due to his fierce appearance and tried employing different tactics to help Shinki make friends with the animals, such as having him feed them treats.

Unfortunately, animals' survival instincts tended to prioritize their lives over treats.

Sad as it is, there's not much we can do about that!



THE same thing happened when we visited the Magical Creatures Department on the third floor of the Magical Research Center. The small animals there fled to the far rear corner of their cages, where they froze, trembling in fear.

I felt bad for the animals and Shinki, so we quickly left.



WHILE we were at the royal palace, I introduced Shinki to Auntie Olive and

Grandpa Gouche.

Uncle Gene was overseas, and I could only assume Uncle Sanrus was busy because I couldn't get a moment of his time.

"My, what a fine young man! I'm glad Dayle finally acknowledged the need for a bodyguard. It took him long enough!" Auntie Olive praised Shinki while sneaking in a complaint about Papa. She'd been urging him to assign me a bodyguard for a while now.

Surprisingly, Auntie Olive left without making a single mention of Shinki's horns.

...Does Auntie Olive know Shinki's true identity? Hmm, I don't know... I'll ask Papa later!



AS for Grandpa Gouche, well... He was Grandpa Gouche.

"Let me test you and see how strong you are."

Without waiting for an answer, he led us to the training grounds and handed Shinki a blunt practice sword.

Does Shinki even know how to use a sword?

"Show me what you've got!" Grandpa Gouche shouted, wasting no time swinging his sword at Shinki.

Shinki did his best to deflect the blow, but there was never any possibility he could withstand Grandpa Gouche's onslaught.

With a loud *CLANK!* Shinki was sent flying.

"Urk..."

Shinki's face was pinched as if trying to hide his pain. It was the first time I'd seen him wear such an expression.

"What a weakling! What was Dayle thinking, assigning Neema such an incompetent bodyguard?"

Umm, well, I was the one who named him...

“Shinki’s never even used a sword before! You’re horrible, Grandpa Gouche!” I complained.

“H-Horrible?!”

I wasn’t sure quite why, but Grandpa Gouche looked deeply shocked.

Sending an amateur flying across the training ring is enough to qualify for the title of “horrible”!

“In that case, why don’t we go another round, this time with the weapon of your choice?” Grandpa Gouche asked Shinki directly.

In response, Shinki threw aside his sword and raised his fists, bracing himself for a fistfight.

“Hand-to-hand fighting, hm? Now that’s interesting!”

I don’t know about you, but the first thing that comes to mind when I hear “hand-to-hand” is martial arts!

The form of hand-to-hand fighting practiced on this continent was pretty much a free-for-all brawl like you’d often see between untrained fighters. You could punch and kick, drop-kick, curb-stomp, poke out the eyes, go for the family jewels—all of the dirty tricks that would be illegal in organized sports were fine.

Normally, hand-to-hand would be used along with a short sword, but Shinki was the dictionary definition of an amateur when it came to fighting with weapons.

Although you might be able to argue that his claws count as a weapon...

Grandpa Gouche eagerly kept pace with Shinki despite the painful-sounding noises like *THUD!* and *SLAM!* that rang through the air one after another.

The two seemed to actually be having fun exchanging, dodging, and landing punches and kicks on one another. At first, I’d been on the edge of my seat watching them go at it, but there seemed to be no end in sight, and I soon became bored.

A crowd formed as royal guards who’d come to practice stopped to gather around and watch the fierce hand-to-hand fight. Several royal guards shouted

encouragement, saying things like, “Right there! You’ve got this!” and “Knock him out!”

Just as I was musing over how much men seemed to love violence, the fight finally came to an end.

Grandpa Gouche’s strong arm body blow connected with Shinki’s solar plexus in a clean hit. Shinki went flying backward, bent in half at the waist.

Did this fight accidentally reveal the truth to Grandpa Gouche—that Shinki isn’t human? He beat Shinki despite his mysterious extra evolution, though...

...Oh, but maybe Shinki was intentionally holding back? Unless they were both holding back? You know what? I’m just going to stop right there. This train of thought is starting to get alarming.

“I’ll admit you’re not too bad at hand-to-hand, but you’re still too weak to properly protect Neema.”

Huh?! What exactly is he expecting to happen to me?! It’s not as if anyone is out for my life or anything... Oh! That’s right—Runohark! But they would probably go after Shinki for being a monster, not a boring old human like me...

“Whenever you come to the royal palace, report here. I will train you personally!” Grandpa Gouche proclaimed.

“...Very well. I’ll train until I can defeat you,” Shinki replied seriously.

Huh? Shinki looks serious, but isn’t he the least bit embarrassed about being sent flying by Grandpa Gouche? It must be a special experience that only fighters who’ve crossed swords with each other can understand because they seem to have suddenly developed some kind of weird mutual respect between brothers-of-the-sword or something!

The royal guards who’d gathered to watch joined in, praising Shinki and all-but-worshiping Grandpa Gouche with feverish excitement.

Hey, what about practice?! Are you all skipping out on your training to watch them fight?!

And so it was decided that Shinki would visit the training grounds periodically for training with Grandpa Gouche.

Oh, I can visit the beast stables whenever Shinki's here practicing! That way, I can play with the animals without him scaring them off.



ALTHOUGH I'd been visiting the royal palace nearly every day recently, today I was ordered to stay home because we were expecting a guest.

I had no idea who the mysterious "guest" might be, though.

Imagine my surprise when I accompanied Mama outside to greet our guest, and it turned out to be Elder Salzar. As always, he was dressed in a hooded robe and carried a cane, the very image of a wizard.

"Master Salzar, welcome to my home. Please come in."

We led Elder Salzar to the guest parlor, and Paul promptly served tea. I was looking forward to seeing what snacks he'd prepared with the tea, but they turned out to be square, green things?

It looks like a green tea-flavored gelatin cake, but what will it taste like?

"Master, I had the kitchen prepare your favorite—couvera. I hope you'll enjoy it."

"You always spoil me, Cerulia! I never could turn down a nice piece of couvera..." Elder Salzar said before digging in happily.

You know, seeing him like this, you'd have a hard time believing he's the premier magic user in the Kingdom of Gaché. He looks more like a jolly old man drinking tea on the porch!

"Now then, regarding the matter I asked you about in my letter..." Mother began.

"No need to rush me, girly. I came today to show you this," Elder Salzar said, spreading out what looked like a blueprint on the table.

These were different than the blueprints I'd seen the researchers at the Magical Research Center working on.

Is it for a magical item?

"It's still in the trial stage, but I managed to stuff in all your basic requests," he

said.

Mama stared at the blueprint seriously.

I had no idea what I was looking at.

“...I don’t think this will allow for the invalidation of magic?”

“You’re right. This item doesn’t disperse magic; it produces magic of equal force so that the two will cancel each other out.”

I didn’t understand much of the highly technical conversation they were having, but it seemed that this was indeed the blueprint for a magical item! Thankfully, Mama thoughtfully explained it to me in simpler terms, so I understood the gist of how it would work.

It was a magical item that would cancel out all attacks over a certain power level. It would be set to only work one time. Once the cancel-out feature was activated, the user would automatically lose to their opponent.

This way, neither the adventurers nor the monsters would die.

Considering the production cost, it was only feasible to make this magical item capable of canceling out up to intermediate-level spells.

Then what will we do if a low-level adventurer who happens to be an advanced-level magic user shows up? Even if they agree to the rules that forbid the use of spells above the intermediate level on Mount Reitimo, we can’t completely rule out the possibility that someone might panic in the heat of the moment and unconsciously use an advanced-level spell.

And what about physical attacks?

Not to mention, even if the magical item can cancel out attacks above the specified power level, won’t it take damage and get worn out by multiple lower-level attacks?

I brought up my concerns to Elder Salzar.

“Hmm, lower-level attacks...” Elder Salzar said thoughtfully before falling silent.

Mama didn’t say anything either, so for the moment, I focused on the snack in

front of me. I couldn't help being curious about this mysterious green square. It appeared to be jiggly and soft, just like a green tea-flavored *yokan*, but when I stuck my fork into it, it was surprisingly firm.

I cut off a bite-sized piece and put it in my mouth...

Oh, wow, it's not sweet at all! No, wait, there is a tiny bit of sweetness to it, but it's mostly just salty. It's salty, but somehow, it complements the tea perfectly.

What a mysterious food!

When I took a sip after finishing the bite of couvera, the flavor and aroma of the tea stood out, followed by a lingering sweetness that was not overpowering but just perfect. The couvera somehow made the tea taste twice as good.

"I see.... When it comes to attacks with weapons, rather than a momentary, powerful blow, it's more of a case of continuous, smaller blows. But if the attacks don't have any effect, the entire training exercise will be pointless. In that case..." Elder Salzar suddenly began speaking. To himself, it seemed.

This magical item can prevent sudden-death attacks, but regular attacks are more difficult. In the first place, it won't do anything to help the adventurers gain experience if we eliminate the effect of the attacks completely. That means being injured is inevitable to determine the winner, but how can we make it so that nobody dies from those wounds?

It's not as if we can make it how it is in video games, where the defeated opponent disappears, leaving behind their items.

Wait... Elder Salzar is the foremost expert in written magic, right? And using written magic, you can create teleportation spells, right?

"Elder Salzar, couldn't we use teleportation spells?" I suggested.

"...Teleportation spells?"

Assuming that the magic circles used for teleportation between the royal palace and large cities are as large as they are so that they can transport multiple people instantaneously over large distances, it should be possible to scale everything down, shouldn't it?

Although it should technically be possible, I suspect the real reason they don't set up more, smaller teleportation circles more easily accessible to the public comes from a concern for public safety and national security.

“What if we created multiple teleportation circles at strategic points around the mountain so the participants could escape on their own if the need arose?” I explained my idea.

“What you're suggesting is that this magical item would be used to evade attacks that would cause immediate death, and the participants would retreat based on their own judgment if they sustained too much damage from lower-level attacks?”

“Exactly. In the end, it would be up to each person to save themselves.”

I thought it might work as long as we cast a barrier around each magic circle to prevent anyone from destroying them or attacking someone who'd fled into them.

Besides, fleeing so you can live to fight another day is a crucial skill for adventurers to learn.

“But there are bound to be some idiots who are too prideful to know when to throw in the towel and run for it. What should we do about them?” he asked.

Oh! He's got a point; there are plenty of annoying people like that, prideful fools who are too full of themselves to admit defeat.

What should we do...?

I wonder if it's possible to create something like the HP meter you always see in video games. It would calculate the damage taken into numbers, and once it reached a certain level, an alarm would sound or something?

Either that, or we could impose a time limit on the battles?

... No, that wouldn't work. Hmm, this is a tough one!

“Is it possible to make it so you can see a visual representation of a person's life force?” I asked hopefully.

“That would be quite difficult...” Grandpa Gouche responded, furrowing his brows thoughtfully.

“I thought so. In that case...”

“Neema, you mustn’t rush things. It’s not possible to resolve all the issues at once. We need to tackle them one by one,” Mama interjected.

Right. Mama makes a good point.

“If we install new teleportation circles, we’ll need His Majesty’s permission. And if they’re going to be used exclusively for short-distance teleportation, the magical formulation will need to be adjusted,” she continued.

Oh, so they can’t just use the same teleportation spell the way it’s currently formulated? I have a feeling getting His Majesty’s permission will be a piece of cake if Mama’s the one to ask.

“For the time being, I’ll look into it and see if there are any spells that might be able to help.”

“Thank you!”

I had a feeling I’d better leave this to Mama and Elder Salzar. I couldn’t help much with my extremely basic knowledge of magic.

“Leave the short-distance teleportation spell to me. Cerulia, you focus on defensive spells, particularly those using non-attributed magic,” Elder Salzar declared.

“Yes, master.”

“Now then, moving on to the next issue...”

There were so many issues at hand that I had no idea which he might be referring to. I tilted my head to the side in confusion, and Elder Salzar graced me with a kind smile.

“If the monsters choose to retreat, there’s no benefit to the adventurers. But if they themselves are captured, there are steep consequences. Isn’t that a bit unfair?”

...He has a point.

We’d already determined penalties for the adventurers, but no such penalties were imposed on the monsters. I suggested requiring the monsters to drop

their items when they decided to retreat.

Heh, that's the kind of thing you often see in video games. Although, in this case, the monsters aren't being defeated like the enemies in video games. I suppose it's more like a bribe in exchange for allowing them to escape. And it will be easier for the monsters to escape if the adventurers are distracted by collecting their dropped items.

But for this to work, it would cost a lot of money to constantly replace the lost items.

"Something that can be easily prepared is fine!" Mama insisted, tossing my concerns aside. She seemed to feel no need to make the compensation strictly equal to the adventurers' penalties.

According to Mama, the normal fee for subjugating a small clan of goblins was around 1 silver coin.

So that means they'd get paid about 100 dollars for taking down anywhere from 14 to 24 goblins, right?

In that case, assigning a penalty of 10 containers of salve per monster would be acceptable.

And if we made a rule that once an adventurer accumulated 100 containers of salve, they could exchange them for a more valuable medicine, that would sweeten the pot for the adventurers.

But that wasn't the extent of Mama's idea.

If the prize was medicine, we could hire out the job of gathering medicinal herbs to the adventurers' guild. This was one of the simplest and easiest jobs the adventurers' guild got and would be assigned to the freshest newbies, who would gain enough experience through these easy jobs to then be able to participate in Project Shiana.

Then, we would hire the apothecaries' guild to make the herbs collected into a simple salve for cuts and abrasions, which would be used as the monsters' drop items.

"But wouldn't that end up costing a lot?" I asked.

If we hired the adventurers' guild to collect the herbs, we'd have to pay a contract fee to the guild as well as the adventurers' job fees. This would add a lot of expenditures to the budget. Even knowing that upfront costs were inevitable, I wanted to avoid going into the red any more than necessary.

"True, but if you hold back on investing out of fear in the beginning, you'll never be able to turn a profit," Mama said.

I don't know about that. Maybe this manner of thinking is common for provincial lords? I would expect that, like business owners, they would want to keep their costs as low as possible, including operational costs, but...

"Let's ask Dayle what he thinks about this idea."

"Okay."

Papa will fund everything, so we should probably get his opinion as provincial lord.

In the end, we didn't completely resolve any of the issues we'd discussed.

Elder Salzar would work on the magical item, Mama would look into spells, and we'd have to consult with Papa about the drop items.

But this is still progress, right? Even if it doesn't feel like it...

But you know what they say: rushing things only leads to mistakes. So, I guess I'll just have to be patient and play the long game.



ONCE Papa returned home and we all sat down for a family meeting, I was greeted with the overwhelming reaction, "You're only worrying about the cost of all this *now*?!"

"Don't you think that, if we're going to spend money on it either way, it's better to at least make it so this arrangement benefits the region and the people helping us make it all happen?"

Is he saying that we should make it so that all of the guilds participating see returns on their investments? Isn't that dangerously close to corruption?

"Isn't that a bad thing?" I asked.

“I think I can see what you’re thinking, but try imagining it the opposite way.”

The opposite?! Um, well...the opposite of this plan would be...to prepare the salve ourselves? We would have the goblins and kobolds gather the herbs, and the Healer Family would make them into medicine. It wouldn’t cost a thing to make other than the kobolds and goblins’ time.

“The adventurers would be receiving medicine from an unconfirmed source. And if they accumulate a lot of them, some of the adventurers will probably sell the extras they don’t need,” Papa explained.

Oh! So that’s what he’s getting at! As a result, both the apothecaries and the adventurers they hire to collect herbs will lose out on work! Not only that, but people will be uneasy about not knowing the credentials of the producers of the medicine flooding the market. Now I get it. Even if it costs a little more, it’ll be worth it to keep things running smoothly and create work for more people.

“Father, you’re really amazing!” I exclaimed.

I should’ve known! He’s not the prime minister of our country for nothing! But I think I’ve learned my lesson: I need to think further ahead than just the immediate return on investment.

“You’re pretty amazing yourself, Neema, if you can understand with just this simple explanation at your age.”

I praised Papa and was praised in return.

I’m a little embarrassed about being showered with such glowing praise!

“The money that’s being used to fund Project Shiana comes from the taxes that we were entrusted with by the people of our province,” he said. “Therefore, it’s our duty to consider how we can best use this money for the betterment of the province.”

He’s right. I need to consider the citizens of Osphe Province as well as the goblins and kobolds. For that, keeping the budget out of the red is important. As for other things we can do to repay the citizens for their faith in us, what about prioritizing local hires?

I’ll have to brainstorm with Papa to figure out what else we can do.

I hadn't given my brain such a good workout in a while. As a result, I slept like a log that night. Not that that was any different from any other night...



AFTER breakfast the next day, I was trying to decide how to spend the day when Paul announced a visitor was there to see me.

Huh? Who?

"It's Sir Lestin Ogma."

That's strange. Lestin doesn't usually come here...

I made my way to the guest parlor, where I found Lestin, dressed in his formal uniform. I was used to seeing him in work coveralls, so I was impressed by how handsome he looked when he dressed up.

I guess this is what they call "the allure of a man in uniform"!

"Lady Nefertima, forgive me for disturbing you first thing in the morning," he said.

"It's okay! I don't have anything planned today other than lots of playtime!"

That makes it sound like playing is all I ever do, but don't get the wrong idea! I have my lessons as well! It's just a coincidence that I don't have anything scheduled today...

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing's wrong, but I'd like to talk to you about Nox."

About Nox? He goes to the beast stables regularly for training and check-ups, but I'm pretty sure everything has been going fine...

"What do you say we start Nox on long-distance flight training?" he proposed.

"Long distance?"

"To travel long distances, endurance and hunting skills are required. Furthermore, it's best to train for long-distance flights to develop the innate sense of how to find his way home no matter where he is."

"But if it's long-distance, I'll have to be apart from Nox for a while, right? Not

only that, but it also sounds dangerous..." My unease must've shown on my face because Lestin proceeded to explain the contents of the training in detail.

"For this training exercise, Nox will train with other birds born in the same season as him. Each bird will have their own beast knight assigned to follow them and intervene if they get into trouble."

But depending on the species of the beast knight's animal partner, I think there's a distinct possibility they'll lose sight of their mark. I mean, they're trying to trail a bird! Nox will be moving literally as the bird flies—with no obstructions through the open sky. The knight following him will have to contend with mountains, rivers, and so on down on the ground. I don't think it'll be easy to keep up...

"I'm just going to need you to trust me," he said when I voiced my concerns. "It's true that the knights may encounter difficult terrain, but if they couldn't overcome this, they wouldn't deserve to call themselves beast knights."

According to Lestin, a knight's animal partners were not limited to their beast mount. I'd thought Uwaz was Lestin's only partner, but apparently, he was also bonded with a night owl, a rye panther, and a land bull, among others.

In short, an accomplished beast knight could have multiple animal partners. They would use the various strengths of all their partners to track the bird they were assigned to watch over.

Being a beast knight isn't for the faint of heart, huh? Come to think of it, I've only ever seen the dragon knights taking care of the dragons and doing patrols. I wonder when they train?

If this long-distance flight training was best for Nox, I would hold back my tears and let him do it, but...

"In consideration of your station, Lady Nefertima, I believe it's best to have Nox receive this training."

So it's not because it's what's best for Nox, but because it's what's best for me? Hmm...

"It's not mandatory, so you may decline if you wish."

“Could I have a little time to think about it?” I asked.

“Of course.”



AFTER Lestin left, I called Nox in from sunbathing in the garden.

“Nox, do you want to fly around outside lots and lots?” I asked him.

“*Screech?*”

It seemed that although he’d heard me, he didn’t understand what I was asking.

Haku bounced over and let out a mewling cry. I set the two on my lap and petted Nox with my right hand and Haku with my left hand.

What I was most worried about was Nox getting hurt.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that restricting Nox to my sphere of movement was a detriment to him.

Nox had wings, so I wanted to let him experience the outside world and taste the freedom of the wide-open skies. Nox’s lifespan wasn’t as long as a human’s, so it was best to let him experience all he could now while he was young and strong, right?

...Oh, I’ve got it! I can ask Shinki to have some elemental spirits watch over him! Come to think of it, where did Shinki go?!

“Nox, do you know where Shinki is?”

When I asked Nox, he responded with an emphatic “*Screech!*” so it seemed he knew.

“In that case, lead the way!”

Nox headed towards a corner of the garden.

To my surprise, Shinki seemed to be in the middle of training.

Shirtless, Shinki was working through a series of punches and kicks. The punches made a slicing noise as they cut through the air, and the kicks made heavy, thumping noises as they landed.

If he hit you with one of those blows, you'd go flying, for sure!

"Screech!"

I'd been concealing my presence so I could observe Shinki, but Nox let out a cry that gave us both away.

"Oh, Miss Neema..."

Yup, the cat is out of the bag now; no two ways about it.

I explained the situation with Nox to Shinki and asked if it would be possible to have elemental spirits protect him.

"They can't interfere in the natural struggle for survival, but I can have them keep an eye on him if you like?" he responded.

Umm, so if another, larger animal attacks Nox, the elemental spirits can't jump in to save him, right?

"What can they do to help?" I asked.

"They say that the best they can do is control the direction the wind's blowing to make it easier for Nox to fly."

That sounds like the same trick I've seen Lars use. It's basically like riding an electric bicycle instead of a regular one. But I can also have the wind spirits update me on how Nox is doing, right? Oh, but the wind spirits' power might end up being dangerous! If they accidentally caused a strong gust of wind while trying to make it easier for Nox to fly...

"Can they confidently say they can control the wind so no other birds are negatively affected?" I asked.

"..."

Hey, hey—Shinki! This is not the time to fall silent!

"The water nano says that they'll go, too, and to leave it to them..."

I am really curious what kind of scene Shinki's seeing play out between the elemental spirits right now... Does this mean the water spirit is stronger?

Hmm, the elemental spirits are mysterious. But if they follow Nox and keep an eye on him, we should be able to rush to his rescue immediately if anything goes

wrong. But how?

...Oh, I forgot about Sol! I'll ask Sol to agree to help in the event of an emergency.

3 - We're Finally Making Real Progress on Project Shiana!

THE day to hand Nox over to Lestin had come.

"Return home safe and sound, okay?" I told him.

After indulging in one last quick pet of Nox's feathers, which were especially soft and fluffy today thanks to our servants' special attention, I handed him over to Lestin.

"I'll take good care of him," Lestin promised sincerely.

Nox kept glancing over at me uneasily, and I felt like I was going to burst out crying at any moment.

Haku let out a mournful "*Mew!*"

Uwaz, who'd carried Lestin to my house, rubbed his head against me comfortingly. Somehow, I smothered my tears by hugging Uwaz tightly. I was sure I'd probably end up crying at some point later on, though.

The training exercise would take approximately twenty days.

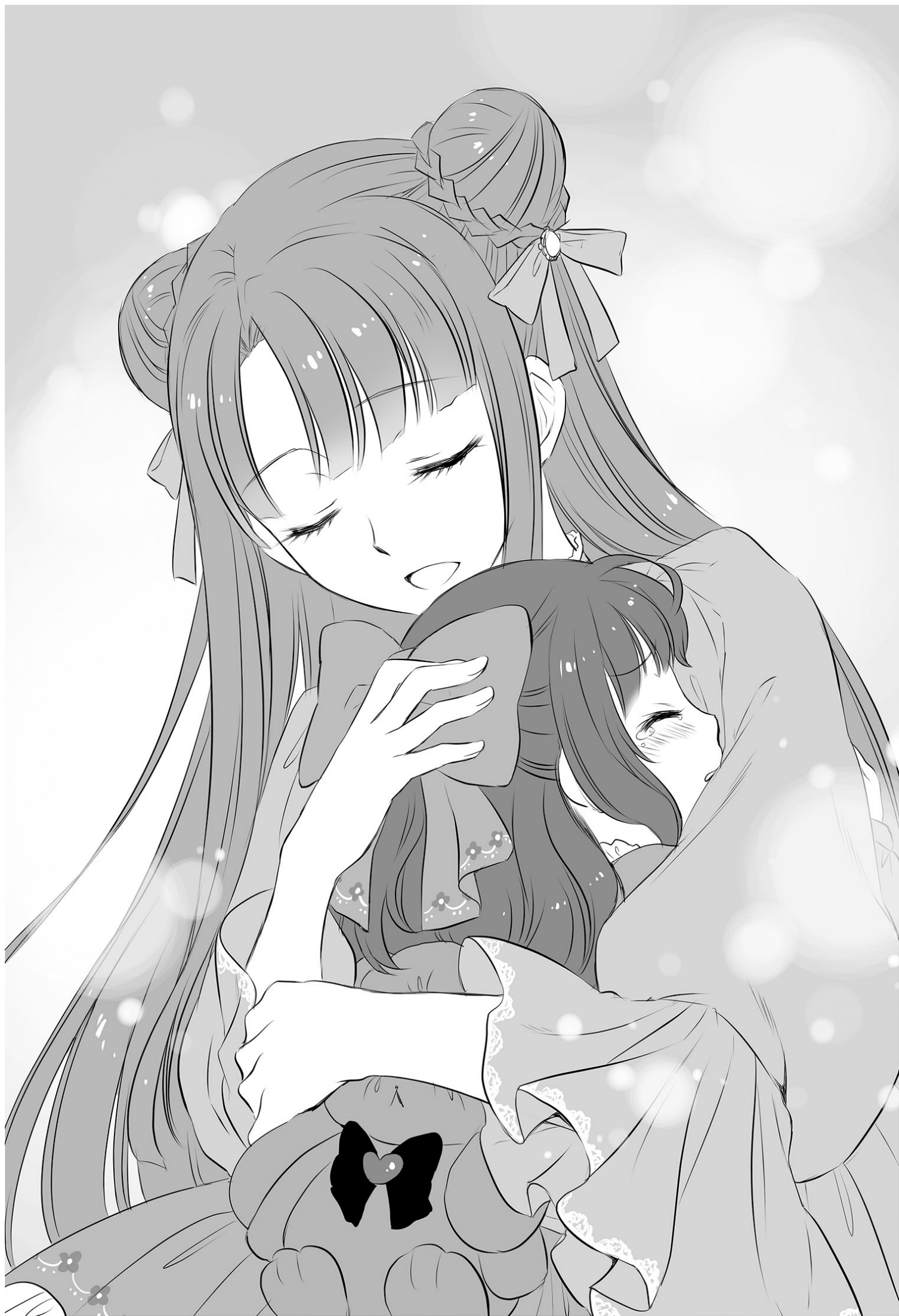
The flight path was a strict secret, so they wouldn't share it with me.

But if anything happens to Nox, the elemental spirits will let us know right away! Then we can rush to his rescue.

I watched until Lestin disappeared out of sight, then turned and began heading back to my room when I encountered Ralf and Karna in the entryway of our house.

"You did a good job holding back your tears and letting him go, Neema."

When my sister's kind arms wrapped around me, tears finally overflowed from my prickling eyes.



“Nox is going to learn and grow, and then he’ll come back to you. So you also have to grow as a pet owner,” Ralf said, stroking my head reassuringly.

He’s right! It’s not only Nox—I’m also responsible for Shinki and Haku, Gratia and Dee, so I have to keep it together for their sake!

“Yeah! I’ll do my best!”

After I said that, my brother and sister took my hands, smiling gently down at me.

“What do you say we spend the day together and call it a siblings’ day?” Karna suggested.

“Good idea. There’s something I want to show Neema,” Ralf agreed.

“Oh, you too? I also have a present for Neema,” Karna replied.

They led me into a room for family gatherings. In short, it was a living room in Earth terminology.

“If it’s okay, I’ll go first,” Ralf said, unfolding a large piece of paper on the table.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s the blueprint for the inn we’re going to build for Project Shiana.”

This is a blueprint?! I thought blueprints were supposed to be 2-dimensional? This seems to be drawn 3-dimensionally, but it’s hard to tell what I’m looking at. If it were a simple illustration, I might be able to understand, but I don’t understand the purpose of all these weird lines, and I can’t make anything out.

“...I don’t get it...”

I listened to Ralf’s explanation, concentrating as hard as I could, but given the difference in units of measurement on top of everything else, I couldn’t understand a thing he was saying.

“Is it a little bit too difficult for you?” he asked.

“Yeah, kind of... I can’t tell what I’m looking at!”

“I see. What can I do to make it easier for you to understand?”

Since he'd asked, I tried explaining the concept of a floor layout diagram. What I couldn't express in words, I explained with simple drawings. I wasn't very good at drawing, though, and I didn't know much about blueprints in the first place, so it looked pretty wonky.

"I see... You have a point; it *is* easier to read with fewer lines."

My haphazard explanation had gotten through to him. Ralf went so far as to say he'd mention it to the carpenters' guild.

Unfortunately, I never did figure out what the inn would look like.

"Next is my turn!" Karna said. "Paul, please bring it in for me!"

"Yes, my lady."

I hadn't even noticed Paul come in, but my eyes followed him with laser focus as he brought something in from an adjoining room.

Oh my gosh, Karna! Don't tell me that's...!

"It's finally done!"

It's a life-sized Hanley stuffed animal!

I was so moved that I trembled as I walked over to Paul. When I took the stuffed animal from him, I nearly dropped it because it was so heavy.

"Ahhhh!"

IT'S SoooOOOO FLuFFY!!! This is an exact replica of Hanley's fur! It's soft and silky and soooooo darn fluffy! It's flufftastic!

"Thank you, Karna!" I exclaimed with glee.

Somehow, she'd recreated Hanley's incredible fur so accurately that it was almost indistinguishable from the real thing.

As to be expected from a magical genius!

"It was worth all the work that went into creating it to see you so happy, Neema," Karna responded with a satisfied smile.

Ralf looked intrigued and kept petting the stuffed animal over and over again.

I know how you feel, Ralf! You can't stop petting this awesome fur, right?!

“It’s incredibly realistic! What method did you settle on?”

“I used the cocoons of mieux-flies to create the fabric.”

Karna’s explanation started with a shocking revelation.

Mieux-flies were an insect similar to a silkworm whose cocoons were made into a thread used to weave the magic circle tapestries to teleport letters and small parcels.

Taking inspiration from the way mieux-flies unconsciously weave magic into their cocoons, Karna weaved the magic that recreated Hanley’s fur directly into the fabric. She also said she used different spells to create the silky topcoat and the dense undercoat.

After collecting the mieux-fly thread, she used a spell called Shape to make it into fabric. Once the magical fabric was made, the rest of the process was just regular sewing, so she got a professional dollmaker to make the stuffed animal. Karna explained the magical formulation she’d used in more detail to Ralf, including which elemental runes she’d used, but it was all Greek to me.

“Mieux-flies, huh? You never cease to amaze me with your innovative thinking, Karna,” Ralf said.

“Even I didn’t expect it to go quite so smoothly.”

“However, this poses a problem when mass-producing the stuffed animals...”

“Yeah... It will be quite expensive to produce, so not many people will be willing or able to buy such an expensive stuffed animal.”

Mieux-flies were raised in the Kingdom of Gaché, but the government highly regulated the process. If we wanted to raise our own, we’d need to obtain a permit, and the breeding facility would cost money to start and keep running.

By Ralf’s rough estimate, it would cost about one silver coin to make even a small stuffed animal.

One hundred dollars for a six-inch-tall stuffed animal is crazy expensive! So, then...how much did it cost to make this life-sized Hanley stuffed animal?! Yikes, that’s scary to even think about!

But, you know...Karna invented the process of weaving magic directly into

mieux-fly thread to create fabric just to be able to make these stuffed animals, right? You could argue it was springboarding off Mama's invention of using mieux-fly thread to weave magic circle tapestries, but it takes that idea and builds on it. So, if we played our cards right, couldn't we profit from this by patenting the process and charging a fee to use it, too?

We could sell the exclusive usage rights to the country, have the country produce the stuffed animals using their existing mieux-fly industry, and negotiate a discounted purchase price as an inventor's perk.

The country could produce and sell Lars stuffed animals, and the Hanley stuffed animals would be exclusive items only available at the Project Shiana site.

Hey, this really might work!

I told Ralf my idea, but the face he made told me this would be difficult to pull off.

According to Ralf, the technology, techniques, and spells developed at the Royal Magical Research Center were protected, but there was no system for patenting the inventions of average people. For this reason, individuals and guilds kept their newly developed technology strictly secret.

"But if you create something new and others try to copy it, that just proves that what you created is valuable, right?" I asked.

They have a system of occupational tax here, so they at least recognize that there is value in techniques and spells...

"If you could buy and sell that, earning a portion of the profits people made off your ideas, I think it would be very similar to the concept behind the occupational tax," I pressed.

"What you say makes sense. If people could profit off of creating new spells, research might progress significantly faster," Karna agreed.

"That's right! Doing research costs money, after all!"

That's why so many magic users in this country want to join the Royal Magical Research Center. The country provides the money to fund their research. In

return, the profit earned from their protected inventions goes to the country.

“We won’t get anywhere simply discussing this among ourselves. Why don’t we consult with Uncle Sanrus about it?” Ralf suggested.

Press the matter with Uncle Sanrus, the Minister of Finance? Something tells me Auntie Olive would get dragged into it as well. But if we can make this happen, it would mean that mass production of Hanley stuffed animals might actually be possible!

And so, we called another family meeting.

We explained what we’d discussed in our sibling meeting to Papa.

“My children are a bunch of geniuses!” he gushed.

“Dayle, please try to retain *some* semblance of dignity as their father,” Mama coldly interjected in response to Papa’s “disgustingly proud parent” supernova. “Starting with Karna: I’m very proud of you for further developing my technique and discovering new possibilities for its application. You’ve grown to become a splendid magic user.”

Karna beamed with pride at Mama’s praise.

I’m jealous! Being praised by Mama is a rare occurrence indeed!

“Next, Neema: you’re not well-versed in national politics, but if this proposal is accepted, it will change the world for the magic users in our country. As both a mother and a magic user, I’m very proud of you.”

...Mama praised me?! I’m often scolded by Mama, but she hardly ever praises me! The only times that come to mind when she praised me were the first time I said “Mama,” the first time I crawled and walked, and when I first learned to dance...

Huh?

Does this mean I only get praised for hitting milestones?! But maybe that’s normal while you’re little? Yeah, that must be it.

“Aw man, Cerulia! You swooped in and stole my thunder...!”

Papa looks dejected, but I don’t mind being praised twice!

“Did we do good, Papa?” I asked.

“Of course! I’m sure Sanrus and Olive will be surprised when they hear it was your idea.” His smile restored, Papa scooped me up and rubbed his cheek against mine affectionately. His beard stubble tickled. “But if you’re too clever, that will be problematic too... *He’ll* probably start bugging me again.”

Those words, which he’d mumbled almost to himself, made me uneasy.

He who?

“Father?” I blinked up at him.

“I’m never going to marry you off, Neema!” he declared.

What does that have to do with anything? Is he saying that instead of marrying me off to another family, he wants to have me marry someone willing to join our family and take our last name?

“If Neema falls in love with someone, I’ll support her with all my might! Even if that means fighting you off, Father!” Karna announced passionately.

Huh?! Don’t tell me my marriage is going to ignite a family feud between father and daughter?!

“I feel bad for Neema’s future partner. But if I don’t approve of his character, I won’t let him marry her either,” Ralf added.

Not you, too, Ralf! The way this is going, I’m going to end up an old spinster still living in my parents’ house! Although, I suppose that’s preferable to being forced into some weird political marriage.

“Calm down, all of you. Neema, do you have someone you like?”

Just when I thought Mama was going to bank the flames of the fire for me, she cast gunpowder in my direction.

A person I like? Well, the first person who comes to mind is...

“Lars!”

Everyone looked relieved at my answer.

“You’re so stinkin’ cute, you know that!” Karna wrapped me in a tight hug, and then Papa wrapped his arms around *both* of us.

I... can't... breathe...

"I won't let anyone have *either* of my precious daughters!" he vowed.

"You really are a hopeless father..."

Mama sounded exasperated, but was she going to step in and rescue me or not?!

In the end, Ralf saved me from potential suffocation, and then it was time for a snack.

Papa said he still had work to finish, so he returned to his office.

Once I'd enjoyed all the snacks I could handle, I brought the Hanley stuffed animal to my room and set it on my bed.

As if he'd been curious about it this entire time, Gratia came out of his usual hiding spot and climbed onto the stuffed animal. He moved around as if searching for something before settling down atop the stuffed animal's chest, concealed by its fur.

I'm so jealous! Being completely enveloped by soft and fluffy fur sounds like a dream come true! Come on, Gratia, let's trade places!

In the end, the Hanley stuffed animal became Gratia's special bed.

Next time I see her, I'll have to ask Karna if it's possible to make bedsheets out of the fluffy fur fabric. Then I can sleep surrounded by fluffy fur, too!



I'D thought I'd be so lonely while Nox was gone that I'd spend all my time crying and waiting for him to come home, but I was unexpectedly busy in the days that followed.

Mama told me that the short-distance transportation circles were completed, and Papa informed me that a new law called the "original technology law" was being passed.

Ralf kept me up to date on the status of each guild, and Karna was busy recruiting magic users from among the common people.

When I asked why she was gathering magic users, she said she wanted to

create a sort of “magic users guild” for Project Shiana.

The Royal Magical Research Center was helping us get Project Shiana off the ground, but once it was operational, they wouldn’t be able to keep up with regulatory maintenance tasks.

I wasn’t sure what kind of organization it would be. From what I gathered, it seemed it would be kind of like the Osphe family’s private magical research lab.

Karna said that once the original technology law went into effect, these kinds of private research labs would probably spring up everywhere, so we needed to secure the best personnel now while we could.

Our family wasn’t the only one making progress, either; each guild had opened a small office in Zigg Village.

In addition to this, we’d also dispatched many newly hired staff.

Healran would be the project overseer on site in Zigg Village, and Miss Belle would be there, too.

Progress on Project Shiana was moving forward at full speed, leaving me behind.

But I *was* finally able to see the blueprint for the inn!

“The people at the carpenters’ guild were surprised. They were like, ‘You want to make it *flat*?!’” Ralf snickered as if recalling the looks on their faces as they’d said this.

I don’t want to build it flat! The people in this world tended to work best by replicating exactly what they saw, which was why they’d drawn the blueprint in 3D. *I understand how making the diagram not only represent but also physically match the finished product makes it easier to picture in your head, but with so much detail, it was hard to read.*

You can still draw in a lot of detail on a 2D diagram, so I think it’s a good compromise. Especially when it comes to room layout, it’s much easier to visualize using a 2D diagram.

And so, the 2-dimensional floor plan the professional architects had slaved over was finally in front of me.

First was the overall diagram. This was drawn like a landscape painting.

One large building was in the center, with several smaller buildings surrounding it.

“The building in the center is the inn, and the smaller buildings around it are each guild’s local branch office,” Ralf explained.

It was agreed that each guild would build its own office building, so they wouldn’t necessarily match the examples drawn in this landscape painting.

Next was a floor plan of the inn’s first floor.

Almost the entire first floor was devoted to a cafeteria-style restaurant. There was also a reception desk, the kitchen, and a break room—all the facilities the staff would need to keep the inn running.

The most eye-catching feature was the large entrance hall. It seemed that this room would serve as a waiting room for the adventurers, as it also contained a recreational space.

The second floor contained a meeting room and the communal baths. There was also something labeled as an entertainment room.

From the third floor up were the bedrooms. Small rooms were designed to sleep two to four occupants, medium-sized rooms slept five to eight occupants, and large rooms could sleep more than nine occupants.

There were also room layout diagrams for each type of room. Each room was equipped with a toilet and a small private bath, and three-tier bunk beds were lined up against the walls.

It was an uncommon style in Japan, but I guess it resembled a youth hostel?

“This is where they’re planning to put the adventurers’ guild’s branch office, but...” Ralf said, pulling out an overall floor plan.

I guess he trailed off at the end because the adventurers’ guild hasn’t actually agreed to participate yet? That reminds me that I still haven’t heard anything from Sol. Either the search is proving difficult, or he just plain forgot.

I should probably remind him, just to be safe. My thoughts had wandered off, but my brother tapping lightly on the table drew my attention back to the floor

plan. *Being easily distracted is a bad habit of mine, huh?*

The spot Ralf had pointed to was larger than those allotted to the other guilds.

“Why is it bigger than the others?” I asked.

“We’re planning to build a training area inside the adventurers’ guild’s branch office. The adventurers can use it for their normal daily training, and we’ll create a barrier around it so the monsters can train there, too.”

Practice is important! A fighter can easily get out of shape if they don’t practice daily.

“What’s this, Ralf?”

Another building was set apart from the others, all clustered around the inn in the center.

“That’s where the people who work for Project Shiana will live.”

Oh, so basically, it’s an employee dormitory.

As one might expect, these rooms were private, single-occupant rooms. Although there was a cafeteria, each room also contained a small kitchen. There were large public baths and outdoor baths. Overall, the dormitory seemed more luxurious than the inn.

“If there’s nothing for the employees to enjoy, they’ll quickly become bored,” Ralf pointed out.

That’s true. The real draw of these jobs won’t be the content of their work but the nice place they get to live in. I suppose you could count this as employee benefits.

And it seemed that the hiring process was already underway.

I was told that they’d do several rounds of screening.

My requests had been implemented into the hiring process: they would adhere to a hiring quota for humans and other species, with non-humans making up at least 30 percent of employees.

I want to have a beastperson serve the food at the restaurant! And if there’s

also a sexy demon who can use healing magic, even better! I know it's partially my own bias, but I'd like this to be a place where lots of different species congregate.

In any case, if this initial phase was a success, we might also be able to build the high-class resort I'd been musing over with Ralf. It might be cool to model it after a traditional Japanese *ryokan* inn, or we could implement architectural styles from other countries here in Larshia and make it international-themed.

The planning phase is the fun part when it comes to things like this!

And the carpenters' guild had already begun construction.

Before construction commenced, the researchers from the Royal Magical Research Center had erected the barrier around Mount Reitimo. This barrier was a reinforced barrier anchored to an elemental stone, just like the one around the experiment building at the Royal Magical Research Center. This was necessary because the barrier covered a massive area and needed to be strong enough to prevent any monsters inside from escaping.

The buildings would be constructed outside of the barrier's perimeter.

I wanted to view the construction site for myself, but my parents were too busy to take me... Since there was no other option, Ralf agreed to bring me with him when he went to observe the construction with the higher-ups from each guild. This meant I'd have to be patient for another two or three days, so I did my best to be good and keep out of trouble while waiting.

I was doing the same things I always did—brushing Dee and enjoying his fur and petting my new Hanley stuffed animal and reveling in its fluffiness—when an unexpected visitor arrived.

Grandpa Gouche came to our house, bringing a royal guard with him.

"I'm here to train Shinki!"

Grandpa Gouche had gotten sick of waiting since we hadn't been visiting the royal palace lately, so he came all the way here for Shinki's training. That said, we'd been to the royal palace only five days earlier!

Does this mean Grandpa Gouche wants Shinki to come for training every

single day or something? In any case, we sure have been getting a lot of visitors lately, huh?

“Grandpa Gouche, will you please introduce the person accompanying you?” I asked.

The royal guard looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place him. He wasn't dressed in formal attire, and his standard-issue uniform didn't indicate which brigade he was in or his rank.

“Sorry, sorry. This is Hoddah from the First Brigade of the Royal Guard.”

Hoda! That's a Japanese name, isn't it?! No, that can't be it. There's no way anyone here would have a Japanese name.

“I am the Brigade Leader of the First Brigade of the Royal Guard. My name is Hoddah Jifu.” He executed a beautiful formal bow, but I was so distracted by what I heard that I hardly noticed.

Hoddah Jifu... That sounds exceptionally close to “Hotta Jibun.” And if you change the family name to the front, like in Japanese, it's “Jibun Hotta” which means “to dig oneself up/out” in Japanese...

No, I need to stop making such ridiculous associations; any relation to Japanese in this world is purely coincidental.

“My name is Nefertima. Mr. Hoddah, your name is quite rare, is it not?”

Maybe part of the reason I made such a strange association with his name was because it sounded foreign to this country. So I just came out and asked about it rather than beating around the bush.

“Yes, my mother was from Icoux, so she chose a name for me from the ancient language of Icoux.”

If I remember correctly, since long ago, Icoux had always been a country with many beastperson villages, and they also had their own language. In the past few hundred years, Larshian had become the common language of the country, but their ancient language persisted in modern times.

“What a lovely mother you have, Mr. Hoddah!” I exclaimed. “I'm sure she chose your name, hoping you would grow to love her home country as well.”

“Yes. I grew up in the Kingdom of Gaché, but I think of Icoux like a second home.”

How lucky he is to have ties to a country full of beastpeople. I wonder what kinds of beastpeople live there.

Spica was a member of the Star Wolf Tribe, Luck was a member of the Ice Bear Tribe, and I was also familiar with a race of beastpeople known as the Rat Tribe.

I'd like to meet some feline-type beastpeople!

“I'd like to go to Icoux someday, too!” I said.

“Please do. I'm sure the citizens will be happy to have you visit.”

I got the feeling we were becoming friends already, which was great, but then I realized that I'd been blabbering away without encouraging either of them to drink their tea as social protocol demanded.

“Forgive me, the tea has already started to get cold while I've been chattering away!”

“Don't worry about it, Neema. More importantly, why don't we get straight to training?”

Grandpa Gouche seems really into this. I hope Shinki will be okay...

“What kind of training are you planning to do today?” I asked.

“Although he has a natural aptitude for fighting hand-to-hand, I think it's best if Shinki learns to use a sword. I will teach him sword fighting, and Hoddah will be his partner for hand-to-hand combat.”

Hmm, I guess that means Grandpa Gouche will teach Shinki the basics of sword fighting and have him and Hoddah practice hand-to-hand through a practice fight? But unlike Grandpa Gouche, we don't have a private training area in our house...

“Are you going to do it in the garden?”

“No, in the training area.”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t know about it?”

There’s a training area? Here, on the grounds of our manor?! I’ve never heard about it before...

“Paul, do we have a training area?” I turned and asked Paul, who’d discreetly moved off to the side of the room to await further instruction after serving the tea.

“Of course, my lady. It’s located on the far side of the garden...”

Paul, too, seemed incredulous about the fact that I didn’t know, but no one had ever bothered to tell me, so how could I?

“Why do we have a training area here?” I asked.

“I’ve heard that the duke two generations ago had it built so that we servants could train daily,” Paul said.

The duke two generations ago? That would make him my great-grandfather? Wait, does that mean that even then, the servants working for our family were super multitalented?

“Does everyone train?”

“Yes, we have all mastered at least the basics to protect the members of the Osphe family.” Paul was smiling in a self-deprecating manner, but I wasn’t buying any of this “just the basics” nonsense.

“Heh! Don’t sell yourselves short, boy. The way I hear it, the servants in this household could hold their own against a royal guard any day.”

Our servants really are incredible. But I have a hard time picturing Paul as being all that strong... Is he just using his slender build and intellectual-looking face as a cover? If he’s secretly really strong, I want to see him in action!

I’ll see if I can get a chance to spy on him sometime when he’s training!

We followed secretly strong Paul as he led us through the garden to a large, single-story building tucked away in a far back corner.

I never noticed this was here! Somehow, the trees must’ve hidden it from me.

Ivy was growing up the walls of the building, further helping it to blend into

the surrounding foliage.

This was clearly intentional on the part of the gardeners!

“Inside, you can use spells up to advanced level.” Paul opened the sturdy-looking door to reveal nothing but a wide-open space. “Lady Neema, please don’t enter this building without prior permission. There’s the possibility you might be accidentally attacked.”

Wouldn’t they notice it’s me before they attack?! How is that an accident?! I thought you guys were super multitalented! Use your aura-reading superpowers or whatever to detect my presence!

“Okay!”

But I wasn’t about to play games with my life, so I would do my best to stay as far away from this building as possible.

As we entered the training area, Grandpa Gouche gave an order to Paul, who quickly brought something over.

In his hands, Paul held two swords.

“The blades are blunted,” Paul explained quickly, seeing me jerk back reflexively at the sight of the naked blades.

“They could still probably break a bone, though,” Grandpa Gouche added unhelpfully.

That’s not reassuring at all! Are you getting a kick out of scaring me or something?!

“Now then, Shinki! Remove your shirt,” Grandpa Gouche ordered, quickly removing his own shirt.

Eek! Is this appropriate for the eyes of a child?!

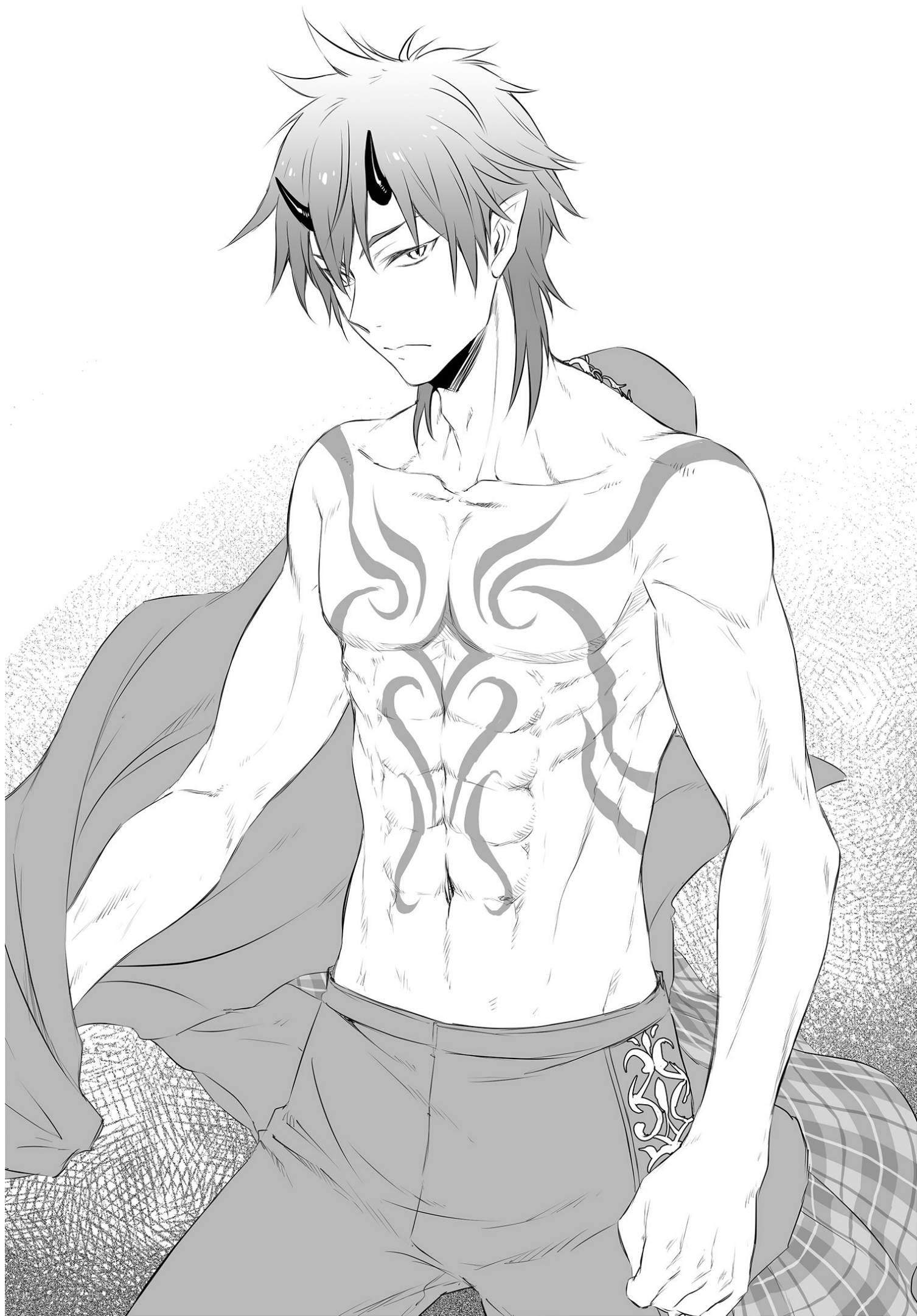
Despite his age, Grandpa Gouche boasted a torso bulging with huge beefy muscles that screamed “warrior!” And the scars that marred nearly every inch of his skin told the history of his many, many battles.

“Like this?”

While I’d been distracted by Grandpa Gouche, Shinki had gotten naked from

the waist up as well!

It had been a while since I'd seen it, but his body sported the same artfully beautiful, athletic physique as always. Shinki wasn't ripped like a bodybuilder; his build was more streamlined, with lean muscle like a predator.



“Heh, look what you’ve been hiding under all those clothes!”

Grandpa Gouche! That sounds incredibly dirty when you put it like that. Knock it off, will you! I have no desire to imagine what’s under the rest of his remaining clothes, thanks!

“Getting down to business, I’ll start by showing you how to properly grip the sword.”

Shinki took up the sword he was handed, and immediately Grandpa Gouche barked corrections. He was holding the sword too low. He wasn’t using his shoulders to support the sword’s weight as he should. And so on.

Then Grandpa Gouche demonstrated several stances, having Shinki practice each in turn.

As Shinki moved through the stances, Grandpa Gouche butted in frequently to correct his mistakes or tell him to move more quickly, move more smoothly, etc. All in all, it was typical of what I would expect from a training session. Aside from the partial nudity, of course.

“Is it necessary for them to get undressed?” I asked Paul, feeling they could just as easily have done all this with their shirts on.

But it was Hoddah who answered my question.

“It’s so they can both see the movement of the other’s muscles.”

“Is that important?”

“If a fighter puts too much power behind his swings, it won’t translate into an effective attack and will provide an opening to his opponent,” Hoddah explained.

Oh, is that how it works? Okay... But just how long am I going to be forced to look at Grandpa Gouche half-naked?! I don’t mind the sight of Shinki’s naked torso at all, but Grandpa Gouche is so buff it almost hurts to look at it!

That’s not a sight suitable for a blushing maiden such as myself.

In the end, I was forced to sit through the entire training session, but to my relief, when Hoddah removed his shirt, he revealed a beautifully sculpted

muscular torso more similar to Shinki's than Grandpa Gouche's.

I suppose you could say that I "trained" today, too—trained the stamina of my eyes!

4 - The Full Force of the Osphe Family (POV: Dayland Osphe)

“DAYLE, you do understand, right? That Project Shiana is a double-edged sword...”

Olive’s beautiful features sharpened as she said this.

The other two nodded emphatically in agreement as well.

After cutting the inspection of my province short and returning to the royal city to inform His Majesty about the existence of a group that meant to do the country harm, I also explained the situation to Olive, Sanrus, and Gouche. Eugene wasn’t in the royal city, so I made do with sending him a letter. I had no idea when he’d be back, so there was no point in waiting to speak to him in person.

“The monsters will either be Neema’s shield, or they’ll lure Runohark out. If it’s the latter, how will you proceed?”

Gouche was correct.

I’d thought Shinki would become a shield to protect Neema, but until we saw the full scope of what we were dealing with in Runohark, the danger would be a constant. I knew when Neema first proposed Project Shiana it would be dangerous. I knew it but felt strangely interested in taming the monsters.

I figured that when you had a strong feeling about something, it usually meant you should follow through with it.

Now, I’d come to regret that a bit.

When I’d parted ways with Neema, it had only been Shinki and Gratia, but according to the letter I’d received from Prince Wilhelm, the ranks of her monster companions had only increased.

She was my daughter, and I loved her, but sometimes she was quite a handful.

“Honestly, I’d like to annihilate every last one of them, but...” I trailed off and changed the subject. “On another note, Gouche, will you train Shinki for me?”

“Heh, you want to strengthen the shield?”

“Yeah. Unfortunately, it seems like we’ll still have a while to go. I’ve already asked Phillip to train Karna, and I’m planning to have Cerulia work with Ralf.”

If the two of them toughen up, it would strengthen the protections surrounding Neema considerably. Since Neema didn’t possess any magic, my only option was to make those around her as strong as possible. I felt bad for Ralf, but that would mean he’d have to suffer through Cerulia’s “special training regimen.”

“But what will we do about the investigation? If it turns out we can’t trust our subordinates implicitly, that leaves us too few pieces to play with.”

It seemed that Sanrus was also feeling the burn of Runohark’s interference.

I knew that a group of supposed adventurers suspected of being involved with Runohark had been spotted in the Mieuxga Province, but not much more was known than that.

“I’ve got the intelligence department working on it as we speak,” Is aid.

“They’re working on it, and this is still all we’ve got? This enemy is turning out to be a real pain...”

As Sanrus hinted, our country’s intelligence department was a highly sophisticated intelligence network that none of the other countries could hope to compare with. Not to mention, their commander was an elemental, so they could also collect information from the elemental spirits. That was strictly confidential, though, so almost no one knew about it.

“That’s why it’s been decided to have His Highness Prince Wilhelt work on it as well. And His Majesty also said he’s ‘cast his shadows’ on the issue.”

Prince Wilhelt could use his holy beast’s powers to gather various information. The wind spirits, in particular, were gifted at gathering information, so His Highness was well-informed about the goings-on in other countries and even other continents.

I'd use whatever method I could get, whether it was from the crown prince or the king himself. If it was for the citizens' safety, all the more so.

"In the end, all we can do right now is wait. I don't like putting things on the back burner, so to speak, but in this case, I don't see where we have much other option." So Olive said, but it seemed she'd already secured trusted people within her province she could put into play when the time came.

I was working on that myself, but I still didn't have nearly enough manpower.

"However, I did see to it that the necessary documents for Project Shiana were pushed through," Olive added.

"Thanks."

Project Shiana would take place entirely inside the Osphe Province, but we still needed to apply for permission from the country to undertake this kind of operation. It was entirely possible that the application could be rejected. However, if the application was approved, it would make obtaining assistance from the Royal Magical Research Center much easier.

Cerulia had told me that it would be impossible to devise a method for piping water down to the base of the mountain for the hot spring baths Neema had proposed without the assistance of the Magical Research Center.

Fortunately for us, if we made it a formal request from the Osphe family, Elder Salzar would approve it for sure. Cerulia had already made all the necessary arrangements on that front, so there was nothing to worry about. She was also working on getting the other guilds on board as investors and business partners.

"Neema sure does come up with the most amusing ideas, huh?" Olive remarked.

"That's for sure. If this is a success, I want to set up a site in my own province," Sanrus replied.

"Oh, that's a good idea! Set one up in my province, too!" Olive responded enthusiastically.

I was slightly concerned with how easily they were committing to such a huge

undertaking.

“That’s fine, but I’ll require a founder’s fee,” I threatened half-jokingly.

“What?! Don’t be so stingy!”

Don’t be ridiculous. Of course, we deserve an appropriate fee for sharing a method for dealing with the monsters that we’ve come up with entirely on our own, tested and vetted at our own expense, and that you can implement as-is with no risk or effort.

“But that... hot spring bath, was it? If I could find one of those in my province, it sounds like a profitable enterprise.”

“Is it true hot spring bathing is good for the skin?”

Wait, what? This is the first time I’ve heard of hot springs having cosmetic benefits.

“Where did you hear that?” I asked.

“What do you mean? Cerulia was saying that Neema had written that in her letter...” Olive continued, but her words went in one ear and out the other.

Why?! Why would she write a letter to Cerulia but not send one to me?! And Cerulia! How could you keep it from me that you’d gotten a letter from our dear little Neema!

Neema, do you hate your Papa now or something?! Don’t tell me this is the beginning of the dreaded “rebellious phase”?!

I wasn’t sure how I’d go on living if I ever heard the words “I hate you, Father!” coming from Neema’s precious lips.

“Hey, Olive, check it out—Dayle’s getting worked up.”

“Heh, it’s amusing, so let’s not interfere.”

There was nothing else we needed to discuss on this day, so it was fine, but I did determine without a shred of doubt from the way the three of them abandoned me while I was in the pits of despair that they were completely unreliable and heartless, every last one of them.



SEVERAL days later, Neema and her entourage finally returned home.

When we went to the entryway to meet her, Neema ran towards me. I opened both arms wide to receive a hug from my adorable youngest daughter, but she ran straight past me to hug Cerulia instead.

...Neema really does hate me!

Ralf and Karna politely greeted me, and the contrast between the two was amusing.

In contrast to Ralf, who looked tired and worn out, Karna was so brimming with life that she practically sparkled. Ralf must've been exhausted from being dragged around willy-nilly by his energetic younger sisters, but I was sure it was a happy kind of exhaustion.

As for Karna, apparently, her journey with Phillip and his group had been fulfilling.

After that, I waited while Cerulia and the children engaged in a terse discussion, but thanks to the children's persuasion and Cerulia's curiosity, in the end, the monsters and animal that Neema had brought home with her received permission to join our household.



FOLLOWING a more extravagant dinner than usual, while Cerulia and I were drinking after-dinner tea together, Neema approached with her hair still wet after her bath.

"Father, hug, please!"

"It would be my pleasure. But you'll catch a cold if you wander around with wet hair, young lady."

"Will you dry it for me, Father?"

The confidence she had that there was no chance in hell I'd turn her down was so typically Neema. *She's not wrong, though; there's no way in hell I'd turn down the chance to dry her hair!*

"Hehe, somebody's acting like a baby to get her father's attention."

I muttered under my breath so Cerulia wouldn't hear me refute her: "She's still a little kid; it's fine!"

I used two spells simultaneously: Warm Breeze to dry Neema's hair and Keep Warm to prevent her from getting chilled. Then I dried her hair, ruffling it with my hands and keeping the heat moderate so it wouldn't burn her.

Neema started enthusiastically describing the incredible fur of a kobold named Hanley, but by the time her hair was dry, she'd drifted off to sleep in my lap.

I told Cerulia I'd put Neema in her bed and come right back, then headed off to Neema's room.

On the way, Paul looked down at Neema asleep in my arms with a rare, faint smile and said she must've worn herself out. Paul opened the door and turned down the bedsheets for me, and suddenly, Gratia popped up out of seemingly nowhere.

"She's sleeping, so don't wake her," I cautioned Gratia, who raised his front two legs in response.

Is this supposed to mean, "Got it!"?

I laid Neema down on the bed, covered her with the blankets, and cast a spell to make sure she didn't get cold for good measure. Gratia intended to sleep on top of Neema's head. Knowing first-hand how she tossed and turned in her sleep, I hoped he wouldn't get squashed.

Paul placed the rabbit-shaped dragon orb beside Neema's pillow.

"May you pass the night in safety and peace."

With these customary parting words before bedtime, we left Neema's room.

...Come to think of it, wasn't there supposed to be a slime?

"Paul, I don't see the slime anywhere. Do you know where it got off to?" I asked.

"If you're referring to Haku, it's in the kitchen."

"In the kitchen?"

“Yes. Lady Neema instructed me to place it inside the trashcan. She claimed it would take care of all the garbage or some such thing...”

In short, the slime is eating its dinner. This house sure has gotten lively lately...



WITH the children’s return home, we really started making progress on Project Shiana.

Ralf set to work soliciting the cooperation of the various guild masters, and Karna worked on making something, though I wasn’t sure exactly what it was.

On top of her regular job duties, Cerulia was also meeting with various people. It probably goes without saying, but she was working behind the scenes to help Ralf.

The most eager participants in Project Shiana were the carpenters’ guild and the innkeepers’ guild.

The establishment Neema had in mind was nothing like the inns that were commonplace now; she wanted to build a hot spring bathhouse. The guilds were intrigued by this new type of facility.

And so, things were proceeding according to plan on that front.

As for the construction, it couldn’t begin until the barrier was erected. If things went smoothly, construction would be completed before the end of the wind season.

And, as for Runohark, I set some of the most trusted gentry from my province to work on it.

One of these was Marquis Ireiga. He was the father of the twins Neema had rescued and brought home safely after she was kidnapped by the goblins.

I looked into his background and dealings thoroughly, and nothing suspicious came up. He implemented my ideas into his policies and produced results. He was an exemplary proxy lord.

Another was Marquis Parzeth. In a way, he was also a victim of Runohark’s, after all.

Of course, I looked into him as well, but I was relieved to find he was still as stout a nationalist as ever.

To be honest, he might be even more passionately patriotic than me.

Within my province, I was forming a Runohark task force to be headed up by Marquis Parzeth.

For the time being, at least, I'll need the servants in our house to do some "secret work" as well.

Just when I'd gotten all my chess pieces in place, my children surprised me again, in the best of ways.

Karna improved upon the magical thread made from mieux-fly silk that Cerulia had invented and developed a method for spinning spells into the thread to endow it with special properties.

According to Cerulia, with this technique, it would be possible to create magic-imbued embroidery thread as well as string with the properties of metal.

The Dierta Province to the south and the metal-resource-rich Wise Province to the east would likely be scrambling to get their hands on this technology.

The more difficult issue was that Mieux-fly cultivation was tightly controlled and monitored by the government. But Neema came up with a proposal that would blow this issue out of the water.

Neema suggested the country should regulate the rights to new techniques, spells, and technology invented by magic users. She'd been inspired by the idea that if that technology was valuable, there were sure to be people willing to pay for the right to use it.

The magic users would register their original technology, and anyone who wanted to use it would pay a usage fee to the country. Then, the country would pay the magic user who invented it. If we made it so that a certain percentage of this fee could be deducted as a tax, it would essentially be the same as occupational tax.

There were still a few issues with the proposal, but we could work with this idea.

If the inventor was identified and the technology was protected, the inventors would finally receive at least a little profit from their work. And if they invented spells that made life easier for the common people, it would be like hitting the jackpot.

Up until now, the Royal Magical Research Center had held a monopoly on new inventions, so some people would probably be able to get rich quickly as inventors under the new system.

What Cerulia was most looking forward to was that new inventions producing income would finance further research, leading to a renaissance in the field.

If that happened, our country might even be able to develop further.

Our children really are geniuses!

Neema asked if she'd done a good job, but she didn't seem to have any idea what a genius she was!

I'm never going to marry her off, no matter what anyone says!

Just as I was thinking that, Cerulia asked Neema a terrifying question...

She asked if Neema had anyone she liked.

Someone she likes?! Father will never allow it! Who is he?! Is it Gouche's grandson, Gash? Or is it Hughey? I won't accept muscle-brained brats like either of them!

Or could it be one of the young knights she's become friendly with? I won't accept a man who has such a dangerous job, either!

...Don't tell me it's Prince Wilhelm...

That, more than anything, I will prevent by any means necessary!

"Lars!"

It goes without saying that not just myself, but the entire family breathed sighs of relief at Neema's answer. Even Marjace, who waited discreetly off to the side, brought a hand to his chest in relief.

It was clear that even our servants were concerned over the matter of Neema's future partner.

I can't entrust her to just any half-baked punk!

"I won't let anyone have *either* of my precious daughters!"

I wrapped my arms around Karna, who was already hugging Neema, embracing both of my daughters tightly.

And, for the sake of my precious family, I could not afford to let Runohark run free, attempting to harm the country.

I couldn't have been happier to have something to unleash the full force of my ability on after so long.

5 - We Finally Found It!

“**THERE** you are.”

The weather had warmed up in the royal city, so today, I was enjoying an elegant teatime in the garden when Ralf called out to me.

“Will you join me for tea, Ralf?”

“Sure, why not? I’ve got a bit of time.”

Another chair was produced as if being pulled out of thin air, and in no time, Paul had poured a cup of tea for Ralf.

I always, always think this, but with how fast they move and how hyper-prepared they are, the servants in our household don’t seem to know the meaning of the word impossible, do they?!

“We’ll travel to Zigg Village with the guild masters to observe the situation in three days,” Ralf said.

They finally decided, huh? I have been getting sick to death of keeping Grandpa Gouche company. Oh, no, wait, it’s Shinki he’s been coming to see. I’ve just been watching.

“However, I’m going to be rather busy this time, so I’m going to assign Paul and a maid to escort you, Neema.”

What?! Paul is coming...to be my babysitter?!

“You won’t be able to be with me?” I asked.

The fact that I was being assigned a babysitter could only mean that my brother, who was supposed to be acting as my guardian, wouldn’t be able to be with me at all times. But this would mean I’d be unable to move about freely.

“I want to be with you, too, but unfortunately, I have to attend to the guild masters. I’m sorry.”

He seems genuinely sorry, so I can't continue being selfish.

"In exchange, as long as you promise to stick with Shinki and Paul, I'll allow you to go up onto Mount Reitimo."

"Really?!"

"As long as you keep your promise. If I find out you've slipped away from them, I'll send you home right away. Got it?"

It was rare for Ralf to be so strict with me.

"I promise!"

"You heard her, Paul. If she breaks her promise, drag her home without mercy, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Knowing Paul, he really would show no mercy at all.

I need to be extra careful not to break my promise! Wait a minute. Does this mean I might get to see Paul's more-impressive-when-undressed body? Awesome! I'll do my best!

I let out a determined huff, and Paul put the final nail in my coffin, saying he'd received permission so he wouldn't show an ounce of mercy.

Paul, your face right now is downright terrifying!

"Come to think of it, did the elemental spirits ever find that spell you asked them to search for?" Ralf asked.

...Oh!

"I completely forgot!"

"Actually, the guild master of the adventurers' guild will also be joining us on the observation trip, so I was hoping we could get a favorable answer from him while we're there. I want to get all the ammunition I can to convince him, so please help me, Neema."

I'm really sorry! I'll ask Sol right away! I need you to convince Ardo to join Project Shiana, Ralf!

"I'll ask right now!"

Just as I was about to open a telepathic connection with Sol, Ralf's personal butler, Josh, came to get him.

"Lord Ralf, it's time."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Neema. Can you fill me in after dinner?"

Since work on Project Shiana had really gotten underway, the entire family had been busier than normal, and I'd been left home by myself more often. I was lonely without any family to spend time with, but I couldn't complain since they were all working on the project I'd proposed.

"Okay! Do your best, Ralf!"

I followed Ralf to the entryway to see him off, then returned to my room and reached out to Sol telepathically.

"Sol! Sooooo! Excuse me, Mr. Sol!"

"Yes?"

"Did you locate the birth control spell?"

"...Huh?"

What do you mean, "huh"?!

"Sol! You forgot, didn't you?!"

I know I'm in no position to talk, but Sol really did forget! He was the one bragging that he's still plenty young, wasn't he?! Sol, you're too old to be getting senile, aren't you?

"Oh, didn't I tell you they found it?" he asked.

"No, you did not!"

"Oh, really? Sorry about that. I received word that they found it."

Thank goodness! There's a magic user who can use the birth control spell!

"They say they'll be there soon, so just hold tight."

Be where soon?

I was confused by Sol's ambiguous statement, but before I could ask him to clarify, there was a knock on my bedroom door.

Oh, no. What bad timing!

It couldn't be helped, so I ended the telepathic connection with Sol and answered the door.

"Lady Neema, visitors have arrived," Paul announced, but I had no idea who it could be.

I wonder who it is? Did Grandpa Gouche show up out of the blue again to whack Shinki around some more?

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's Riliardo Judar Wagajeetar of the adventurers' guild, and he's brought a companion along with him."

I'm impressed Paul was able to pronounce Ardo's full name. I already forgot it, except for his nickname: Ardo.

But if Ardo is coming here, it must have to do with Project Shiana. But, but, but! There's no one home right now! I can't meet with them on my own...

But it also wouldn't do to leave guests waiting unattended. So that only leaves one option: I'll call Mama home immediately!

"Paul, I'd like to ask Mother to return home at once, so please dispatch a messenger."

"Her Grace will arrive home shortly."

Huh? Does that mean Ardo's visit was planned? Mama, why didn't you tell me?! Oh, I know! This must be a test to see if I can properly attend to guests!

"Very well. Please stay with me until Mother returns."

It wasn't only for emotional support that I wanted Paul to stay with me; I also wanted him to keep watch to make sure I wouldn't say anything that would bring shame to our family name. If possible, I hoped he'd throw me a life preserver if I made a mistake.

That's right! Paul is my insurance plan.

“Certainly. You can count on me.” Paul cheerfully agreed, understanding what I wanted without needing to be told explicitly.

This is probably a job for the steward, Marjace, but he’s busy, and I don’t want to bother him...

Or so I thought, but when I arrived at the guest parlor, Marjace was already there, tending to the guests.

...Maybe I don’t need to be here after all?

I shook my head and put to bed all thoughts of shirking this anxiety-inducing responsibility by calling out to Ardo.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting,” I said.

“Not at all. Thank you for making time to meet with us.”

When I explained that Mama hadn’t yet returned, Ardo apologized for arriving earlier than promised.

“I’m afraid I might not be able to properly entertain you by myself, so would it be all right if these two sat in?” I asked, gesturing to Marjace and Paul.

“Of course. Frankly, I’m a little embarrassed about getting so ahead of myself that we arrived this early.”

While we were making small talk, a tea set was brought in for me.

I already drank a lot of tea earlier, so I’m quite full, but...

“Should we reserve the topic of the purpose of your visit for once Mother returns?” I asked.

“Yes, let’s wait until Her Grace returns to get into the details. In the meantime, please allow me to make introductions.”

I’d been super curious this whole time, but it would’ve been rude to stare at Ardo’s companion when we hadn’t even been formally introduced, so I’d been doing my best to resist.

Was the reason Ardo “got ahead of himself” because of this person?

The person accompanying Ardo was another elf!

A female elf!

“This is the elven healer, Velcia Judeau Coggfen.”

...Why are the elves' names all a series of difficult-to-remember syllables?!

“It’s very nice to meet you. The elemental spirits led me here.” The female elf stood and bowed elegantly.

Huh? The elemental spirits led her here...? Does that mean she’s the person who can use the birth control spell?! So this is what Sol was talking about!

I examined the female elf again with new understanding. The first thing I noticed about her was that she was short. I suspected she was around the same height as Karna. Her hair was long and a dark golden color, while her eyes were a shade of brown, even darker than most Japanese people’s eyes. Her face was beautiful, with delicate features.

Despite being short, she had long arms and legs, which gave her an air of elegance. You wouldn’t be tempted to confuse her for a child, either, with the way her body was curved in all the right places and slender everywhere else.

To put it plainly, I’m jealous of her looks! However, I wonder why there’s such a stark difference in their appearances when she and Ardo are both elves...

“Forgive my rudeness, but Ardo and, um...” I trailed off, unable to remember the female elf’s name for the life of me.

“Please call me Vel.”

“Thank you. I am Dayland Osphe’s youngest daughter, Nefertima.”

That was a close one! I was in such a hurry that I almost forgot to introduce myself properly. I need to calm down so I can keep my wits about me!

I took a sip of tea, letting out a tense sigh.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why is there such a stark difference in your appearances?” I inquired.

“Although we’re the same species, we’re of different ethnicities. I’m a Judeau elf; we’re naturally affiliated with the earth spirits,” Vel explained.

So, I guess their middle name indicates their ethnic group? Do the Judeau

elves get their small frames and golden hair from their affinity for the earth spirits, then?

“The Judar elves, of which Ardo is a part, are naturally affiliated with the wind spirits.”

“Meaning there must also be ethnic groups affiliated with the fire and water spirits?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

I wonder what the ethnic groups affiliated with the fire and water spirits look like? Based on Ardo and Vel’s appearances, I think I can hazard a guess. I bet their hair and eye color are the same as the elements of the spirits they’re affiliated with.

“But the elemental spirits love you, don’t they, Lady Nefertima?”

“Elves can see the elemental spirits, right?”

“Yes. Many elemental spirits are surrounding you.”

I’m so jealous. I wish I could see them. What do the elemental spirits who work with Sol, Lars, and Shinki look like?

“What do the elemental spirits look like?” I probably wouldn’t get a chance like this again, so I figured I’d better make the most of it and ask.

“They are very cute and have beautiful wings.”

Are their wings feathered like a bird?

“I have a picture that I carry around as a good luck charm.” Vel had been doing all the talking up to this point, but Ardo suddenly spoke up and showed me a small picture.

The picture was smaller than the palm of his hand and depicted several tiny, sprite-like figures that I assumed were elemental spirits. The wings Vel mentioned weren’t feathered like a bird’s wings; they were membranous like an insect’s. The elemental spirits each had three sets of these rounded, membranous wings and slanted eyes so huge that I wondered if they even had eyelids.

The rest of their features differed depending on their elemental affiliation and personal taste. There was one elemental spirit with long red hair and another with green hair done in braids.

I can see now how Shinki would associate these guys with bugs if a bunch of them were flitting around him all the time. But they're so tiny and adorable!

"They're so cute!"

I got so excited that I blurted out the first words that came to mind, and a gust of wind blew across the room seemingly out of nowhere. I looked around the guest parlor, trying to determine where the breeze had come from, but there weren't any windows open, and the door was firmly shut. There was no sign that either Marjace or Paul had moved, so I was left stumped as to the source of the wind.

"The elemental spirits are happy that you called them cute. That sudden gust of wind was accidentally caused by an over-excited wind spirit." Ardo was smiling wryly, leading me to believe that the elemental spirits must be doing something amusing.

I'm so jealous... I wish I could see all those cute little elemental spirits!

Wondering if it might be possible to at least sense the presence of elemental power the way my sister could, I concentrated every fiber of my physical and spiritual being on searching for it, but I didn't pick up on a thing.

I need to convince Sol to hurry up and bond with me!

While the two elves were teaching me many things about the elemental spirits, Mama finally arrived home.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting."

The atmosphere in the room changed the moment Mama stepped inside. It was hard to describe, but the air suddenly felt more tense and formal.

Mama gracefully crossed the room and sat beside me, exchanging polite greetings with our guests as if it came as naturally as breathing to her—which, knowing her, it probably did.

All right, all the main players have arrived! Now, it's time to get down to

business!

“So, is it true that you can use the birth control spell, Vel?”

I'll just cut right to the chase to avoid the possibility of causing any misunderstandings!

“Yes. The elemental spirits were searching for a magic user who knew the spell and asked me to help a beloved child.”

Huh? What's a beloved child?

“First, can you explain what you mean by beloved child?”

“A beloved child is someone who has received the blessing of the God of Creation. Legend says that elemental spirits and holy beasts treat God's beloved children with special care.”

I was surprised by Vel's explanation, but I wasn't the only one.

Blessing refers to my special ability to be loved by animals, right? I suppose it fits...

“And you think *I'm* one of these so-called blessed children?” I asked.

“That's what the elemental spirits say.”

Mama nodded slightly beside me. Had she already figured it out?

Marjace and Paul didn't let their expressions slip for an instant, so I couldn't tell how they felt about this revelation.

“Does everyone in the world know about beloved children?”

“No, other than the elves and others involved with the elemental spirits, I imagine only a small number of researchers and historians would know about them. But I've suspected for a while now that you might be one, Neema,” Mama revealed.

I was well aware of all that I'd gotten up to, so I knew it wasn't strange for someone in the know like Mama to see straight through it.

“Velcia, may I ask what you think of Project Shiana?”

At Mama's question, Vel had a troubled expression.

“If I may be honest, I’m afraid I can’t agree with it. I believe that removing the monsters from their natural environment equates to interfering in the way nature intended them to be, which violates the wishes of the God of Creation.”

I see. But I have a sneaking suspicion that God was the one who drew all the monsters together. Hmm, but maybe even God didn’t imagine I would do something like this with the monsters?

If God were against Project Shiana, surely he’d make that known by interfering in some way? In the first place, what is God’s will?

“Vel, can you sense the will of God?” I asked.

“...No. This is merely my own belief, based on what I’ve been taught about the balance of nature by the elemental spirits.”

“The elemental spirits know God’s will, right?”

“Yes.”

Let’s summarize this:

The elemental spirits are well aware of Project Shiana.

And Lars has been there for most of the planning as well.

Neither the holy beast nor the elemental spirits have expressed any opposition to Project Shiana.

I’m sure that if it went against God’s will, Lars would’ve had Will put a stop to it.

“Are any of the elemental spirits opposed to Project Shiana?” I asked.

“...No. They all say they want to help the beloved child.”

“That means it doesn’t go against the will of God, then, right?”

The will of God was especially important to the elves since they could see elemental spirits. If I could get her to see that it didn’t violate the will of God, I had a feeling she would agree to assist with Project Shiana.

“Furthermore, if it really went against the will of God, Prince Wilhelm’s holy beast would surely have put a stop to it. The holy beast loves Neema dearly, so there’s no way he would allow her to do something that would incur God’s

wrath. Nor would the fire dragon of the northern mountains get involved with searching for someone who can use the birth control spell,” Mama said, jumping in to help me convince Vel.

“Vel, they both make good points. I would ask that you consider carefully what is important to us as elves,” Ardo added.

If we couldn’t get Vel to help us, we’d have no choice but to do as Mama had suggested and cast the excess population out to fend for themselves in harsh terrain.

But it has to be her choice; we can’t force her into this.

“What’s important to us as elves... That is and always has been working with the elemental spirits to carry out the God of Creation’s will. And if she is doing his will, I will follow Lady Nefertima.”

“Then it’s decided. In that case, the adventurers’ guild will also participate.”

We convinced not only Vel but Ardo as well?! In the end, the elemental spirits convinced them. The elemental spirits are amazing!

“Thank you both very much. And thank you, elemental spirits!” When I thanked the elemental spirits, the entire house started shaking and rattling.

An earthquake?!

I clung to Mama, bracing myself against the earthquake’s impact.

“Please calm down. You’re frightening the beloved child.”

Almost as soon as Ardo said this, the shaking stopped.

Was that caused by the elemental spirits, too?!

“Lady Nefertima, it may be best if you only speak directly to the elemental spirits if either one of us or a holy beast is around.”

He might be right. I don’t want to accidentally cause natural disasters with nothing more than an offhanded remark!

But Shinki’s usually with me, so hopefully it will be okay? At the moment, he’s probably training in the garden. Either that, or maybe Haku and the others caught him and demanded he play with them.

Just to be safe, if there's anything I want to say to the elemental spirits, I'll try to make a habit of having Shinki communicate it to them for me.

"...I'll be careful."

"Neema, don't just be careful. Promise you'll do as he says," Mama ordered.

Urk. If I break a promise to Mama, even unintentionally, I'll be in for one of her fearsome scoldings! Do I really have to promise?

...Yeah, I don't think I'm going to be able to wiggle out of it. Mama's eyes look too scary right now.

"...I promise."

Once I spoke those reluctant words, some of the fire went out of Mama's eyes.

I'll check with her later if it's okay when I'm with Shinki.

"Very well, then. Ardo and Vel, please take good care of Neema."

Ardo and Vel's faces were pinched with mild concern at Mama's ferociousness, but they both agreed.

It's okay. As long as you don't step on a landmine, Mama is very kind!

And so we secured the participation of the adventurers' guild and located someone who could use the birth control spell in one fell swoop.

Our family would hire Vel as an official staff member for Project Shiana. Since Papa wasn't home, she would have to return the following day to go through the details of her employment with him, though.

It was rather sudden, but we'd decided she would accompany us on our observation trip in three days and settle in Zigg Village from then on.

Thankfully, Vel was happy to comply with this plan.

I asked Vel if it was okay not to return home to explain the situation to her family, but she replied that it would be fine because she could speak with her family from anywhere by having the elemental spirits deliver her voice to them.

The elemental spirits sure come in handy!

When Ralf returned home, I informed him that the adventurers' guild had agreed to participate in Project Shiana, and he praised me happily.

When Ralf is happy, I can't help being happy too!

Papa also seemed surprised that we'd actually found someone who knew how to use the birth control spell but was thrilled we'd secured the formidable assistance of an elven healer.

I hadn't even thought of that, but since Vel's a healer, we can have her run the on-site medical clinic! I'd been picturing a sexy and voluptuous nurse, but a slender, serious healer would also work!

No, this is the better option! Vel will be seen as an angel in a white coat!

...Oh, that's right! We should create a uniform for all the employees! Of course, Vel will need a white coat, but if everyone's wearing a uniform, it will make it much easier to identify the staff at a glance.

After discussing it with Papa, he agreed to have a uniform made.

I wanted to get our super-multitalented servants to help design uniforms that would look cool and be practical.

Our servants dressed in clothing similar to what you might imagine prosperous European peasants to wear; their clothes were simple but well-made from quality materials. These clothes were provided by the Osphe family, so I supposed that qualified them as a type of uniform, but...

If possible, I'd like something more unified, something unique that sets them apart. Don't get me wrong, these traditional country clothes are cute, but uniforms look really cool! Not to mention, this is one area I can actually help with!

All right! I'm about to get busy!

6 - I Want to Make Friends With Beastpeople!

I was all hyped up to get to work on designing the staff uniforms, but Mama dragged me out with her first thing in the morning. I had no idea where she was taking me, and it turned out to be the headquarters of the innkeepers' guild.

Even among the other buildings in the commerce district of the royal city, this one was imposingly large. This architectural style was all the rage in the past, but whatever the case, it certainly stood out from the other buildings around it.

It kind of reminds me of the royal palace. I wonder if it was built around the same time?

"Are we meeting with someone from the innkeepers' guild today?" I asked.

"No, we'll be interviewing potential staff for Project Shiana here today."

What? I heard they were implementing a multi-step hiring process, but I guess interviews are the final round of screening?

Still full of questions, I followed Mama into the guild hall.

The lobby of the building was just as elegant and high-class as I would've imagined based on the building's facade, and it was currently full of people of various species.

Most were humans, but I spotted several easily identifiable beastpeople as well.

Are those triangular ears straight-up dog ears? Or maybe fox ears? Whoa, there's even a person with massive wings on their back! I guess they're some kind of bird beastperson? They couldn't be an angel, could they?!

And that woman, who looks a lot like Ardo, must be an elf, right? Oh man, I'm so freaking excited!

"Lady Osphe, we've been awaiting your arrival."

The person who came out to greet us was an ordinary, middle-aged human

man. He was so ordinary that he made your guard drop immediately. Or maybe he was just a nice person.

“My daughter will be joining us today. If you have no objections?” Mama said, gesturing to me.

“None at all. It’s a pleasure to meet you, young lady. I’m the guild master of the innkeepers’ guild. My name is Iannel Corg.” The guild master knelt to place himself at eye level with me as he politely introduced himself.

He’s in the business of customer service, so that explains his friendly aura and the courtesy he’s showing to even a little kid like me. But if he’s risen to the rank of guild master, I bet he’s not as harmless as he seems.

Iannel led us to a large room.

Representatives from the merchants’ guild, blacksmiths’ guild, apothecaries’ guild, and carpenters’ guild—all of the guilds participating in Project Shiana—were already there. I was surprised that, other than the carpenters’ guild and the blacksmiths’ guild, all of the others were represented by the guild masters themselves.

The guild master of the carpenters’ guild was already on-site in Zigg Village overseeing the construction personally, so he’d sent his second-in-command in his place. The guild master of the blacksmiths’ guild was working on an important order and couldn’t get away, so he’d sent his second apprentice instead.

With this panel of interviewers, I’d probably pee my pants if I were the applicant!

The guild masters had an aura of capability and dignity that was quite intimidating, and the second-in-command and the second apprentice were both stern-faced.

A member of the upper nobility like Mama stuck out among them, but I probably stuck out most of all. I was sure the applicants would all wonder what a child was doing there.

And these people were a bit unusual.

They said things to me like, “It’s a good thing to be full of creative ideas!” and “You should do the things you want to while you’re still young!”

They interacted with me as normally as they could without crossing the line into being rudely informal with a member of the upper class. I couldn’t determine whether they were treating me like an adult simply because they didn’t know how to interact with kids or if I’d genuinely won their approval for my work on Project Shiana.

“Mother, is it really okay for me to be here?” I asked.

“Of course. You’ve been saying the whole time that you want to hire other species, right? I figured you might have some criteria you were looking for in these candidates, so I arranged for you to sit in on the interviews.”

This was all to honor my request?! Thank you, Mama!

At today’s interview, the guild representatives were looking for personnel to work at the new branch offices each guild would be opening in Zigg Village.

Mama was looking for people to operate Project Shiana.

Some of the servants from our house had been dispatched to Zigg Village to keep things running, but this was just a temporary placement. They would be called back once we found reliable staff to fill the spots permanently.

Iannel announced that the first interview was about to begin, so I quickly sat beside Mama. Iannel also took a seat on our side of the room, so he would be joining the interviews as well.

My job was simple: I just had to make a checkmark next to the candidates I thought were suitable.

After that, they would select the necessary personnel while considering my recommendations as much as possible.

In the end, my top picks were a solemn middle-aged adventurer, a sleepy-looking cat beastperson, and the beastperson with the angel-like wings.

The winged beastperson also had pointed ears and a fluffy tail. This type of beastperson was based on an animal called a feliance.

Feliances were an animal that looked like a fox with pure white bird wings on

its back. They lived primarily in the south, so I'd never seen one in person.

Unfortunately, those large wings were hindering this beastperson, causing them to have trouble finding work.

I can see why they would make it difficult to move around indoors. And outdoors, the most common types of jobs are manual labor, but those wings would prevent them from carrying things on their shoulders or back.

They were working for the postal guild, flying deliveries here and there, but because they weren't a strong fighter, they felt they couldn't continue in this line of work indefinitely.

According to the rumors, most members of the postal guild could hold their own against a red-rank adventurer! No wonder a person with mediocre fighting skills would feel out of place! I definitely want to help them by offering them a job!

Having wings, along with animal ears and a tail, is the ultimate combination!

If we become friends, I wonder if they'll let me touch their wings?

I couldn't remember most of the applicants we interviewed, but there must've been at least fifty of them.

Finally, we got to the last interview. The applicant was a rabbit beastperson. And it wasn't just one, but two of them interviewing together!

"You're sisters, and you want to get hired together?" Iannel confirmed with the applicants.

"That's correct. As you can see, my younger sister is painfully shy, so I figured I might as well apply along with her."

But if they made it to this stage, I'm guessing the older sister is pretty skilled?

I looked at their resumes and discovered they'd only recently arrived in the Kingdom of Gaché. The form of personal identification included with their application designated them as refugees from Icoux.

The two had run a small restaurant back in Icoux. They could read and do math, and of course, they could cook. At their previous restaurant, the older sister handled customer service and waitressing while the younger sister did the

cooking and the accounting.

So the younger sister didn't interact with the customers at all?

"For beastpeople, we're looking for people who can carry out a variety of duties, including both customer service and behind-the-scenes tasks. Are you still interested in the job, even so?" This question came from the guild master of the merchants' guild.

If the innkeepers' guild doesn't hire her, maybe the merchants' guild will want the younger sister for her accounting experience. I doubt she would be suited for jobs with the blacksmiths' or carpenters' guild.

"Of course," the older sister answered directly, her ears standing straight up from the top of her head.

The younger sister had droopy ears that hung down by her cheeks, and she didn't so much as look at us.

This isn't looking so good for her...

I wanted to speak with the younger sister, so I got up and walked over to her.

"Hello, my name is Neema! What's your name?"

I'm going to set aside aristocratic manners for a minute and try to be as friendly as possible.

"..."

"Her name is Racul," the older sister finally answered.

Yikes, she's really protective of her younger sister...

"You want to work with your older sister, right?" I asked.

"..."

Racul ducked behind her older sister and hid.

This won't do at all!

I could sense, even without looking, that the adults behind me were growing disgruntled.

Up to this point, the screening process had been entirely on paper, so they'd

probably proceeded this far based on the older sister's customer service experience and Racul's accounting skills, but if Racul was unable to communicate, there was no way she'd get hired.

"Racul, you can't just stay silent. Do you want to work or not?" I asked her.

Finally, a very faint voice reached my ears.

"...I want to work."

"In that case, you can't keep hiding behind your sister. Even if you're afraid, you have to take the first step."

When she realized I was asking her to step out from behind her sister, Racul shook her head. Her ears flapped back and forth along with the movement of her head.

Aw, I feel like I'm abusing a poor little innocent bunny...

"It's okay; there aren't any scary people here," I assured her. "If any scary people come, I'll beat them up for you!"

As if surprised by this, Racul hesitantly peeked her face out to look at me.

Look how cute she is!

Her eyes were large and dewy-looking, and she had a pert little nose. Her plump lips were on the smaller side, just like her nose. Racul wasn't an elegant beauty like her sister; she was a frail and cute beauty.

"...You'll beat them up?" she asked me.

"That's right! I'll beat them up!"

Racul giggled at the sight of me waving my fist in the air emphatically.

"What is it you're afraid of, Racul? The thing I'm most afraid of is being scolded by Mother and Father!" I emoted.

Up to this point, the only thing I've ever experienced that was scarier than that was the fight with the kobolds.

At that time, I'd been afraid and sad, felt worthless, and experienced so many other emotions that I couldn't name.

“...I’m different from my sister. So I’m afraid of people looking at me,” she said in a threadbare voice.

Different from her sister? In what way? Is she saying she’s not actually a rabbit beastperson like her sister?

“We are members of a sub-group within the rabbit tribe known as Grand Rabbits. The identifying characteristics of Grand Rabbits are large ears and broader facial features, like mine,” the older sister explained.

So Racul’s referring to the fact that she doesn’t possess the same identifying characteristics as her sister? What were the other members of her tribe saying to her about her features being different from all of theirs?

This sounds like a deep-seated issue...

“It’s okay to be different!” I insisted.

“Huh?”

“You and your sister are two different people, right? Even animals of the same species have different facial features and fur patterns; no two are the same.”

Something tells me this isn’t especially convincing? I’m often compared to my older brother and sister, but it’s not fair at all. They’re different ages and were born with different talents. We’re not even in the same league, so there’s no use comparing us if you ask me!

“Besides, where you used to live, people might’ve looked at you strangely for that, but things are different here. Beastpeople are rare in this country, so people are bound to look at you simply because they’re curious.”

Honestly, even knowing the basic types of beastpeople, I didn’t know the finer classifications. I’d never even heard of “Grand Rabbits” before today.

“So you don’t need to worry about that here in the Kingdom of Gaché,” I concluded.

“Beastpeople are rare?” she asked.

“Yeah! I’ve only ever seen members of the ice bear tribe, the rat tribe, and the fish tribe.”

The ice bear beastperson was Luck from Red Hlaada, and the mouse tribe and fish beastpeople were part of a traveling performance group. I wouldn't have ever seen the traveling group's performance if the king hadn't invited me. Until then, I hadn't even known they had something similar to a circus in this world.

I suppose Spica is also technically a beastperson, but in her heart, she's a kobold!

Besides, Ralf had warned me that it was best not to tell people about her since she was a member of a tribe that was believed to have become extinct. And today, I'd gotten my first glimpses of a cat beastperson, a feliance beastperson, and now Grand Rabbit beastpeople.

"It's not because I'm weird?" she asked timidly.

"Nope! They're looking because you're a rabbit. And because your ears are really cute!" I enthused.

"You think my ears are cute?"

"Yeah, droopy ears are adorable! Look, this little guy has droopy ears, too!" I said, holding up my bunny-backpack. Today, as usual, the ribbons tied around the bunny's ears matched the ribbon in my hair.

Oh, that's right! The servants packed me a spare ribbon inside my bunny-backpack. It's not because I often lose my ribbons or anything! It's just a spare, in case something unforeseen should coincidentally happen!

I took the spare ribbon out and gestured for Racul to crouch down. Then I tied the ribbon in a pretty bow around one of Racul's droopy ears.

"Look how cute you look!"

"Oh..."

The red ribbon paired well with Racul's dark orange hair.

Come to think of it, since the older sister's hair is such a light gray that it almost appears to be white, they look kind of like a Japanese White and a Lop-eared Rabbit!

Sigh. Rabbits really are so cute!

“You can keep the ribbon; consider it a present!” I declared, but the older sister immediately declined. She was unwilling to let her sister receive something for nothing.

“Hmm... In that case, let’s trade!”

I asked Racul to give me something in exchange for the ribbon the next time we met. Of course, I added that it had to be something of equal value so Racul wouldn’t be burdened by trying to reciprocate with a more expensive gift.

“...Is it okay if it’s something I made myself?”

“Of course!”

Handmade is even more impressive!

I was only barely capable of producing passable embroidery. Even then, I only managed it by drawing the lines onto the fabric first and sewing over them. And I’d only ever successfully embroidered simple designs like flowers and birds.

“Neema, that’s quite enough,” Mama called out chidingly, so I obediently returned to my seat.

“Now then, Miss Racul, do you truly have the determination to work for Project Shiana?”

Unlike before, this time, when Racul was addressed directly, she didn’t hide behind her sister.

“Yes. I want to increase what I can do by myself.”

Wh-Whoa!

This time, she answered in a firm, audible voice. I wasn’t sure what had done the trick, but if she could keep this up, even if she didn’t pass this interview, she would surely find work somewhere. I would put a checkmark next to her name, but I was pretty sure the guild masters didn’t have the best impression of her.

If we become friends, I hope she’ll let me touch her ears...

Come to think of it, what are rabbits’ tails like? I thought the same thing when I met Luck, but I’m curious to see what short tails look like on beastpeople! Oh, I know! If we go in the hot spring bath together, I’ll be able to see it while we’re

both naked, right?

Hmm, I'll have to see what I can do to pull some strings and push these sisters' hiring through! But I don't have the authority, so I guess I'll have to ask Mama to help.

We finally finished all the interviews, but boy, was it a long day. Dusk was already beginning to fall.

They're holding a meeting tomorrow with all the guild representatives to determine which applicants to hire. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be allowed to attend, but I would ask Mama to advocate for my chosen applicants.

I only ended up giving checkmarks to five candidates, so it's not too much to ask to have them hire them all, is it?



THE following day...

First thing in the morning, everyone left to go to work or on various outings, and I was left at home by myself.

I wanted Mama to bring me to the meeting to determine who to hire, but she insisted it would be a lot of adult conversations that would go right over my head anyway.

I could always go out if I wanted, but the only place I was allowed to go without a family member escorting me was the royal palace. I'd been to both the dragon and beast stables recently and didn't want to interfere with Elder Salzar's work by going to the Royal Magical Research Center...

Oh, I know! I'll go visit Lars! Then I can get him to tell me about "beloved children."

No time like the present—let's go right now!

"I'm going to go visit Lars!"

I was sure that if I announced it out loud, the wind spirits would tell him without me needing to ask them to convey the message. It was almost frightening how convenient the elemental spirits could be. I would have to do everything in my power not to get on their bad side.

I made my way to the royal palace, accompanied by Shinki, and as soon as we arrived, Lars came out to meet us.

“Lars!”

I ran forward and hugged him enthusiastically as a greeting, and Lars let out a low, growling purr deep in his throat. He immediately set off walking, presumably to lead me to Will’s room, but he wasn’t following the usual route...

I was still wondering where we were headed when we arrived at our destination: the Royal Guard’s training grounds.

Unbidden, the image of Grandpa Gouche’s almost disgustingly muscular body came to mind, and I grimaced.

Thankfully, Grandpa Gouche wasn’t present.

However, I was surprised to see Will standing in the middle of the training ring, crossing swords with the royal guards.

Isn’t it a bit strange for Will to be taking on two royal guards all by himself?

Bleachers surrounded the training ring where onlookers could sit and watch, but Lars found a spot where he could see everything and laid down right on the ground, letting out a huge yawn.

Hm? Does this mean he wants to wait here until Will’s done training? In that case, I don’t mind if I do! I’ll use Lars’ belly as a couch to sit back and watch the fight in style!

I wasn’t very knowledgeable about sword fighting, but even I could see that despite being up against two opponents, Will seemed to be winning.

The metallic *CLANG!* of swords crashing together rang through the air as Will pushed his way forward.

At the same time, the second royal guard attacked Will from behind. Will deftly avoided the blow, and the sword of the royal guard he’d just been fighting clashed with that of the royal guard who’d attacked him from behind. It was like watching a scripted fight scene from a movie.

He’s really incredible. I had no idea Will was this strong.

While the two royal guards were preoccupied fighting each other, it created an opening for Will to get in a strike against the one he'd originally been face-to-face with.

There wasn't any blood, so the blade must've been blunted, but it still had to hurt. The royal guard who'd been struck collapsed on the ground in agony.

Without sparing the fallen royal guard a second glance, Will turned and aimed his blade at the throat of the other royal guard.

The royal guard dodged the blow, but Will crouched and launched an upward strike at his opponent. He scored a direct hit to the royal guard's stomach. The man keeled over, clutching his abdomen.

Ouch, that had to hurt! Will is merciless, huh?! And that arrogant smirk is annoying! He really is a demon.

The fight was over, so Lars roared to call Will over.

Black-hearted pervert demon prince... Huh? Wasn't the word "wily" in there somewhere too?

...Sure, why not!

Wily black-hearted pervert demon prince Will... Good grief, that's long!

I'll stick to "demon prince."

The demon prince Lars had called out to was covered in a thin sheen of sweat but looked thoroughly invigorated, as if he'd just finished a light workout, not beat the stuffing out of two highly trained, elite royal guards single-handedly.

I guess fighting is a good stress reliever?

By the time he made it to us, he'd already caught his breath and returned to normal.



“Will, I feel bad for those poor royal guards!” I complained.

“If they’re ready to throw in the towel after that, they aren’t suited for the royal guard. No matter how much stronger I am, they need to use that as ammunition to motivate them to train harder,” he countered.

“But if you’re not kind, people will hate you!”

“Heh, you think people hate me?”

Grrr! I don’t understand why this demon prince is so popular! For some inexplicable reason, the royal guards and the people who work in the royal palace all idolize him.

“More importantly, what are you doing here?” he asked.

Oh, that’s right. I almost forgot why I came here today.

“There’s something I want to ask Lars about.”

“And you want me to play translator?”

“That’s right!”

It’s not like anyone else can understand what he’s saying!

“You know, I’ve been thinking this for a while now, but you don’t seem to have any qualms about using the crown prince for your own whims, do you?” He raised an eyebrow at me.

“Should I?”

“Heh. I suppose I have no choice but to grant the wishes of a cute lil’ sis.”

Huh? Am I hearing things, or is Will actually being nice? Oh well, it must’ve been my imagination. In any case, apparently, it’s okay to ask him to translate!

“Please, Big Brother Will!”

I doubted it would work on Will, but just in case, I used my special attack. I looked up at him with wide, glittering eyes.

This technique worked on Karna 10 out of 10 times and even had an 80 percent effectiveness rate against Papa!

It didn’t usually work on Mama or Ralf, though.

Will ruffled my hair affectionately and said to follow him, then set off walking. Lars padded behind him, so I also hurried to chase after them.

Unfortunately, I couldn't keep up with Lars and Will on my stubby little legs and was humiliatingly forced to ask Shinki to carry me.

We decided to talk in Will's room, but Will wanted to change first, so I waited in the sitting room, drinking tea and eating snacks, while he disappeared into his bedchamber.

The tea was just as delicious as always.

At the tea parties that Queen Relena sometimes invited me to, I occasionally got to try tea cakes from her home country, the Linus Empire.

Once Will returned, we dove right into the topic at hand.

"Lars, what is a 'beloved child'?"

Vel said it was someone who'd received God's blessing, but I wondered how that was different from those known as "God's favored."

Lars was staring at Will, so I assumed they were communicating telepathically.

"He says that a beloved child must be cherished and protected."

"How is that different from someone like you, one of God's favored?"

Lars and Will communicated silently again, so I sat patiently and waited for them to be done. Partway through, Will unconsciously spoke out loud, saying, "Really?!" leading me to assume that Lars had said something surprising.

"A favored, as you put it, is simply someone God is fond of. But, apparently, a beloved child has been assigned a task by the God of Creation."

That sure is confusing! Why can't they make them one and the same?!

"What kind of task?" I asked.

"Lars says that he has no way of knowing that, but he says that the first king, Gee, was also a beloved child."

What? The first king was a beloved child?! I figured he must be one of God's favored since he was so legendary, but I wouldn't have guessed he was a beloved child! Why didn't God give me awesome powers like his?!

Hey, God! You're clearly playing favorites here!

"I'm sure we'll discover what your divine purpose is in time," Will said.

No, I already know what it is. I just can't fulfill it yet.

"Oh, and Shinki is a 'knight' assigned to protect the beloved child. Nice, huh?"

Whaaat?! This is the first time I've heard of this!

"A knight?"

"In general, the elemental spirits and holy beasts are supposed to protect the beloved child, but the other people around them may not be so considerate. This is a way of protecting the beloved child, so they won't be used by others for their connection to these powerful beings."

But humans aren't supposed to use elemental power, right? I guess it's okay if it's a monster doing it, then?

"Roy was the first king's knight, so I'm sure there's no problem with yours being a monster," Will said.

Roy was the first king's rhinoceros beast mount, wasn't he? I see, so Roy wasn't just an ordinary rhinoceros after all...

While I was reeling in shock about those revelations regarding the existence of beloved children and their knights, Lars rubbed his head against me.

"Yeah," Will agreed, not bothering to translate whatever Lars had said.

Lars was so affectionate towards me that I couldn't find it in me to care for very long. The fur around his neck was just so fluffy!

Lars, let's take a nap together!

7 - We're Here to Observe, but I'll Still Find Time to Play

AFTER a lot of thought, I realized that this news didn't change anything on my end.

Since learning that the elemental spirits and holy beasts would do everything in their power to help me succeed in my mission, I'd begun feeling lucky to be a "beloved child."

Will had speculated that, when it came to a beloved child and their knight, the elemental spirits and holy beasts would stop us before we inadvertently did anything that could cause us to become "fallen." Lars nodded in agreement.

And so I had a new outlook: I would follow my gut and trust God to intervene before I could get into too much trouble.

In short, everything will work out!



THE morning we were finally going to travel to Zigg Village, I witnessed an amusing sight.

When I announced that I wanted to bring my Hanley stuffed animal with me, Paul was so disgruntled that he clutched his head at the outrageous demand.

It was a massive stuffed animal—over 6 feet tall.

But for the sake of my and Gratia's beauty sleep, I was more than willing to make Paul lug it around.

Paul will probably look cute lugging a stuffed animal around with him. If it were Shinki, on the other hand... Yeah, I can't even imagine it.

So, when the time finally came to depart, I gave in to my curiosity and had Shinki carry the Hanley stuffed animal instead.

I know I didn't specify how to carry it, but it should be common sense not to throw it over your shoulder like that, shouldn't it?!

The Hanley stuffed animal looked alarmingly similar to a dead body the way Shinki was carrying it.

While I was distracted by feelings of sympathy for the poor Hanley stuffed animal, we swiftly made our way to the royal palace, where the guild masters, Ardo, and Vel were already waiting. Each guild master had brought along a few of their underlings, making us quite a sizable group.

Other than Ralf, me, and the others connected to the Osphe family, everyone else had to undergo a security check that consisted of ID verification and a pat-down. Once the security check was complete, we were led to the room with the teleportation circle.

Because there were so many of us, we would have to divide into two groups.

I was assigned to the first group.

All right, this time, I'm ready! I've got my secret weapon—the pair of sunglasses I asked Karna to make so I can finally see what the sparkles generated at the moment of teleportation really are!

Although they look more like goggles than sunglasses...

I put them on and got ready to see the sparkles.

“Lady Neema, what are you doing?” Paul asked, looking astounded by the sight of me wearing sunglasses.

“I’m going to look at the sparkles!”

“At the... sparkles?”

Paul is clueless; forget about him! Come on, Ralf, say the magic word already!

Ralf was snickering at my unusual appearance, but finally, he called out our destination “Fauxbe!” to activate the teleportation spell. Reacting to Ralf’s command, the magic circle spilled forth an abundance of sparkling light.

Through the sunglasses, I could see that the sparkles were made up of small, round... things. They were really tiny, no more than a millimeter across.

I was happy I could finally see the sparkles, but I still had no idea what they were.

Hmm, I'll have to ask Karna or Mama sometime.

When we arrived in Fauxbe, the unit leader was waiting for us. This time, it was just him.

I took off the sunglasses and ran up to the unit leader.

"Please take good care of us this time too!" I said.

"Of course, you can count on me."

I was surprised to see a group of people who were not knights gathered behind the unit leader. Based on their appearance, they were probably adventurers, but what were they doing here?

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"They are adventurers hired to protect the guild masters."

I didn't hear anything about this from Ardo...

While I was pondering this unexpected development, the second group arrived in Fauxbe.

"Ardo, there are a bunch of adventurers here..." I said.

"Adventurers?"

Ardo made a confused expression. As soon as he caught sight of the group of adventurers, they all moved towards him as if under someone's order.

They were smiling, but their voices sounded a bit forceful. The adventurers were saying something to Ardo, but I couldn't make out the words.

"Forgive me, Lord Ralfreed. It appears that one of my subordinates dispatched this group of guards on his own judgment." Ardo bowed his head to Ralf.

Even if he was the guild master of the adventurers' guild, it was a huge overstep of authority to have extra members suddenly join our group without receiving permission in advance. Therefore, Ardo apologetically explained the situation to Ralf, the highest-ranking member of our party and de facto leader.

Thankfully, Ralf wasn't the type to be angered by a perceived slight and easily granted permission for the adventurers to accompany us.

According to Ardo, the guild masters hadn't requested the protective detail, but one of his subordinates had been horrified by the thought of all the guild masters gathering in one place without protection and dispatched them.

Ardo seemed highly disgruntled about his subordinate's arrogance in deciding something like that without even consulting him. I couldn't blame him for being peeved; communication is important!

And so, we became an even larger group.

Several carriages were waiting for us outside, as well as horses for the unit leader and the adventurers to ride. Of course, I took the time to pet the horses before climbing into the carriage.

The horses pulling the carriage were a different breed from the powerful war horses the knighthood rode; they were smaller but heavily muscled. I had yet to see any slender horses built for sprinting like Thoroughbreds thus far. The war horses were built like draft horses, and the regular horses had thick legs, sturdy joints, and short necks. They seemed more similar to the wild horses that lived on Earth in ancient times before human domestication. In exchange for their strange-to-me appearance, they were insanely strong!

The horses snorted and tossed their heads, ready and raring to go.

All right, let's do this!



AFTER loading into the carriage and departing Fauxbe, I passed the time looking out the window at the scenery and chatting with Ralf and the others. In what seemed like no time at all, we arrived in Zigg Village.

I'd become accustomed to riding in carriages but was still eager to be old enough to ride on my own.

I was allowed to ride the war horse, Hugh, at the beast stables, though. Hugh was highly intelligent and moved independently, judging the environment around him without needing direction from his rider. To put it another way, he essentially ignored his rider's commands and operated on autopilot. Lestin allowed me to ride Hugh, knowing he wouldn't do anything dangerous. He'd even started letting me ride Uwaz recently, so I was hopeful that this meant I

was making progress as a rider.

When we arrived in Zigg Village, Healran came out to greet us, accompanied by Miss Belle, whom I hadn't seen in a while.

The last time we'd been here, we finally remedied the oversight regarding Healran's housing by arranging accommodations for him so he no longer needed to camp out.

"Miss Belle!"

"Lady Nefertima!"

Somehow, Miss Belle seemed even more energetic than she had back in Cass.

There's something soul-healing about living in the countryside! She seemed to have a lot on her mind before we parted ways in Cass, but the simpler lifestyle here suited her.

"Thank you for the lovely room you provided for me!"

That's right; while we were arranging Healran's accommodations, we'd also added living quarters to Project Shiana's operations office, which was probably where Miss Belle was staying. We'd provided furniture as well. Karna and I had gone shopping for the furniture together, and she provided excellent advice on arranging a cute and cozy layout.

"You like it?" I asked.

"Yes! It's so beautiful, it's wasted on a simple person like me!"

I was glad she liked the room. I'd been determined to spare no expense to provide the employees with comfortable living accommodations as a part of their employee benefits.

"Healran, where are Uncle Phillip and his party?"

"They went cave-exploring with the sirens. He said they'd be back before you arrived, but..."

Uncle Phillip and his friends seem to be living their best lives out here, huh? Weren't they exploring the caves last time we were here too? I'm sure we'll run into them at some point.

For the time being, we left Uncle Phillip and his party to their own devices and headed over to Project Shiana's operations office.

When we reached it, I was surprised by how much bigger it was than I'd expected. I'd imagined it would be around the size of a modest apartment building, but it was more than twice that size because they'd added rooms for members of the Osphe family to stay in when visiting. There were five luxurious bedrooms, only a bit smaller than my room at home.

No wonder it's so big!

Paul informed me he would be "stepping away for a bit," which I assumed meant he was going to prepare one of these rooms for me to stay in. My maid, Shell, hurried after him.

Paul sure is dedicated to his job!

In the large meeting room in the business section of the building, the guild masters were taking turns speaking with the guild master of the Carpenters' Guild to order temporary offices while their permanent branch offices were being built.

Everyone's just doing what they want. Is this really okay?

"In our schedule for this trip, today was specifically set aside for each guild to work on setting up their offices. We won't go up onto the mountain for another three days."

Three more days...?

But I was free to come and go as I liked, so I planned to look at the area where they would be building the inn.

Paul seemed busy, so I brought Shinki with me on my little outing. I told Ralf and Paul I was going out and headed outside, excited to look around, when Shinki suddenly picked me up and began carrying me.

But I can walk just fine, you know! I suppose this is easier, though, so I won't complain.

First, we went to have a look at the barrier that had been erected around the mountain. Healran had explained the barrier to the monsters, but I doubted the

goblins understood.

If there was danger, we needed a plan to alleviate it.

I asked some of the carpenters working nearby where the barrier was on the way to the mountain. They replied that we wouldn't miss it if we continued towards the base of the mountain.

Leaving the hard-working carpenters behind, we approached the mountain.

Oh, there it is! They weren't kidding; there's no way you could miss this!

The barrier stood over 6 feet tall and was glittering.

A faint light seemed to ripple across the barrier's surface, and the ebb and flow of the pigmentation in the barrier occasionally made it difficult to see the scenery on the other side.

This continued on as far as the eye could see.

It felt like a barrier in every sense of the word.

On the far side of the barrier, a hand-made fence had been erected. The monsters were attempting to protect anyone from accidentally wandering into the barrier.

I have no idea how effective it'll be, but...

Wait a minute... Where should we enter?

I was fairly certain the barrier wouldn't harm humans but would probably treat Shinki the same as any other monster.

For the time being, we set off walking along the barrier.

Before long, we encountered two knights I'd never seen before patrolling the area.

"Excuse me, how can we pass through the barrier?" I asked.

I'm pretty sure a teleportation circle is set up somewhere inside the barrier, but I don't know where it is.

"You can't; no one is allowed on the mountain without permission."

"Scurry on home, little girl."

...Ho-ho-ho! I'm being treated as a normie, huh?! Heh, this is actually kind of exhilarating!

No, this is no time to be getting sentimental. If they won't tell us, we have no choice but to look for it ourselves. Oh well, I suppose it's fine. We'll go for a nice walk and search at our leisure.

We set off walking again in the opposite direction from the knights, staying close to the barrier.

But the knights followed behind us.

Do they think we're suspicious or something?

We ignored them and kept walking when suddenly Shinki came to an abrupt stop.

"What's wrong?"

"I almost stepped on it."

On what?! I thought, glancing down and answering my unspoken question. There was a large caterpillar on the ground in front of us. If Shinki hadn't stopped, he would've undoubtedly stepped on it and squashed it to death. It was about three times the size of a rhinoceros beetle larvae—or around the size of a golf ball.

I watched as it inched its way along the ground. Something was reassuringly familiar about the caterpillar's characteristic many-footed gait.

"Do you want to eat it?" Shinki asked just as casually as anything.

"No, I most certainly do not!"

I suppose this was a throwback to Shinki's origins as a goblin. To the goblins, bugs were an easy, nutritious food source when they couldn't find anything else.

While we were distracted by the caterpillar, the rustling sound of many feet quickly approaching reached us.

I looked up. A different group of knights from the ones still trailing us headed straight for us. However, the knight at the front of the group looked familiar; he

had accompanied us during my first visit to the Osphe Province.

“Lady Nefertima, right?”

I was worried that the caterpillar might get stepped on, so I asked Shinki to pick it up and put it safely out of the way on a tree branch.

“We received a report that suspicious people were wandering around in the woods...”

“I’m sorry, did we interrupt your work?”

Those other knights really did think we were suspicious!

“It’s okay. Will you enter the mountain today?”

“Yeah, I was hoping to check out the barrier a little and then visit the monsters. But we couldn’t figure out where to pass through the barrier...”

That makes it sound like we were lost, but we weren’t! I just forgot to ask how to get through the barrier before we left the office!

“I see. If you’d asked any of us from Giles’ unit, we would’ve been happy to escort you.”

“...Giles’ unit?”

“It refers to the four of us under Unit Leader Giles’ command who accompanied you when you first arrived in the Osphe Province. Including myself, of course.”

...Wait, is “Giles” the unit leader’s name?! He probably introduced himself when we first met, but I’ve been referring to him by his title, “unit leader” this whole time. I’ll probably forget again soon enough...

In the end, the knights led us to the teleportation circle.

The two patrol knights apologized profusely once they caught up with us, but I told them not to worry about it.

“You did the right thing, following your instincts when you noticed someone you thought shouldn’t be here. Please continue to be just as vigilant!” I said encouragingly.

To my surprise, the knights seemed shocked by my words, and then both

promptly burst into tears.

Now I'm the one who's shocked!

Apparently, they were occasionally praised by their superiors and thanked by the common citizens but had never been spoken to by a noble like this before. They said that aristocrats usually scoffed at the knights, resentful that the knights were impervious to their authority despite being of common birth.

Once a knight took oaths and joined the knighthood, the orders they received took precedence over everything else, and according to the knighthood's protocol, knights were forbidden from taking orders from the nobility.

But I bet that exactly because of this strict division between the knighthood and the nobles, there are some upstanding nobles who want to thank the knights for their service but feel hesitant to approach and speak to them.

In the end, Shinki and I were able to use the teleportation circle to enter Mount Reitimo.

The teleportation circle was a perfect replica of the one in the royal palace, only much smaller. The runes carved into the platform were tiny, with such fine and delicate markings that they could only have been created by the hand of a true master.

The sparkling lights were also the same, leading me to strongly suspect that they'd already perfected the process of creating smaller teleportation circles some time ago and were intentionally preventing the spread of this technology among the wider populace.

So we've arrived on the mountain, but I have no idea where!

I wanted to avoid getting lost at all costs, so I asked Shinki to have the elemental spirits guide us. The first stop was the goblins' den. I wanted to speak with Suzuko and make sure they weren't having any problems settling in here.

Shinki carried me in his arms, and as we descended the mountain, the scenery started to look familiar.

With a rustling sound, a group of goblins who looked like they were heading out hunting appeared out of the bushes.

“Giiii!”

The goblins literally jumped in surprise. Then, recognizing Shinki and me, they gathered around us and began dancing.

I get that you’re excited, but calm down a little!

“We’ll be waiting in the cave, so go finish your hunt and hurry back.”

The goblins looked dejected at Shinki’s instructions, but they soon let out war cries of *“Giii!”* and ran off into the woods.

They couldn’t afford to neglect hunting for food just because their boss was here.

Do your best to catch something big so you can feed the whole clan!

When we made it to the cave, Suzuko came running out.

“Boss! Mistress! You’re here!”

I was pretty sure Suzuko’s expression was supposed to be one of joyous greeting, but her fangs protruded out when she smiled, looking more frightening than welcoming.

But it’s kind of cute once you get used to it!

“Suzuko, have you encountered any trouble?” I asked.

I didn’t feel very authoritative being held like a baby, so I got Shinki to put me down. However, that left me looking up at Suzuko, still not feeling very authoritative.

“No problems.”

That’s good. It looks like things are going smoothly.

I listened to Suzuko report on all that the goblins had been up to in our absence and learned several had already died. All of these had been accidental deaths that had occurred while they were out hunting—a falling tree, a prey fighting back, etc.

Life wasn’t easy for the goblins, that was for sure.

“The weak die. You don’t need to concern yourself with it, miss,” Shinki said

matter-of-factly.

Shinki and Suzuko seemed to accept that, no matter the environment, death was unavoidable.

As I suspected, the goblins' weakness will naturally regulate their population size. No matter how fast their rate of reproduction and maturation, it's likely their population will actually decrease a bit once they start fighting with adventurers.

"Suzuko, there's a method I'd like you to test out next time you go hunting," I said.

Currently, the goblins hunt in teams of four or five. That was fine, but the way they all blindly threw themselves at the prey resulted in high casualties.

I wanted the goblins to attempt to assign roles in advance and see if this improved their success rate. My idea was that they would predetermine the roles: one or two goblins would distract the prey while the others attacked, and if any of them were injured, they would all retreat.

At first, they shouldn't always play the same role either. They should take turns and determine which role suited their individual strengths.

"Suzuko, I want you to assess each of the goblins' strengths and help them expand upon them," I said.

The faster runners would be suited for acting as bait, while the stronger fighters would take advantage of the prey's distraction to attack. Suzuko and Touki would provide guidance to all of them.

"Okay, we'll try it."

Following this, I spent some time explaining the new hunting method to the goblins with Shinki's help. If not for him, the goblins and I would've had difficulty communicating. However, even with Shinki's help, the goblins continued to tilt their heads to the side in confusion, clearly not understanding.

Hold on, you guys... Why are all of you confused by this?!

I tried until sunset began coloring the sky, but it started looking like it might be impossible to make the goblins stronger after all.

It might be better to just pick out the ones like Shinki, naturally occurring, unusually strong goblins, and proactively train them.

We bid farewell to the goblins and made our way off the mountain.

The magic word to teleport outside the barrier from any teleportation circles on Mount Reitimo was “Retreat.”

Isn't this degrading for the adventurers? Even if they win, they still need to say, "Retreat" to get back. Oh, I know! We just need to assign a name to the teleportation circle inside the inn.

I wonder what we should call it...

When we returned to the operations office, Paul was there waiting for us.

He checked me over for injuries, and when he found a stain on my dress, he immediately used magic to clean it.

After that, we ate dinner, took turns bathing, and finally, I curled up with my giant Hanley stuffed animal and fell asleep.

The room felt comfortingly similar to my bedroom at home, thanks to Paul's preparations.



THE following morning, Ralf told me not to run off to play just yet because he had something he wanted to show me.

Without further explanation, he led me to the meeting room.

The guild masters were all seated already.

I wonder what this is all about?

Ralf gestured to Paul, who darkened the meeting room and activated magical item lights. These weren't lamps but more like spotlights that produced strong beams of light.

The room was illuminated in red, blue, yellow, green, and white.

It's a little too bright!

Then Ralf began chanting a spell. It might've been the first time I saw him cast

anything other than a healing spell.



When he finished chanting, what appeared to be mist flooded the room. The mist moved as if it had a will of its own, gathering at Ralf's side.

The multi-colored beams of light from the spotlights reflected off the mist in a complicated pattern that gradually took shape, forming a distinct image like you might see projected onto a movie screen.

The projected image was that of the main building that would house Project Shiana: the inn. The colors were a bit off, but the projection was discernible, and what's more—the image was 3-dimensional!

The guild masters, too, let out cries of surprise and amazement.

"I developed this new technique to project an image using magic," Ralf said. "The technique could still use some fine-tuning, but I think you can get a better idea of how the building will look like this."

"Ralf, this is incredible!" I cried.

To be perfectly honest, I had no idea how he'd done it, but this just proved to me that Ralf really was a genius.

"You were the one who inspired me when you said that the diagram was difficult to understand."

Ralf chanted again, and the projected image changed from the exterior of the building to the interior. The projected image slowly cycled through the rooms: the spacious entrance hall, the large cafeteria, *etc.*

It was finally starting to feel real to me; they were really going to build this.

Once the projector display ended, Ralf was bombarded with questions.

He explained that the base for the spell was illusion magic, but he'd discovered while developing the technique that rather than creating an image out of nothing, it was more stable to use the mist.

However, this technique used a lot of magic, and the way it was currently configured, only an advanced-level magic user with double attribution in wind and water could cast the spell.

Ralf said that reflecting the light just so and controlling the different colors

was the most difficult part. In short, at the current stage, this spell was only accessible to a scant number of magic users.

However, so long as the caster had a clear image of what they wanted to project, they could project pretty much anything. To prove this point, Ralf projected an image of our house. It really was an exact replica, down to the tiniest detail.

The guild master of the carpenters' guild seemed disappointed after hearing Ralf's explanation. He lamented how useful this technology would've been in presenting building plans to customers. But he recovered quickly because he then declared that he would develop a technique exceeding this one, making it accessible to more people. I looked forward to seeing what he would come up with.

I guess now's as good a time as any to go deliver the stationery set I brought for Sicily.

I'd also had Mama procure a magic circle tapestry for Sicily.

This will make it much easier to keep in touch! Oh! It didn't occur to me until just now, but Sicily can read and write Larshian, right?

8 - God Is Actually Pretty Darn Impressive?!

“LADY Neema, please wake up.”

Someone’s saying something...

I buried my face in the Hanley stuffed animal, and sleep crept back over me.

“You’re going to be left behind while everyone goes on a tour of the mountain without you.”

A tour of the mountain?!

“I’m awake!”

I cast off the allure of soft fur and jumped to my feet.

Don’t even joke about leaving me behind!

“Breakfast will be served momentarily, so please get ready quickly.”

With Shell hurrying me along, I washed my face, dressed, and did my hair in no time.

Today, Healran would lead our group on a tour of the mountain. I was surprised at how massive our group was when everyone arrived.

I guess the addition of the adventurers adds a lot of bulk? They’re all pretty beefy, after all.

The first place Healran showed us was an obviously thrown-together building that housed the teleportation circle. It’d be improved upon so it could be turned into the royal knighthood’s branch office eventually, but until the inn was completed and the teleportation circle could be relocated there, they were sharing the space.

The teleportation circle could teleport up to six people at once and was set to randomly transport the users to any one of the teleportation circles inside the barrier; the user couldn’t pick their destination and wouldn’t know where they

were ending up.

For this reason, we needed to have the researcher from the Royal Magical Research Center, temporarily stationed here to do upkeep work on the teleportation circles, perform an override to permit us to temporarily set the destination to a fixed location.

Once we'd all finished teleporting in, the first order of business was to look at the barrier. Just inside the solid and imposing barrier ran a fence that stretched the length of the barrier, extending in both directions as far as the eye could see.

The kobolds had built this fence to prevent anyone from accidentally touching it. They'd also made it so an alarm would sound if anyone did.

You have to give it to the Carpenter Family—they sure work fast!

Healran explained that if the alarm sounded, the knights knew to come running to check it out.

The Carpenter Family aren't the only ones who work fast! Healran is pretty efficient himself!

The kobolds were also running patrols to make sure no one was getting too close to the barrier, and if anyone was caught, there would be consequences. According to Healran, anyone who broke the rules would be forced to undergo an extreme training regimen with Gova and Tolf. Healran laughed while explaining that the children were all terrified of Gova, recalling some amusing incident as he did. It seemed that Healran had gotten pretty friendly with the monsters while I'd been gone.

Next, we left the barrier and headed towards the goblins' den.

On the way there, we encountered a group of goblins out hunting, but they got scared and ran off. Shinki scoffed at the fleeing group, but I thought they'd made the right call.

When faced with such a large group of humans, running is the correct choice!

The humans all snapped to attention, nervous about the sudden appearance of goblins, and the adventurers stepped in front of the guild masters, shielding

them from danger.

“When you’re walking around on the mountain, you’re bound to encounter monsters. This lower region of the mountain is the goblins’ territory. You’ll also occasionally see slimes here,” Healran explained in a calm, soothing tone.

The guild masters were a bit flustered, but no one was actually hurt in any way.

When we arrived at the goblins’ den, Uncle Phillip and his companions were already there.

Come to think of it, where are Uncle Phillip and the others staying? Don’t tell me they’re still camping out in the woods?!

Ardo was the first to react.

“Purple Gandal?!”

A commotion rose among the adventurers when they realized this was the legendary party of purple-rank adventurers who called themselves Purple Gandal.

“Oh, hey! What, you came all the way out here too?” Uncle Phillip drawled.

Isn’t that manner of speech a little too casual for addressing the guild masters of nearly every major guild?! I suppose he can get away with it, though, given how prestigious he and his party are...

“These are the members of Purple Gandal; they are helping us with Project Shiana,” Healran explained to the group, and Uncle Phillip flashed a rakish smile.

He has a carefree, playful attitude, huh?

“Even a novice adventurer should be able to defeat most of the monsters here,” Uncle Phillip reported to the group.

“Most, but not all?” Ardo asked.

“That’s right. Take the goblins, for example. Only someone red-rank or above would have any hope of defeating someone like Suzuko or Touki.”

“How do you know that, Uncle Phillip?” I asked.

I don't even really know how strong Suzuko and Touki are.

"Because we had ourselves a practice fight, of course!"

They did what?!

I quickly searched the area for the two and found Suzuko making a very scary face. As for Touki, he was lying face-down on the ground.

"Suzuko, Touki, are you hurt?" I asked.

"Mistress, Touki lose! Touki so shame..." Touki was trying so hard to keep from crying that he was unconsciously biting his lip until it bled.

I patted Touki's head consolingly but was relieved neither he nor Suzuko seemed to be injured.

"I healed them right up after; don't worry," Eligeena explained. She was the only female member of Purple Gandal and a healer.

I was relieved.

"Touki become stronger! Then Touki get him!"

I'm glad to see you raring with determination to get stronger, but please don't kill anyone.

"Just don't kill him, please," I cautioned.

"Hey, hey, enough with the threats, little buddy!" Uncle Phillip cut in.

I already told him not to kill you; that's the best you're going to get.

"But you guys need to learn to coordinate your attacks better," Uncle Phillip advised the two defeated goblins.

"...Uncle Phillip, will you train Suzuko and the others?" I asked.

"Hm, I suppose it's fine. We've decided to make our base here in Zigg Village, so it works out."

Oh. He accepted much more readily than I expected. But is it really okay for him to decide by himself? I glanced around and found Ardo looking gob-smacked, the members of Purple Gandal smiling, and the adventurers looking supremely jealous.

“Is it really okay?” I asked again.

“We don’t mind. It turns out cave exploration is more difficult than we imagined, so if the monsters want to be Phillip’s training partners, that’s fine with us.”

This came not from Uncle Phillip but from the magic user in his party.

I see... Well, if they don’t mind, that’s great!

“Gova and Tolf are pretty skilled, too,” Uncle Phillip added.

He fought Gova and Tolf too? They do seem pretty strong. I bet if they keep practicing with Uncle Phillip, they’ll get stronger and maybe even evolve. But if that happens, the adventurers will have no hope of beating them...

“Phillip, you are an adventurer,” Ardo interjected, “so please train the adventurers on this mountain.”

Ardo has a point. It does seem strange for a human adventurer to help monsters become stronger...

“If we meet them at the inn or here on the mountain, we’ll be happy to fight with them.”

Another commotion broke out amongst the adventurers in response to Uncle Phillip’s declaration.

Could it be that Uncle Phillip is a bit of an idol among the adventurers?

“Oh, and Ardo... I hear that you forced an excessive condition on Nefertima,” Uncle Phillip said. “Retract it.”

Huh? What’s he talking about?

“What do you mean, excessive?”

Ardo didn’t seem to have any idea what Phillip was referring to either.

“The condition that no adventurers die.”

Is that excessive? I think it’s completely understandable from Ardo’s perspective. No one would want to see the members of their organization die, right? So, I can understand why he made this a condition for the guild’s involvement.

“Why?” I asked, uncomprehending.

“Nefertima, do you know why adventurers choose to become adventurers?”

“The reason why adventurers choose to become adventurers? Surely, it’s different for everyone, right? I imagine some choose to become adventurers because they love adventuring, while others fall into it simply because they have no other means to provide for themselves.” When I expressed this to Uncle Phillip, he adopted an expression that could be taken as a wry smile.

“No one becomes an adventurer because they’ve got no other choice. If you can fight, you can join the knighthood, and if you can use magic, there’s a world of job opportunities open to you.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

The knighthood did have an entrance exam, but as long as you had the basic aptitude, it was easy to pass. In fact, they accepted nearly all applicants. However, the training was intense, so the initial drop-out rate was also pretty high.

You could say that they don’t turn away any that come but also don’t chase any that leave.

“We choose to become adventurers because we love ourselves,” he said flatly.

...Wait, what? By “loving themselves,” does he mean, like, narcissism? Ugh, I really don’t get it! I pulled a face.

“We love how strong we are,” he continued. “So we try to always be strong in all situations.”

Is that really true? I can hear the members of Purple Gandalf muttering, “Speak for yourself!”

Maybe this is Uncle Phillip’s personal philosophy?

“But why does that mean we can’t make it so no one dies?” I asked.

“Because those who aren’t prepared to face death will die. Listen well, Nefertima: the willingness to face death leads to the will to live. The moment you think you’re going to die, you automatically feel a strong sense of

determination and think, 'I don't want to die! I'm going to survive!' Experiencing this makes you stronger."

Healran, Paul, and the adventurers nodded in agreement.

I understand Healran and the adventurers, but why is Paul nodding?!

I thought it strange, so I asked him about it, and Paul retorted that he'd experienced thinking he was going to die before.

In what possible circumstances would you ever think you were going to die while working in our household?! Our servants really are unusual.

"I think Ardo's stance also has merit," I insisted.

"All of the job requests that the adventurers' guild gets, no matter how simple, don't come with a guarantee that the adventurer won't die in the process," Uncle Phillip explained. "If you're out collecting herbs, you might fall off a cliff and die. If you're escorting a merchant caravan, you might be attacked by robbers or monsters and get killed. There are no guarantees when you're an adventurer."

This I could understand. No matter how supposedly peaceful and safe a world we might live in, there was always the possibility of being involved in an accident.

"I want those lacking the proper determination to face an actual life-or-death situation to learn their lesson. If not, their employer and companions will be affected," he said.

Even so, this is stipulated by the adventurers' guild as a requirement for their participation, and Project Shiana can't exist without them...

"That was my original intention, but Ardo said he wasn't willing to accept the possibility of even a single guild member dying, so we've been brainstorming like crazy trying to figure out a system to prevent any deaths, and we've also recruited Vel as a healer..." I tried to explain.

"You aren't at fault here, Nefertima. This is all on Ardo."

I was probably making an incredibly unattractive face. Uncle Phillip stroked my head reassuringly. I was full of convoluted, twisting emotions and wasn't

sure if I wanted to cry, get angry, or hide my face in shame.

“I’m the bad guy?” Ardo asked incredulously.

“You used to be an adventurer, so you should know better,” Uncle Phillip retorted.

“Yes, I *do* know just how terrifying—and precious—the choice between killing or being killed can be.” Ardo was wearing a kind expression that I’d never seen on his face before.

I understand how fighting to the death can be terrifying, but how is it “precious”? You know, the adventurers must have a strange way of viewing the world because, more often than not, I seem to be unable to understand a thing they say!

“Precious?” I asked.

“Receiving the gift of someone else losing their life so that you can survive. There is nothing more precious than that,” Ardo explained.

I see...

This wasn’t a world-changing revelation, but a dramatic wave of calm rolled over me as it sank in. Then tears began welling up and falling from my eyes.

Ardo seemed distressed to see me suddenly burst out crying because he quickly pulled out a handkerchief and offered it to me, a very gentlemanly gesture.

“Have I done something to upset you?” he asked gravely.

I shook my head emphatically and stutteringly forced out, “Ardo, you... You believe the lives of people, animals... and even monsters... are equally precious, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Somehow, I’d fallen into the biased thought process that human lives were more valuable than all others, and that must be why you were unwilling to let any of the adventurers die...” I said.

I’d unconsciously harbored prejudice within my own heart that human lives

were the most precious of all. But what Ardo was saying was that, to the adventurers, all lives sacrificed for their survival and the successful completion of their jobs were precious.

They respected the lives they took just as much as the loss of their own lives.

I wasn't sure if it was simply because values regarding "death" were different in this world or if it was something the adventurers inevitably picked up, but either way, it was critical. Even though I'd personally watched the kobolds get injured and die, I'd made the wrong choice.

When Ardo had insisted that no one could die, I *should've* replied that when the monsters' population increased too much, that would be the adventurers' time to shine. The monsters would be risking their lives and fighting to survive, so it was the least the adventurers could do to take the same risks.

I'd underestimated both the adventurers and the monsters.

I was so ashamed that it had taken me this long to realize it.

"You've lived a sheltered life among the humans, so I think it's inevitable you wouldn't know, Lady Nefertima," Ardo said considerately, speaking in a gentle and consoling tone. "However, all lives are equally valuable. It's as you say, Lady Nefertima. Attaching value to individual lives may be a weakness of mankind's. However, it's not necessarily a bad thing."

What you're saying seems to directly contradict itself, Ardo!

"Why?"

"Values differ from person to person. This is a highly personal and ambiguous thing. So, it's not up to me or anyone else to determine 'good' or 'bad.'"

Ardo had likely come to this conclusion over the course of his very long life.

Then why do I get the feeling that the whole topic has become excessively confusing and difficult?!

"Nefertima, you don't need to think so hard about this. All I'm saying is that each person should be allowed to choose for themselves how they will die," Uncle Phillip cut in.

"But what about those who are attacked by bad people?" I asked.

Having an unexpected accident or being attacked didn't exactly sound like "dying on one's own terms" to me...

"That's their own fault for being weak and failing to hire guards."

That's a little unreasonable, don't you think?!

...Hold on a minute. If the attacker is stronger, the victim will lose. If the victim is stronger, the attacker will lose.

Well, duh. That much is obvious. But isn't this the same as the natural philosophy of "the strong eat the weak"?

Hmmm?

Let me try to gather my thoughts.

I picked up a fallen stick and was about to sketch out my thoughts on the ground, but...

"There are so many leaves..." I groused.

Just when I felt frustrated about the leaves and weeds covering the ground, they were all swept aside, revealing a patch of bare dirt just the size I needed.

I looked around, trying to figure out who had clearly used magic to help me out, and spotted Ardo and Vel smiling secretively to themselves.

Based on the expressions on their faces, it must've been the elemental spirits.

The elemental spirits had been helping me more and more recently, but it also made me a little uneasy. I thanked them in my mind, tacking on that they didn't need to go out of their way for my benefit so much.

In any case, back to the topic at hand!

The humanoid races in this world included humans, beastpeople, elves, and demons. Below these were the monsters, and below them were animals. Or at least this was how I'd always pictured the food chain: as a pyramid.

In my past life, humans had been at the pinnacle of the food chain as well.

But through my conversations with Uncle Phillip, Ardo, and Sicily, I'd come to realize this wasn't correct.

Assuming plants were the base that supported all other forms of life, next came insects that fed on plants, then birds and other creatures that ate grains and insects, as well as other herbivorous animals, followed by carnivorous animals. Humans and monsters fit in the same category as the other carnivorous animals.

When I drew this as a diagram, it wasn't the typical triangular pyramid shape but more of a trapezoid.

"What are you drawing?"

"I'm trying to summarize what you've been saying about the monsters. The natural world sure has a lot of weak creatures that get eaten, whereas there are fewer strong creatures," I said.

When I tried to add information about food sources, it became even more complex.

Humans, goblins, and kobolds were all omnivores, but elves generally ate only fruits and vegetables. Sirens and some demon races consumed intangible things such as "the energy of living things" or "nature energy," and some monsters were strictly carnivores.

In terms of ability-based strength, demons were strong users of magic, elves could use elemental power, and beastpeople were blessed with physical strength, whereas humans were pretty feeble but had the advantage of numbers.

In short, none of the species stuck out more than the others.

But what would happen if this balance was somehow tipped?

For example, if the number of monsters dropped suddenly, as was happening currently...

First of all, the insects and animals that most of the monsters ate would start to increase. As a result, more plants would be consumed, and the available plant life would decrease. I could only imagine this would prove disastrous for the species that depended on plants for their diets.

What if it were humans that suddenly decreased?

A moderate change in population size wouldn't have much effect on the balance of nature, right? I doubted that changes in the elf or beastpeople population would have too much effect on the whole either, similarly to humans.

Which means monsters are... that!

Not "key animal," key... What do you call it?

That's right: "keystone species"!

Keystone species was a term that referred to a creature that had a large impact on the ecosystem; birds of prey like the Golden Eagle were famous examples.

Assuming monsters were a keystone species, if the number of monsters on the continent decreased significantly, it would likely spur a famine that would affect all corners of the continent...

"Has there ever been a famine on this continent?" I asked.

"Hey now, don't you know your history at all, young lady? A notorious famine is written about in all the history books," Uncle Phillip scolded, causing me to frantically search my memory.

Now that he mentions it, I think I remember hearing about one that occurred a very, very long time ago...

"It was during the Era of Turmoil, before the founding of the Kingdom of Gaché. Approximately 400 years ago, crops failed to grow on the continent, spurring a fierce struggle to secure adequate food. This led to war breaking out all over the continent, and the Kingdom of Gaché was also founded during this time," Ralf explained.

If it were 400 years ago, even Ardo wasn't born yet, right?

"Immediately preceding the famine, was there a sudden increase in the animal population?" I asked.

"I don't think there are any records of such things..." Ralf said.

"There *are* records of several animal species experiencing huge population booms around that time. It was written that the birth-control spell was used,

but, due to the human wars, the numbers decreased rapidly,” Vel interjected, sharing information Ralf had been unaware of.

“Do you know what the monsters’ situation was like at that time?” I inquired.

Vel thought for a minute before replying that it was right after the Great Monster Extermination, so their numbers were lower than ever.

That’s it! I think I remember hearing about the Great Monster Extermination!

One of the countries was attacked by ogres and suffered enormous casualties. In response, incensed humans and beastpeople slaughtered all the monsters they could find, determined to wipe them all out. In the end, the country that had been attacked by the ogres was ultimately absorbed into a neighboring country.

The number of monsters was decreasing again, so it was possible that the number of animals would increase like they had 400 years ago. The monsters had all been driven north, so it was very likely that things were already beginning to tip off-balance in the south.

Speaking of the south, I remember hearing about something happening recently...

Oh, that’s right!

“Does anyone know what’s happening in Icoux? What ever happened with the drought?!” I asked almost frantically now.

Last year, there had been a terrible drought in Icoux. If I remember correctly, our country had sent aid.

The citizens fled in droves and were living as refugees in the surrounding countries. Some beastpeople we’d met during the interviews for staff to work at Project Shiana were refugees from Icoux.

“Regarding Icoux, I heard that the Linus Empire dispatched a holy beast affiliated with water to lend assistance,” the guild master of the merchants’ guild offered.

“I heard it was a land tiger,” the guild master of the apothecaries’ guild added.

The guild masters each had bits and pieces of information, but there was no way of knowing what was true and what was merely rumor.

I wish Will and Lars were here at a time like this! Will seems to know everything about all of the other countries...

“What does Icoux have to do with anything?” Ardo asked. “Shall I ask the wind spirits about it?”

Oh, right, Ardo’s here! He’s on good terms with the wind spirits, too!

“Yes, please! I’d like to know what caused the drought in Icoux,” I said.

Ardo nodded, then whispered into what looked like nothing but thin air, “Please grant the beloved child’s request.”

A strong gust of wind blew at that moment, causing casualties to some of our group: several guild masters wiped their blurry eyes, trying to remove grains of sand that had accidentally been blown into them.

“It will take them a little while to gather the information, he informed me. “In the meantime, why don’t we continue on?”

That’s a good idea. It will be bad if my suspicions regarding the origin of Icoux’s drought are correct, but it won’t help anything to get worked up about it at this point.

“Are you okay, Nefertima?”

“Yeah, thanks to you, Uncle Phillip!”

Thanks to Uncle Phillip, I’d come to understand things more clearly.

First was the ecosystem of this world.

Thanks to the abundance of elemental power—God’s power that lingered in this world—it operated under a complex system. No wonder they called him “God.” For possibly the first time, I was actually impressed with this world’s god.

Next was the true objective of Runohark.

If my suspicions turned out to be true, Runohark might be actively trying to start a war. However, I was pretty sure that only someone very knowledgeable

about God and the ecosystem of the world would ever conceive of this plan.

I can't say anything for sure without further investigation, though.

"You hear that, Ralf? *Thanks to me!*" Uncle Phillip bragged.

"How nice. Although Neema could've gotten the same answers from anyone else if you weren't here, Uncle Phillip," Ralf retorted.

Huh? No, only someone very familiar with the adventurers could've taken the conversation in this direction. But they seem to be having fun bantering with one another, so I'll leave them to it.

"But I'm glad it turned out that we're better off not using the birth control spell after all," Vel said, sounding relieved.

"Why?"

"Because the monsters will be able to remain in their natural state, as God intended."

She's got a good point. Although I suspect the fact that a birth control spell exists means that God recognizes there's a need for it in certain situations. Probably to protect the balance of nature.

I'd inadvertently drawn the entire group to a halt while we'd been having this conversation, but once the decision to carry on with the tour was made, Healran began leading us through the forest once more.

"Miss," Shinki called out, causing me to pause. Then, something plopped down on top of my head.

"Mew!"

I know this voice!

"Haku?!"

I'd told Haku and Gratia to stay behind in my room today for their safety because adventurers were joining us on the tour.

If Haku was here, that must mean Gratia was here somewhere, too!

"Gratia!" I snatched Haku off of my head and shouted for Gratia.

In response, Gratia crawled out from his hiding spot inside Shinki's clothes.

The two of them concealed themselves on Shinki without me noticing?!

"I said not to come because it's dangerous!" I pouted.

"They were worried because you seemed worn out, miss. Their presence always soothes you, doesn't it?" Shinki explained.

Ugh... I can't deny that since Nox has been gone, they've become a security blanket for me... I indulged myself in enjoying Haku's soft and squishy texture while I thought about what to do with the two of them.

"Fine, you can stay. But you both have to promise not to go anywhere near the adventurers, got it?!"

I don't want any adventurers to get surprised and accidentally attack Haku or Gratia!

Agreeing to my terms, Haku let out a satisfied "Mew!" and Gratia did his usual mysterious dance, perched on Shinki's shoulder.

Do they really understand, or are they just agreeing so I'll let them stay?!

9 - Time Flies When You're Having Fun

I thought about this world as we made our way to the kobolds' territory.

Some things were similar to Earth, but many more were completely different.

What was the function of humans in a world like this?

In the first place, why were humans even necessary in this world?

I have a feeling the world would probably function just as well if there were only elves, beastpeople, and demons... It doesn't need to go as deep as the "origin of the species" or anything, but I wonder how humans came to be. There must be some kind of myth about it, right?

"Ralf, how did God create humans?" I asked.

In response to my question, Ralf began with the disclaimer that no one knows for sure before launching into an explanation.

"This world was full of plants and animals. The holy beasts and elemental spirits watched over all of this. But looking at the world he'd made, the God of Creation felt lonely. For this reason, he created beings in his own image to live in this world. That was the beginning of the humanoid species."

I mean, I am glad that he created humans, but... I guess it's similar to the prevailing belief on Earth that God created humans by modeling them after himself. But then, why did he make so many humanoid species?

...It couldn't be that humans were a faulty model or something, right?

Shinki had said that goblins were a defective version of humans and that all monsters were defective versions of something else. Humans and beastpeople were fairly well made, but by my guess, the elves and demons were the most successful of God's humanoid creations.

...Based on what I know about God, I wouldn't be surprised. I wonder if there's some way to hear the explanation directly from God. If I call out to him with all my might, maybe he'll come to me in a dream?

But if that were possible, he'd probably already have appeared to me. Probably to mess with me some more. Hmm, maybe the only way to speak to God is to go to one of the Church of Divine Creation's churches? I might just go, expecting the worst but hoping for the best. Come down and speak to me, please, God!

"But, whatever the reason, it doesn't change the fact that the God of Creation was the one who made this world," Ralf said. "Surely the God of Creation's divine plan led you to meet Shinki and Sol as well, Neema."

When I'd explained what I'd learned from Will about beloved children to my family, they'd all reacted as if they'd been expecting this. Ralf believed that God was leading my way because I was a beloved child, but I still suspected he was mostly just playing around with me for his own entertainment.

I was still pondering all those unanswered questions when we reached the kobolds' territory. Sicily came out to greet us, but the adventurers all tensed the moment they spotted her.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch! What? Have you never seen a werewolf before or something?" Uncle Phillip scolded, thumping one of the young adventurers on the back.

Somehow, that succeeded in lightening the mood considerably.

I was impressed with Uncle Phillip's charisma level.

Uncle Phillip also somehow seamlessly usurped the role of tour guide from Healran. With him leading the way, we made our way around to view the areas where each family had set up their workplaces.

The Green Family's fields had gotten massive since the last time I saw them, and the Carpenter Family had amassed a mountain of timber.

The Furnace Family had finished building a fabulous smithy for themselves. It was just as nice as the one Shinki had previously created for them.

The Weaver Family and the Knitter Family had chosen to construct a joint workshop, complete with a loom that they said the Carpenter Family had built for them.

All of the guild masters seemed deeply interested in the kobold village, where the kobolds had built a life for themselves that was not so different from that of humans.

As fellow craftsmen, the guild masters asked the family leaders various questions.

Huh?! Am I just imagining things, or is the guild master of the merchants' guild hitting on the family leaders of the Weaver Family and the Knitter Family?! I mean, I can understand why he would feel amorous towards them after seeing those alluring chests covered in all that soft and fluffy fur, but still!

As I watched, he continued to try valiantly to speak with them.

The two female kobolds, one Collie and one Border Collie, both looked undeniably troubled.

Should I butt in?

"...What do you say?"

"That's quite the proposition, but..."

Aaaaall right, time to jump in!

"What's going on?" I asked, stepping up.

"Lady Neema!"

The two female kobolds looked relieved to see me.

"The adornments these ladies are wearing are simple but cute, so I was asking if they would allow me to purchase them to resell." As the guild master of the merchants' guild explained the situation, I examined the accessories in question.

The two kobolds had woven accessories made of acorns, berries, and leaves into the fur covering their chests. They weren't dazzlingly gaudy, but the natural hues of the accessories suited the colors of the Collies' fur. The way the bead-like red and yellow berries swayed with the kobolds' movements *was* very cute.

"You're right, they *are* really cute!" I agreed.

"We make these simple trinkets just for fun in our spare time when we've

finished all our other work, so we were trying to explain that we couldn't possibly make them to be sold, but..."

But the guild master of the merchants' guild wouldn't take no for an answer, right?

The Weaver Family and Knitter Family made ropes out of natural plant fibers and thread from the fur of animals, hunted for food, and created fabric and textile products. The items they made supported the livelihoods of all the kobolds.

"These types of handmade goods are all the rage among the common citizens these days," the guild master insisted.

Hmm... I feel like these kinds of handmade goods were popular in Japan, too. They always looked so simple to make yourself, but whenever you'd try it, it would never turn out right, and you'd always end up just buying one and calling it a day...

"Are you saying you're going to attempt to sell people something they could just as easily make for themselves?" I asked.

The guild master of the merchants' guild beamed. "You certainly have a merchant's sense, Lady Nefertima!"

That's supposed to be a compliment, right? It would be beneficial for the kobolds to have a form of cash income, but problematic if making handicrafts to sell interfered with their main jobs...

"As long as it doesn't interfere with the family leaders' actual jobs, I suppose it's fine, but..."

"We can supply the materials, so they'll be able to continue making the accessories in their free time," the guild master offered.

"If the kobolds make the accessories with materials provided by the merchants' guild, the material fee and the cost of labor will eat into the profit from selling the finished product... Won't that drive up the price?"

When I asked about this, the guild master answered he would hire adventurers to gather the materials. If they had the adventurers gather a large

amount of materials at once, they would only need to pay for the adventurers one time. Since it was a simple job, the fee wouldn't be high.

And if the materials were provided, the fee they would need to pay the kobolds to assemble the accessories would also be lower than if they needed to gather their own materials.

In short, the cost to produce the accessories wouldn't be terribly high.

...I guess that's how this world works, huh?

"Can we discuss it with Sicily before agreeing to anything?" I asked.

"Of course!" the guild master agreed.

Everyone seems to be negotiating with the kobolds, so I'd better catch Sicily now while I can.

"Thank you, Lady Neema."

"We weren't sure how to respond to his request..."

The two Collies had their ears flattened against their heads, looking dejected.

"It's okay! I'm just glad to see that others appreciate your skills!"

The two of them smiled happily when I said that. Their ears perked up, and their tails began to wag.

Ahhhh! They're so gosh-darn cuuuute! It's enough to make you want to rub the tops of their heads vigorously!

"What's going on?" Sicily called out, watching us with a wry smile on her face.

We explained the situation to Sicily, and she understood right away how this had come about.

"The items Yuena and Taona make really are incredible," she said.

The Collies' names are Yuena and Taona? I don't know who is who, though...

"However, I don't think we have any need for human money."

"You might not need for it now, but I have a feeling that as long as you are interacting with humans, you'll need it for something or other in the future," I said.

“I guess you’d know better than me,” Sicily allowed dubiously.

They could ask Healran or Phillip to purchase anything they might want for them on their behalf. And if they saved up, they’d have a nice little nest egg tucked away just in case something came up. It never hurts to have some money stashed away for a rainy day.

Sicily finally gave her approval, saying, “Sure, why not?”

And so, it was decided that they would try making one batch of accessories as a trial run.

When we delivered the news to the guild master of the merchants’ guild, he was overjoyed.

The plan was for the merchants’ guild to deliver the supplies once they were gathered, so I explained the situation to Ralf, and he agreed to grant them a letter of permission that would allow the bearer to pass through the barrier. This way, they could deliver the materials to the kobolds and come to pick up the finished accessories.

Just as we settled that matter, a loud commotion of raised voices could be heard from the large central clearing.

I whipped around to see what was going on, only to find the adventurers who were supposed to be guarding the guild masters fighting with kobolds from the hunting families!

“What are they doing?!” I hurried forward to stop the fighting, but Uncle Phillip reached out and physically held me back.

“There’s nothing to worry about; just watch,” he said.

Just watch them rip each other to shreds?!

The kobolds fighting the adventurers were all younger kobolds who’d only recently evolved into high kobolds. Many had lost family members to humans, and some likely bore grudges as a result.

The kobold from the Fighter Family was armed with spiked brass knuckles that made a *WHOOSHING* noise as they cut through the air, aiming for their opponents.

The attacks of the spear-wielding Siberian Husky kobold and the Boxer kobold armed with shields were very well coordinated.

However, the kobolds from the Strength Family and Insight Family were attacking the most fiercely.

The kobolds were merciless and determined, but the adventurers had the upper hand in terms of skill. They read their opponents' attacks, effectively dodging and negating them.

Even so, the kobolds didn't give up.

But the very next moment, the kobold from the Insight Family went flying.

Then, the adventurers pressed forward, taking advantage of the kobold from the Strength Family momentarily freezing in fear. With their dominant arm numb from being struck by the adventurers, they involuntarily dropped their sword.

The kobold from the Fighter Family also seemed to have been bested because they collapsed on the ground.

"Enough!" one of the men from Purple Gandal shouted, calling a stop to the fight, and the adventurers immediately began tending to the kobolds' injuries.

"See? I told you it would be fine, right?"

You are absolutely shameless, Uncle Phillip!

"That was dangerous!" I huffed.

"Neema, they all accepted the danger the moment they took up their weapons. But fighting together was the quickest and surest way to draw them closer as friends, more than any words they could've exchanged."

I understand what Uncle Phillip is saying, but he does realize this makes them all seem like dimwitted meatheads, right? I guess it makes sense for the kobolds, given the nature of their culture, but...

All the wounded kobolds were quickly patched up with healing magic, and in the end, there were no major injuries.

The adventurers seemed relaxed and praised the kobolds' raw skill and gave

advice about what they should've done differently during the fight. For their part, the kobolds recognized the adventurers as the superior fighters and earnestly listened to their advice.

"The way things are going, there might end up being more adventurers who make their base here," Uncle Phillip observed.

That would benefit us, so I'd be thrilled if his prediction came to pass. If there were good adventurers around, public safety in the area would improve as well.

Whenever trouble involving other adventurers occurred, the adventurers who made their base in that location would step in to handle it before the knighthood had to get involved.

And if they were adventurers capable enough that they'd been chosen as personal security for the guild masters of all the major guilds, it wasn't likely many other adventurers would dare cross them.

However, although I wasn't surprised about Uncle Phillip and his party, it was a bit of a stretch to think that many other adventurers would like it here so much that they wanted to set up their base here.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's not that hard to believe there would be other adventurers like us, is it?" Uncle Phillip replied. "Surely others also want to make friends with the monsters."

There might be, but...

"Even though they're normally enemies?"

"Well, there is that, but... I guess it's something that people who can only see things from one perspective will never really understand."

I don't really understand, either. I guess it's a case of "yesterday's enemy is today's friend"?

"We *can* say for certain that this isn't a bad thing for you, though, Neema."

If Uncle Phillip said so, maybe it was true.

I was happy to see the number of adventurers who wanted to befriend

monsters increase, but wouldn't they fight with the adventurers who believed that all monsters should be indiscriminately exterminated?

I muttered that I was nervous about the whole situation, and Uncle Phillip hugged me.

"Leave that to me!"

I felt slightly more confident after seeing the look of determination on Uncle Phillip's face when I heard Ardo let out an impressed mutter off to the side.

"Incredible. This really looks like the perfect opportunity for young adventurers to get quality hands-on training." Ardo was wearing a rare, brilliant smile and seemed more than satisfied with the kobolds' skill level.

That smile is slightly alarming... I wonder what exactly he's thinking. Maybe I'm better off not knowing.

Healran called out that it was about time to head back, and our entire group set off on the trek back to Zigg Village.

On the way back, Ardo announced that the elemental spirits had returned, so we all listened to him relay their report. According to the elemental spirits, the situation in Icoux was even more dire than expected.

I'd only heard of a terrible drought, but according to the elemental spirits, a blight, where no crops would grow and the fields were dry and barren, had preceded the drought. Not only that, but in some areas, it *did* rain. So much so that great floods devastated the land.

I suspected this was because the trees in the mountains had dried up and died and were no longer absorbing the rainwater, causing flooding. Because there was no plant life, the animals were dying off in droves, making food increasingly scarce.

Currently, using the power of the holy beast sent from the Linus Empire, plants were growing in only a very small area.

"How did this happen...?" I asked.

"The elemental spirits are saying that humans threw off the balance of nature," Ardo relayed.

Is the “balance of nature” the elemental spirits are talking about the same as the ecosystem?

“Could it be that this is extending into other countries as well?”

“So it seems. The elemental spirits say that the surrounding small countries are in much the same state as Icoux.”

In short, if we don’t find a way to stop this, there’s a high possibility it will spread until all corners of the continent are affected.

There were no signs of such a thing at the moment, but if the affected countries started invading other countries in their desperation, it would likely end up as the great famine long ago had: continental war.

The Mieuxga Province shared a border with Icoux. It was likely that they’d already begun suffering effects that I was simply unaware of.

“How can we fix this?” I asked.

“The elemental spirits say... By returning things to the way God intended them.”

It’s not that easy! What do you want me to do? Send our monsters over there?! Wait... Send in monsters...?

That’s it!

We can send monsters to the border between the Mieuxga Province and Icoux and let them propagate there! “As God intended” refers to the original state of things, where monsters lived in those areas naturally, right?

It actually is that simple!

Even if we sent monsters in, it wouldn’t make much difference if there were no mountains or forests for them to live in. We could set the monsters loose on a mountain near the border that still wasn’t too affected, protecting the ecosystem there, and then slowly work outwards, reclaiming territory...

No, actually, if we’ve got the help of an earth tiger from the Linus Empire, maybe it would be better for them to focus on revitalizing the land in a fixed area first?

I was nodding to myself, convinced this was the best course of action when Ralf suggested we should discuss this with Papa before anything else. He had a good point, so I decided to have Ralf write Papa a letter as soon as we got back to Zigg Village. I also had Ardo ask the elemental spirits to keep us informed on the situation in Icoux.

Elemental spirits, I'm so sorry for always using you like my personal servants!



THE next day, we toured the construction site where the inn was being built.

As we approached, we saw that the frame was already taking shape.

Burly men carried lumber on their shoulders and hefted giant stones without the assistance of a single lick of magic. From what I'd heard, Uncle Phillip had led the researchers from the Royal Magical Research Center on a tour of the hot springs cave.

I'd been wondering how they planned to pipe the hot water all the way to the foot of the mountain, but they would make use of Elder Salzar's new and improved teleportation circles.

According to Ralf, this would rely on a technology termed Continuous One-Directional Teleportation, but no matter how much he explained the process, it went right over my head, so that was about all I could say about that topic.

I never realized there were so many different types of magic circles.

The main building was being built at the base of the mountain, almost eating into the mountainside. Right beside it, another building would house the teleportation circle. That was almost completed.

As the guild master of the carpenters' guild droned on, explaining various things to the group, we came to where the bathing facilities would be built on the second floor.

The mountainside of the building would be dominated by large glass windows, providing a stunning view of the natural scenery, which would be visible from the large bathing pools.

There weren't any tubs yet, but rows of showers were powered by magical

items. The showers looked an awful lot like vintage telephone receivers to me, but since no one else would get the reference, I kept it to myself. People would look at me like I'd grown a second head if I mentioned a "telephone receiver."

The water from the hot spring would be transported to a massive water tank on the premises, then pumped to all of the bathing facilities using magical pumps.

The wastewater from the bathing facilities would be returned to a separate water tank, where it would undergo a stringent process of magical water purification, and then it could be used as a clean water source for the inn and other buildings.

The researchers from the Royal Magical Research Center conducted experiments and confirmed that the water-purification spell removed all the minerals and other elements from the hot spring water. For this reason, they'd decided to rely exclusively on mechanical filters to remove impurities in the water sent to the hot spring water tank.

Hmm, there sure is a lot of magic hard at work behind the scenes!

I asked the guild master of the carpenters' guild about something that had been niggling at me.

"Are you planning to build something over there?"

"No, that's where we'll install pillars to support the weight of the building."

Outside the glass windows, a short distance away, I could see an open, unutilized space where I'd assumed they must've been planning to build a terrace.

What a waste!

"What if you created a relaxation area out there?" I suggested.

"A relaxation area?"

"You could set up tables and chairs so people could gather to talk, drink, and just have fun and relax together," I explained.

"That sounds interesting!"

The guild master of the carpenters' guild quickly pulled out the blueprints and started drawing something into the dead space that extended from the second floor up.

They would also create glass-walled sunrooms on the floors containing the guest rooms, where adventurers could get together and hang out.

Another thing I wanted them to take special care in deciding was the material the bathing pools would be made from. Wooden baths would have a warm and rustic feel, whereas stone would feel more luxurious. I wanted to draw attention to the unique “flavor” of each material. Personally, I was partial to wood. I'd always loved the individual-sized wooden barrel-type baths in public bathhouses in Japan.

I droned on about all of this to the guild master of the carpenters' guild to such an extent that he expressed surprise at how much I cared about such small details. He seemed a bit taken aback, but that was fine with me as long as he understood how passionately I felt about this! In the end, he promised to search for wooden bathtubs.

Then, I talked with Iannel, the guild master of the innkeepers' guild, about customer service standards.

I wanted them to *not* provide excessively over-attentive service but to be approachable and friendly so that the guests wouldn't hesitate to reach out to staff if they needed something. I wanted the adventurers to truly relax, not be like they were standing at attention in a fancy hotel. Thankfully, Iannel was on the same page, and we chatted together for several minutes about the kind of service we had in mind.

The others all seemed incredulous, but they were pretending not to look.

And so, while watching things slowly start to take shape, I spent the days of the observation trip playing outside to my heart's content.

That was until a heartless order arrived...

No matter how much I cried and protested, it was useless.

This was the real reason Paul came along, wasn't it?!

10 - There's No Place for Personal Feelings in National Politics!

PAPA had sent orders for me to return home immediately.

I'd been having the time of my life, so I cried to Ralf and begged him not to make me go, but it proved futile. Papa had seen right through me and known I'd throw a tantrum and weasel out of going home because he'd issued an executive order to Paul to drag me back. Since it was an official order, neither Ralf nor Paul could disobey.

I wanted to play with all my friends on the mountain some more!

I sulked the entire way home, but Paul was used to dealing with me in this state by now. He told me I could let Haku and Gratia out to play inside the carriage and even prepared snacks for them.

When we arrived home, my favorite treats were served along with the tea. It was hard to stay angry in the face of such excellent service.

I was enjoying my snack when Mama swept into the room.

"I know you've only just returned, but we need to go to the royal palace."

They dragged me home on Papa's orders, and now I'm being carted off to the royal palace with hardly a moment to rest and catch my breath?!

With Mama hurrying me along, I changed my clothes and was stuffed back into the carriage.

"Why are we going to the royal palace?" I asked.

"There's going to be a meeting with His Majesty and the cabinet members."

And what does that have to do with me? I'm assuming it's related to the imbalance in the natural world, but... I guess the letter Ralf wrote for me wasn't clear enough?

"I suspect they'll have a lot of questions for you, but you just answer as you

feel fit.”

“Okay!”

If Mama’s giving me permission, I’ll do just that and answer as I feel fit!



ONCE we arrived at the royal palace, we were led to a room I’d never been in before.

It was neither too large nor too small and contained nothing but a table and chairs. Ten chairs were set up around the table, so I assumed that was how many people they were expecting for the meeting. One of the chairs was different from all the others—it was child-sized. Clearly, this was where I was meant to sit.

Mama didn’t sit down, so I followed her lead and remained standing.

I was zoning out a bit, waiting for something to happen, when Auntie Olive and Uncle Sanrus arrived.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Cerulia, Neema,” Auntie Olive apologized lightly.

“Hey, Neema. It hasn’t been that long since I last saw you, and you’ve already gotten bigger again!” Uncle Sanrus remarked.

Um... When did I last see Uncle Sanrus, again? I visited the royal palace frequently but rarely got to see him.

“I’m a growing girl!”

“That’s certainly true. I’m sure you’ll grow into a great beauty someday.”

I wouldn’t count on that if I were you.

If I’d looked like either Papa or Mama, it would’ve been a safe bet to assume I’d grow up to be a beauty, but... considering I was said to take after my great-grandfather, who knew what I’d look like when I grew up?

Papa was the next to enter.

“Welcome home, Neema.”

“Father!”

Time to make you take responsibility for cheering me up after having me forcibly dragged home!

I leapt into my father's arms and began pulling on his cheeks, distorting his face into an amusing shape.

"Neema!"

Unfortunately, I was immediately forced to stop by the frigid aura rolling off Mama in waves.



“That hurts, Neema!” Papa protested weakly.

“I wanted to play with my friends longer...” I pouted.

Papa apologized, so I had to forgive him.

“I see you’re also powerless against Neema, eh, Dayle?” a familiar but unexpected voice rang out behind Papa.

“Uncle Gene!”

As the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uncle Gene was always traveling from country to country, and I’d only met him a handful of times in my life. If I remember correctly, it had been about a year since I’d last seen him.

“I brought you home a souvenir of my travels, Neema. I’ll send it over to your house later, okay?”

I guess I’ll have to wait until it arrives to find out where it’s from.

Everyone was chatting casually, updating one another on recent goings-on in their lives when King Gauldi’s chamberlain appeared and announced the arrival of the king. Everyone in the room sank into deep bows and curtsies, paying homage as we waited for the king.

“Be at ease.”

I raised my head to find that not only the king but the queen, Will, and Lars had all joined us. At the king’s urging, we all took our seats. I was peeved to find Will sitting next to me.

“The reason I’ve asked you all to gather here today is in regard to the mysterious group we’ve named Runohark,” King Gauldi announced.

Next, Papa took over.

“We’ve squashed several of their bases but were unable to gather any information about the person or persons at the heart of the organization.”

They squashed them like a bug?! How fitting!

“All of the individuals we captured had two things in common: they were human and were followers of the Church of Divine Creation.”

I understand the importance of identifying common factors, but isn't that a bit too broad? I think it would be more difficult to find humans who don't follow the beliefs of the Church of Divine Creation!

"If that's all, it could very well be a coincidence," Auntie Olive pointed out. I found myself agreeing with her. It left me wanting something more specific.

"Furthermore, we're currently working on figuring out what their objective is and what the group's ideals are," Papa continued.

It might be bad to say so, but from the government's perspective, Runohark was basically a terrorist group. I was well aware from Earth's history how dangerous it could be if religion became involved with groups like that.

"Neema has a hypothesis regarding their objective. Would you please explain it to everyone, Neema?" Papa said, turning to me.

You're handing the floor to me?! I've thought it over a lot since the idea first came to me, but will I be able to coherently explain my thoughts to everyone on the spot like this?

"Currently, we know that Runohark is driving all of the monsters north," I began. Then, I explained what might very well occur as a result, laying everything out in order as logically as possible.

First, there was the question of "Why Icoux?" Followed closely by "Did it really even start with Icoux?" After all, the Linus Empire was located at the far southern edge of the continent, even further south than Icoux.

I suspected the Linus Empire was as-to-yet unaffected due to the presence of a holy beast there. I figured that with a holy beast using elemental power to keep an eye on things, it would be hard for any sizable group to get away with causing trouble. I also suspected that the trouble actually originated in the Alliance of Nations, a group of several smaller countries sandwiched between Icoux and the Linus Empire.

Each of those countries was small in terms of territory and population size but worked together to protect their independence and develop their cultures and economies. In theory, it was an arrangement similar to the European Union.

All of the monsters had been driven out, first from these countries, then from

Icoux, and now they had begun to spread into the Kingdom of Gaché as well. Shinki had said it had been impossible to turn south, but some monsters may have escaped into the Linus Empire at the very beginning.

In short, we could expect to see the ecosystem thrown off balance in two distinct patterns, cutting horizontally across the continent. On one hand, there were areas without any monsters, and on the other, there were areas with a sudden increase in monsters.

In either case, the result would be pretty much the same.

If there weren't any monsters, the animals would increase and eat all the plants.

If there were too many monsters, the animals would be eaten, and plants would be eaten by the resulting increase in insects. There might even be some areas that experienced unusual overgrowth in plant life, but these were the exception.

In either case, if there weren't any plants, the entire structure of the food chain that depended on plants would fail. People would become desperate for food, and war would break out. Countries would invade other countries in an attempt to feed their own.

There was already a historic example of this occurring on a large scale here in Larshia 400 years ago, after all.

"In summary, you think Runohark's objective is to cause a war?" The king's face was taut with concern. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look so troubled.

"Your Majesty, if I might interject?"

I was surprised to hear Queen Relena speak up since she tended to stay out of politics, but it made sense when I considered we were discussing the situation in the Linus Empire. Queen Relena was originally an imperial princess of the Linus Empire, after all; her father was the previous emperor.

"Deeply concerned about the current state of things in Icoux, my parents dispatched their bonded holy beasts, Sache and Kaideetay, to provide aid."

I knew the Linus Empire had a tradition of only allowing someone bonded with a holy beast to become emperor, but I hadn't realized that Queen Relena's mother was also bonded with one.

"Unfortunately, even with the holy beasts' power, it seems they've only been able to make plants grow in a very limited area," Queen Relena concluded sadly.

This is probably due to the imbalance the elemental spirits mentioned. But why haven't the elemental spirits done anything to the people responsible for destroying the balance of nature?

"Lars, why didn't the elemental spirits punish Runohark?" I asked.

"Growl."

"The perpetrators could claim they were merely protecting their territory by chasing the monsters out. The elemental spirits say it's not their place to get involved in territorial disputes," Will translated.

Looking at it as individual incidents, it could easily be taken as a natural struggle for survival. If I remember correctly, Shinki had also said that the elemental spirits didn't interfere in such things.

So that's why they declined when we asked them to protect the kobolds? But Shinki asked the elemental spirits to lead the goblins through the forest to the cave, and they did...

Ugh, I really don't get it!

"But why would the absence of monsters lead to a famine?" Auntie Olive asked, perplexed. I could tell she was having a hard time understanding how the balance of nature affected an ecosystem.

I asked Mama for a piece of paper so I could draw a diagram and began mapping out a depiction of the food chain.

"At the bottom are plants, and above that are animals that eat plants," I explained.

Above those, I drew in carnivorous animals, and finally, at the top were monsters. This was the ecosystem of a mountain or forest.

“There aren’t any humans,” Auntie Olive remarked.

She was right; there weren’t any humans in this ecosystem.

Above the first triangle, I drew a second, upside-down triangle.

In this triangle, humans were in the largest slot at the top, followed by beastpeople, demons, and elves. Up to this point, the different species were ranked from largest to smallest by population size.

Then, at the bottom of the upside-down triangle, at the very tip, I wrote, “monsters.”

When the “monster” section at the bottom of the upside-down triangle met the one at the top of the ecosystem’s pyramid, it formed an hourglass shape.

Looking at this diagram made me reconsider the fundamental structure of this world.

On Earth, humans supposedly evolved from animals, so they were a part of the ecosystem. In this world, however, humans were created as-is by God. They weren’t the product of evolution. In that case, I concluded that they didn’t fit into the bottom triangle.

And if monsters were the keystone species of the ecosystem, I hypothesized that they were probably also the connection between the ecosystem and all of the humanoid species.

Furthermore, another difference between the triangle and the upside-down triangle was how each species thought about God.

The monsters knew that God existed, but they didn’t worship him. They believed that eating or being eaten, living or dying, were all ultimately their own responsibility and something they determined for themselves.

I was certain that animals and plants didn’t even understand the concept of “God.”

As for the upside-down triangle, all species listed there, other than monsters, worshiped God. They interacted with God’s power via holy beasts and elemental spirits and depended on him for healing magic and the prophecies of oracles.

From God's perspective, he was probably fine with this. If he really did make all these species because he was lonely, his act of creation would've been pointless if they didn't believe he existed, after all.

In short, the result of God's actions was an extremely intricate ecosystem.

...You really are the root of all this!

I decided to save beating God over the head with my righteous fury for a later date and, for the time being, inquired whether any effects were being reported in the Mieuxga Province and the Dierta Province.

"In my province, towns and villages close to the national border are reporting higher rates of crops being eaten by insects than in previous years," Uncle Sanrus answered, presenting a small stack of documents he'd brought with him.

The documents listed the production rate of crops and losses due to natural disasters, etc., going back several years. There was a distinct shift, starting approximately a year ago, where damages had begun rising and production falling.

In particular, I noticed with interest in the detailed breakdown of losses one year ago that damages due to monsters had increased significantly. This must've been around the time the monsters were being driven along the national border.

"In my province, we lost a lot of livestock to monsters. From what I heard, it got so bad that they had to call in the royal knighthood when the ogres appeared," Uncle Gene said, pulling out the same types of documents as Uncle Sanrus. I assumed these had been prepared by his father, who still served as provincial lord.

Among the cabinet members, Uncle Gene was the only one who wasn't also a provincial lord. Not only because of his job as Minister of Foreign Affairs but also as a personal hobby, Uncle Gene was always traveling around and, more often than not, wasn't even in the country. For this reason, his father felt that he couldn't put the role of provincial lord on his son and was carrying on past the age he might otherwise have retired. Although everyone around Uncle Gene was always nagging him to hurry up and take over the role, Uncle Gene, perhaps out of an unusual form of filial piety, always insisted that his father

truly enjoyed his work as provincial lord, so he was in no hurry to usurp the title—and all the responsibility that came with it—from him.

In any case, it seemed that the imbalance wasn't affecting the Kingdom of Gaché too badly so far.

"Could we create a place like Mount Reitimo close to the border?" I suggested.

We wouldn't need to erect a barrier; just prohibit humans from entering the area, and the surrounding ecosystem should stabilize.

"We probably could, but there's a high likelihood that Runohark would just drive the monsters out again," Uncle Gene replied.

"That's true... Then I guess we do need a barrier, after all?"

"Furthermore, the monsters you bring there would need some kind of cohesive leadership. For that, you'd need to take even more new monsters under your jurisdiction, Neema," Uncle Sanrus said, startling me.

You want me to grow my monster army even more?! I already have slimes, goblins, sirens, and frost spiders bound to me!

"God's beloved child, becoming the Queen of Monsters? Now, that certainly sounds interesting."

Not you, too, King Gauldi?!

"To sum it up, we need to maintain a certain number of monsters, right? In that case, why don't we designate a specified timeframe during which it's prohibited to kill any monsters?" Auntie Olive proposed, rescuing the conversation before it could head further down a dangerous path.

Thank you, Auntie Olive!

"But what about monsters that harm humans?" Papa asked, pointing out an obvious issue with Auntie Olive's proposal.

"We can just drive them off into the forest or the deep mountains. If we hired adventurers to deal with the problematic monsters, they'd probably just kill them, so most of the burden will fall on the knighthood, but..."

“If that’s the case, this isn’t something we can decide on our own,” Papa concluded.

He’s right. The leader of the Royal Knighthood, Grandpa Gouche, isn’t here right now.

That was an intentional decision to preserve the clear division between governmental and military powers. Grandpa Gouche couldn’t get involved in politics, but we also couldn’t make decisions on matters such as war and public safety that involved the knighthood without him. The knighthood existed to serve the people, so when it came to making political decisions that threatened the safety of the citizens, the king and the general had to agree.

“I suppose we’ve got no other choice. Summon Gouche,” King Gauldi proclaimed.

At the king’s order, the chamberlain, who’d been waiting unobtrusively off to the side of the room, bowed once and withdrew.

Knowing Grandpa Gouche, he was probably hard at work at the training grounds in the royal palace. Until he arrived, I took advantage of the opportunity to ask a few questions I’d been wondering about.

“Are the Linus Empire taking any actions against Runohark?”

Even with the power of holy beasts, I wonder what they’re doing about the influx of monsters fleeing there?

“From what I’ve heard, there’s no evidence of any group resembling Runohark operating inside the Linus Empire. However, monster sightings have been increasing for some time, so I heard that the country carried out a large-scale extermination.”

The Linus Empire’s military was said to be the largest on the continent of Larshia. There was no doubt that the extermination had been thorough and merciless.

Due to that, the ecosystem may have avoided being imbalanced by an excess of monsters, but... it gave rise to the possibility that the scales might’ve been tipped too far in the other direction from overhunting.

But Queen Relena hadn't mentioned any problems with agriculture failing in the Linus Empire, so maybe there was nothing to worry about? Although, even if their crops were growing normally, the Linus Empire's harvests wouldn't be sufficient if they also had to support the other affected countries in addition to feeding their own citizens.

"I have asked His Majesty to look into Runohark, so please wait a little longer for the result," Queen Relena said almost apologetically.

Huh? By "His Majesty," she's not referring to King Gauldi, right? Does this mean the emperor of the Linus Empire is working on this, too? That certainly escalates the scale of things considerably!

"Of course. By the way, are the holy beasts that went to Icoux water-attributed?" I asked.

"Yes, my father, the retired emperor's bonded holy beast, Sache is. My mother, the retired empress's bonded holy beast, Kaideetay, is an earth tiger."

There really is an earth tiger! Earth tigers are the complementary species to sky tigers like Lars, right? I want to meet one!

"Why don't you join us on our next family trip to the Linus Empire so you can meet them?" Queen Relena suggested with a coy smile, clearly picking up on how excited I was.

"Lady Relena, please don't encourage her," Mama said, putting a halt to the queen's fun before I could *very enthusiastically* accept her offer.

"Aww..." the queen said, feigning disappointment.

She doesn't look all that disappointed. What's really going on here?

"Neema, please be a bit more aware of your position as a highly ranked noblewoman. Now that it's been determined that you are also a beloved child, it puts you in danger of being coveted by both our own *dearly beloved and deeply respected* monarchs, as well as those of other countries," Mama said tightly.

Is it okay to say something critical of "our dearly beloved and deeply respected monarchs" right in front of them?

Wait a minute; when she invited me to join them, Queen Relena wasn't suggesting I join the family trip as Will's fiancée or something, was she?!

That's terrifying!

And the way Mama put it, it sounds like I'd also be in danger of being recruited as a potential bride for one of the royals or highly ranked nobles in the Linus Empire if I wasn't careful?!

Nope, nope, nope! No, thank you! Absolutely not! I much prefer the idea of being Queen of Monsters, thank you very much!

Just then, Grandpa Gouche bounded into the room, oblivious to the tense atmosphere.

I've never been so grateful to see Grandpa Gouche! Thanks for bursting in and clearing the awkwardness away!

"Gouche Zelnan, reporting as Your Majesty ordered!" Grandpa Gouche announced boisterously, bowing deeply in homage to the king.

"Be at ease, Gouche," King Gauldi said, sounding almost amused at Grandpa Gouche's antics.

Somehow, Grandpa Gouche's entrance made the room feel much smaller. Maybe it was just my imagination, but it also seemed as if the temperature in the room had risen abruptly.

We explained the circumstances that led to the proposal of issuing a decree that monsters not be killed for a specified period of time, and Grandpa Gouche agreed to the plan surprisingly easily.

"It'll be a good training opportunity for the knights," Grandpa Gouche remarked.

"Training?" I asked, confused.

"It's much more difficult to fight when you're attempting to subdue your opponent without killing them," Grandpa Gouche answered.

As he went on to passionately explain, it was easy enough to go all-out and attack spontaneously to kill your opponent, but it was much more challenging to suppress your instinct to use deadly force in a battle in which your own life

was at risk and fight with the restraint required to avoid delivering fatal injuries.

I felt bad for putting even more burden on the knights, but not bad enough to not ask for their help.

Grandpa Gouche seemed full of determination as he promised to leave immediately to relay the orders to the knights stationed in each of the provinces and get them to start practicing the use of non-lethal force.

“Very well. Are we in agreement, then, that our country’s policy on this matter will be the temporary protection of monsters?” Papa confirmed with King Gauldi, leaving Grandpa Gouche to be excited by himself.

“Yes. Please handle the preparations for issuing the royal decree.”

“As you wish.”

Papa and the cabinet members moved seamlessly together, paying homage to the king once more.

That was actually pretty cool!

“Father looked so cool just now!” I whispered into Mama’s ear.

Mama smiled faintly as she agreed. “Yes, he does look quite handsome when he’s working...”

I’ll keep it to myself that Papa might have earned back a few of the “coolness points” he’s always losing. If I told him, I’m sure he’d react by acting like a total dork and losing them all again immediately, anyway!

Although I have to admit I love Papa’s hopelessly sappy father side as well.

11 - Welcome Home, Nox!

FOLLOWING my return from Zigg Village, my family members were all still busy with their own work, so I was on my own again today. As an apology for calling me back early, Papa had promised to take me shopping, but when would he find time for that?

I was enjoying one of my favorite pastimes of late—having tea in the garden.

Pluma was playing energetically in the pond, and Haku and Gratia were playing with a toy our gardener, Ayle, made for them.

Is it just me, or does the toy Ayle made look an awful lot like a cat tower? Oh well, as long as they enjoy themselves, I suppose it's fine!

As for Shinki... he was taking a nap. He was stretched out on the hammock I'd received from Uncle Gene as a souvenir.

It's fine. I'll have Ayle make me a swing to play on!

Our garden was becoming more and more unusual by the day, but since this garden was for our family's private use, I figured that was fine. We had another garden that we used for tea parties and other gatherings attended by members of the nobility.

I was zoned out, relaxing and taking in the tranquil serenity of the garden, when a familiar voice called out from somewhere not too far off.

"Screech!"

I looked in the direction the bird call had come from to see the uniquely distinctive wings of a bird of prey...

It can't be!

Shinki, Haku, and Gratia had noticed as well. Pluma was the only one unaffected; he was still lounging in the pond without a care in the world.

"Nox!"

“Screech!”

By the time he came into view, he was already descending. I lifted my arm and braced myself for the impact of Nox’s landing.

Nox reached out with his legs, spread his wings wide for balance, and grabbed my arm. A trace of pain pricked across my arm. Nox’s nails had grown while he’d been gone. When he was home, I fastidiously filed his nails so they wouldn’t get too sharp, so normally didn’t hurt when he landed on my arm.

More importantly!

“Welcome home, Nox!”

“Screech!”

I hugged Nox, being careful not to hurt his wings, and he rubbed his head affectionately against my cheek in greeting. He felt a bit heavier on my arm as if he’d put on a bit of muscle since I’d last seen him. And his face looked more fearless, too.

It saddened me a bit to realize that his cute baby days were well and truly behind him—he’d grown into a strong and capable adult.

Haku and Gratia were jumping up and down excitedly over Nox’s return.

“Big Brother Nox is back, kids!”

I set Nox down on the ground so he could greet Haku and Gratia.

They started climbing on top of him, and for his part, Nox seemed content to let them do as they liked. Shinki didn’t say anything but stroked Nox’s head once, relaying his affection for the little rain hawk.

“You’re back sooner than I expected,” I said.

Hadn’t Lestin said the training exercise would take about twenty days? This was the seventeenth day since Nox had left with Lestin. I wondered if something had happened that caused them to shorten the timeline.

As I was pondering that, Paul appeared to announce the arrival of a visitor. A beast knight was here to see me. I figured it was about Nox, so I asked Paul to bring the beast knight here. I doubted a beast knight would clutch his pearls in

horror at the sight of the bird sanctuary our private garden was turning into.

“Forgive me for interrupting your leisure time, Lady Nefertima,” the beast knight said politely, kneeling to put himself at eye level with me.

It’s probably rude to notice this, but he looks haggard and exhausted!

“It’s regarding Nox, right?” I asked.

“That’s right. He suddenly picked up speed, and I lost sight of him, so I came to confirm he’d made it back here safely.”

Tsk-tsk, Nox! You created extra work for this poor knight.

“He arrived back safely just now,” I said.

“Thank goodness. I’m sure he was eager to return to your side, Lady Nefertima. For the entire training exercise, he was flying almost unnaturally fast, so if you’ll allow it, I’d like to make sure he hasn’t injured himself in any way.”

Nox! How could you be so reckless?!

I handed Nox over to the beast knight, who carefully examined his wings, legs, and neck.

“Nothing seems to be out of the ordinary. Normally, we’d keep him at the beast stables for a full day after a training mission like this for observation, but Nox seems determined to stay here with you.”

“You hear that, Nox? You’ve got a clean bill of health, so they’re letting you stay with me.”

“Screech!”

Nox quickly returned to me and begged for attention.

He’s so cute! Why are all my animal friends so adorable?!

“I will inform Legion Commander Les that Nox will be staying here. Please inform us immediately if Nox presents with any unusual symptoms.”

With this, the beast knight bowed once and left.

Oh no, I forgot to thank him! I’ll have to write a thank-you letter to Lestin

later. Was Nox the reason why that beast knight looked so exhausted? I'll have to write him a thank-you letter, too.

"You're not hurt anywhere, right, Nox?" I asked.

"Screech!"

I suppose if he's sure... The elemental spirits must've helped him out, right?

That was probably why Nox didn't look particularly tired despite how fast he'd reportedly been flying.

I looked Nox's body over carefully once more.

Compared to before he left, his feathers seemed to be a little less glossy. I spotted damage to some of his tertial feathers as well. It was only in a few places, but the vanes—the fin-like portion extending out on both sides from the central stem—were torn here and there. I assumed this was due to how fast he'd been flying.

I have to make sure he's getting all his nutrients so his feathers can return to normal as quickly as possible!

All right! I'll summon Ayle, and we can figure out a gourmet menu for Nox!



ONCE Ayle and I ironed out the details of Nox's nutrient-rich diet, I asked the chef, and he agreed to prepare it for me.

Although I was trying to create meals as nutrient-packed as possible, given that Nox was a bird of prey, the ingredients we could use were basically limited to fresh meat. So we settled on one of Nox's favorites: rabbit.

The chef was muttering something like, "Maybe I'll just go ahead and make rabbit the main dish!" so I got the feeling I would also be eating rabbit for dinner that night. Everything our chef made was delicious, so I was looking forward to it.

Nox dug into his food with gusto.

However, in the days following his return, Nox spent more time than usual sleeping. Worried, I contacted Lestin, and he told me that this was a common

occurrence following a long-distance flight training mission and there was no need to worry.

I see, so he's eating and sleeping a lot to recover from the exhaustion of his training?

Several more days passed, and Nox's appetite and sleep patterns finally returned to normal.

Today, he was playing with Haku, Gratia, and Dee and looked as energetic as ever. The glossiness had returned to his coat, so I figured he would be fine.

I watched the four of them playing together in my bedroom. Gratia climbed onto Dee's tail, and Dee shook his tail with all his might. Gratia went flying and was caught by Haku. They'd been playing like that a lot recently.

Sometimes, Gratia would climb onto one of Nox's wings instead, and Nox would be the one to fling him through the air. Gratia seemed to be enjoying himself most of all. The speed at which he flew through the air and the pillowy impact of smashing into Haku must've been exciting.

Haku failed to catch Gratia a few times, but the Hanley stuffed animal was propped up behind Haku, so Gratia was ultimately unharmed.

One time, Gratia flew straight over the top of the Hanley stuffed animal but reacted quickly, using his spider thread to latch onto something and swing himself to safety in an impressive imitation of Tarzan. I was jealous.

Maybe I'll have them make me a Tarzan rope instead of a swing.

In the middle of all this carefree playing, Ralf arrived home from Zigg Village. He, too, was back earlier than expected.

"The guild masters were so enthusiastic and hard-working that we finished ahead of schedule," he explained.

According to Ralf, the guild masters had been so inspired by the kobolds' techniques that, determined not to be outdone, they'd powered almost nonstop straight through all their meetings.

The apothecaries' guild had submitted numerous job listings to the adventurers' guild for herb-gathering jobs. The merchants' guild was also hard

at work, preparing to source the materials for the kobolds' accessories and food supplies for Project Shiana.

As for the problematic adventurers' guild—well, to be specific, *Ardo* was the problematic one, but in any case...

At Uncle Phillip's urging, they'd constructed a separate building to use as a training facility.

When he heard this, Papa laughed and said that was just like Phillip.

"He's good at watching out for others and picking up on the weaknesses in their plans."

Does he say this from experience? I can picture Papa needing someone to watch out for him!

"We were only together for a short while, but he took good care of me," Karna added.

That's right, Uncle Phillip watched out for Karna, too, while they were traveling together. So he likes taking care of others, huh? That must be why he agreed so readily to train Suzuko and Touki. Well, as long as things are moving along without a hitch, that's what matters!

After we finished discussing Project Shiana, Papa had some bad news for us.

"We've received reports from the intelligence department that the Alliance of Nations appears to be preparing for war."

So it's come to this after all. I took some time to reflect and gather my thoughts. I returned to my bedroom and hugged the Hanley stuffed animal tightly.

Nox, Haku, and Gratia seemed to have noticed something was off about me because they were on their best behavior.

As for Dee, I assumed he was sleeping in Ralf's room now that he'd returned.

Enveloped in the comforting, fluffy warmth of the Hanley stuffed animal, I turned my thoughts to the future.

If things keep going as they are, fighting will likely break out, and the flames

of war will quickly spread to engulf every corner of the continent.

But why is Runohark trying to ignite a war?

Maybe the question I should ask is, "Why did they choose this method for causing the war?" How did they realize how crucial a part monsters play in this world? Did they simply attempt to recreate what happened 400 years ago?

No, humans are trying to eradicate monsters as harmful creatures... But it doesn't make sense for humans who worship God to eradicate creatures that he intentionally created...

"Hey, Shinki... What do you think we should do?" I asked.

"About the war, you mean?"

"Yeah, that, and... just everything."

The more I thought about it, the less I understood it. I didn't expect Shinki to have all the answers, but I figured it was worth asking.

Two brains are better than one, right?

"In the end, war is just humans' version of the struggle for survival, isn't it? What is so complicated about that?"

Maybe... he's got a point? But war is bad, isn't it? Because a lot of people will inevitably die... The victims won't just be humans, either. Beastpeople will fight, too, and elves... Huh? Come to think of it, the species that will be least affected by all this are the demons, right?

The demons primarily lived on the continent of Wazhite; very few were in Larshia.

Could the demons be plotting to take control of Larshia?

"Shinki, have you ever met a demon?" I asked.

"Nope."

Of course. I should've known. It would be pretty suspicious if demons were spotted where monsters live; they have no real reason for being there. Demons, huh...

If demons are trying to take over Larshia, that would probably mean

something significant happened in Wazhite, right? A deficit of food and resources, climate change... Oh!

“Elemental spirits, please tell me about Wazhite!” I requested.

That’s right! The elemental spirits know about everything, even far-off continents!

“The continent of Wazhite doesn’t have many forested areas, but it does contain the highest mountain in the world. A water dragon dwells on the mountain. The elemental kings of Wazhite are kind,” Shinki relayed.

A water dragon?! And the Wazhite elemental kings are kind? Does that mean the Larshia elemental kings are mean?! No, no, I’m sure that’s not what they mean...

“Is there a lack of food in Wazhite, or are the demons suffering in some way?”

“Apparently not. The nanos say that the demons are like themselves: free.”

The demons are free? Does that mean they live a free, unfettered lifestyle like the elemental spirits? If that’s true, it makes the case for this being the work of demons much weaker... But, just to be safe, I’d better ask Papa to look into it.

“What kind of people are the demons?” I asked.

“Most spend their time doing whatever they like, not bound to anything.”

That is pretty much the very definition of freedom... But don’t they work for a living? I wonder how their society is organized. Now, I’m curious to know more about demons. But, in any case, if it’s not demons, that makes the human theory look more likely again.

War does lead to death, but there are many other repercussions as well. The citizens turn to the government for security when their daily lives are disrupted. Surrounding countries are forced to accept refugees, even though it drains their finances.

Who would benefit from war?

“...Are there people who would benefit from war?” I asked.

“There must be. For people to fight, they need weapons and provisions,

right?”

Shinki’s answer called to mind “merchants of death,” a derogatory term used on Earth for industries that inevitably profited from supplying and funding wars. But in this world, many people’s occupations—such as adventurers and knights—already required them to be armed with weapons.

Would the potential monetary gain be worth the risk of crossing that dangerous bridge and causing a war?

“I’ve heard that humans pay money as offerings to God... There’s no time you need God *more* than when you’re suffering.”

That’s it!

“Please let my friends and family who’ve been driven from their homes by the war make it back safely.”

“Please let the war end, and let me survive it.”

“Please allow me to live a better life in the place I fled to for refuge.”

In times of trouble, people pray to God for salvation. The worse things got, the more people would turn to God to save them.

They would go to church to pray.

There wasn’t a mandatory fee to pray at the church, but just like the custom of throwing coins into the offering bucket at shrines in Japan, it was also customary here to donate a few small coins.

Nobles typically made larger offerings, and there were cases where noble families even made sizeable donations to the church. And if war was raging, it would make sense that the injured, who could afford it, would flock to their local churches for healing.

If they built up enough prestige among the citizens, the church might even be able to rival the government in terms of authority. In fact, there might even be some countries whose national governments would turn to the Church of Divine Creation for help.

Come to think of it, why is it that God is worshiped in the first place? It makes sense to worship the Goddess; she’s the source of healing magic, which people

rely on. Maybe, long ago, people still felt a close connection to God?

Mama had said that elementalists used to be commonplace in the past, so it was possible that being able to use elemental power made people feel closer to God.

Could it be that since that connection has worn thin in modern times, God is lonely?

“If a person prays to God for something, I wonder if God will grant their prayer...”

“I doubt it. He is the God of creation and destruction. God can’t intervene in our world. God can only influence this world through beloved children,” Shinki said.

What kind of God can’t affect the world he created?!

“But what about ‘the will of God’ everyone’s always talking about?”

God’s exerting his will on the world all the time!

“Just as an example, God allowing this country to exist is ‘the will of God.’ But if God decided he wanted your brother Ralf to be king, he couldn’t just make him king.”

“Why not?”

“God is a being that exists to create and destroy; he doesn’t guide people.”

...Now, that is a shocking revelation! I’d always assumed God’s purpose was to protect and guide people!

The God worshiped on Earth was known to create miracles and save people, so I’d assumed that’s what it meant to be “God.” But come to think of it, there weren’t any myths in this world about God coming down from the clouds and appearing to humans. And most of the “miracles” that occurred in this land were the work of elemental spirits or God’s “messengers.”

“Then what about the Goddess?” I asked.

“The Goddess’s powers of mercy and rebirth are directed towards the souls of this world. In short, it’s a given that she would interact with the creatures of this

world.”

I see... So, to some extent, God's power is curtailed by the need to maintain the balance of the world? But if he's a god, why is he beholden to anything?

I more or less understood what Shinki was saying about God's will and his inability to intervene, but the mysteries had only increased.

“Why do you know so much about all this anyway, Shinki?”

I'd never seen Shinki reading, studying, or anything like that. I certainly hadn't learned anything like this in my education thus far.

“Because I'm the knight of a beloved child.”

...Being a knight made him knowledgeable? How?

“Just like how my body evolved to be able to protect the beloved child, I was also endowed with knowledge that the beloved child would need. My instincts are still those of a goblin, but it feels like my thoughts have become those of something else.”

Endowed with knowledge?! Did God plant all this knowledge in his head or something?!

“Normally, goblins can only evolve into hobgoblins. And yet, I evolved into a knight. There's no one other than God who could possibly be responsible for this.”

I see... So God's not just playing around after all? Hold on. They said that the first king of our country was also a beloved child, right? And he went on to become a king, right? So that means that, if a person is a beloved child, God can just make them a king?!

God interferes when it comes to beloved children, right? That's it; God is definitely up to something!

If the Church of Divine Creation is shady and God is shady, that doesn't leave me any other choice—I'm gonna march my butt down to the church and demand God explain to me exactly what he's up to! I don't know if he'll actually bother to answer, but...

But first, I'd need to get Papa's permission to go there.

I asked Paul where Papa was at the moment and was told that he was in his office.

I feel bad for Papa, coming home and immediately getting right back to work.

“Father...” I called out, knocking on the door of his office.

The door was opened by Papa’s butler, Aurphan.

“Please come in, Lady Neema.”

Come to think of it, it had been a while since I last saw Aurphan. Had he been sent out to the province for work?

I made a beeline straight over to Papa, who picked me up and set me on his knee, even though he was still in the middle of work.

“It’s rare for you to be up so late. Are you having trouble sleeping?” he asked.

It *was* past the time I would’ve normally gone to bed. I’d been thinking so hard that I didn’t feel sleepy.

“There’s something I’d like you to look into, Father.”

I explained everything I’d been thinking about earlier and the conclusions I’d made to Papa. When I told him I wanted him to look into the demons and the Church of Divine Creation, his expression darkened.

“The demons might be possible if I ask Eugene, but as for the Church of Divine Creation...” As Papa trailed off, help came from an unexpected source.

“In that case, I would be happy to volunteer,” Aurphan offered.

“But you already have your hands full, don’t you?” Papa countered.

“I believe those tasks can be delegated to... others. This is a good chance for me to get out there and stand on my own two feet.”

As expected of Papa’s personal butler, Aurphan seemed to be juggling a lot of work. But what “others” was he referring to?

Josh had been assigned as Ralf’s personal butler, which made him a personal butler to the future Duke.

I suppose that does still place him in a rank below Aurphan and therefore

eligible to be delegated Aurphan's excess work, but...

Based on the way Papa and Aurphan were acting, I didn't think that was it.

Maybe someone in our household was similar to the king's private soldiers, and I just wasn't aware of it.

"Very well, I'll leave it to you then, Aurphan," Papa said.

"As you wish."

Aurphan executed a beautiful bow, then poured me a cup of warm milk. He'd prepared it just the way I liked, without sugar or other sweeteners.

"Lady Neema, what exactly would you like me to investigate regarding the Church of Divine Creation?" he asked.

"First and foremost, whether they have any connections to Runohark! Next, I guess, the movement of money? If the donations have increased, someone might be embezzling that money. I also want to know more about the faction that believes humans should rule over all the other species."

"Very well. Leave it to me."

I wasn't familiar with Aurphan's abilities, but he must be pretty skilled if he was good enough to serve as Papa's personal butler.

"I'm counting on you!"

...Oh, right. I've got another request to make while I'm here.

"Oh, by the way... tomorrow I want to go to church!" I said.

"To church?"

"I want to pray to the Goddess for the world to return to normal."

I was actually going there to complain to God, but our family had stronger ties to the Goddess, so I used her as a cover story. After all, Ralf had the Goddess's blessing!

"I see. The Goddess is kind and merciful, so I'm sure she will listen to your prayers. However, it will be dangerous if it turns out the Church of Divine Creation does have ties to Runohark."

Yeah, that did occur to me... But I can't think of anywhere else I might be able to contact God!

"Do you promise to stay close to Paul and Shinki at all times?" Papa asked.

"You'll let me go as long as Paul and Shinki come too?"

As soon as I asked, Papa frowned.

Papa, are you that reluctant to let me go out on my own, even with attendants?

"You have to promise to obey Paul, you understand?"

"I promise!"

In the end, Papa reluctantly agreed.

Look how cute and innocent I am; of course, I'll behave myself!

"Good girl. Now, you'd better get to bed. You've got a busy day ahead of you tomorrow."

He's right. Staying up late is bad for a growing body!

"Father, may you pass the night in safety and peace."

I spoke the traditional words of nighttime greeting, and Papa returned them.

"May you pass the night in safety and peace," he said, hugging me tightly.

At times like this, I see the resemblance between him and Karna!



WHEN I returned to my room, my body felt warm and sluggish.

Is this because of the warm milk? In any case, I might be able to fall asleep after all!

"Pardon the intrusion, Lady Neema."

Normally, Paul would escort me as far as my door and leave, but this time, he entered the room and approached me. I paused, confused by Paul's strange behavior, and he reached out to press a hand to my forehead.

"You seem to have spiked a fever. If it doesn't go down by tomorrow

morning, let's ask Lord Ralf to take care of it, okay?"

I spiked a fever?! It must've been from thinking too hard! Of all the ridiculous things...!

12 - Deliver These Feelings to God!

AFTER a good night's sleep, my fever went down.

Ralf checked on me anyway because he was worried, but as soon as he saw me looking as energetic as ever, he seemed relieved and said it looked like I didn't need a healing spell after all.

After getting a healthy diagnosis from Ralf, I was given the go-ahead to proceed with my outing as planned.

Shinki and Paul would come to keep an eye on me, but that was fine with me. I was just going to church to give God a piece of my mind, which I could do just as well with babysitters.

"Lady Neema, are you ready to go?" Paul asked.

I'd prepared for the outing by selecting one of the formal dresses I'd received from Auntie Olive and having a maid do my hair. By all appearances, I was the daughter of a noble family.

Is it just my imagination, or do I look even more proper than I usually do when visiting the all-important royal palace?



WE loaded into the carriage and set off for the upper-class district's church.

Here in the royal city, churches were built in each district and one inside the royal palace. The church inside the royal palace wasn't gaudy; it looked simple and peaceful. I'd never been inside, though, so this was just my passing impression.

The church in the upper-class district was the largest and most ornate in the royal city. This was probably a good indicator of just how much money they were receiving in donations from the nobles, but it might also have been an intentional choice to match the grandeur of the surrounding buildings and avoid

irritating the neighbors by being an eyesore in a fashionable neighborhood.

When we arrived at the church, Paul took care of all the necessary protocols. He sure was helpful to have around at times like this!

A person dressed similarly to the High Priest I'd seen that time I'd been summoned for a public audience with the king led us to the chapel, where visitors could pray. The male priest wore white robes fastened at the waist with a silver belt-like sash. The only difference between his clothes and those of the High Priest was the color of the embroidered geometrical patterns decorating the white robes.

I can't say for sure, but I have a feeling those are probably written spells.

They were different from the runes I usually saw in written spells, but the Church of Divine Creation might have its own unique version of written magic.

The large, wide-open chapel had high ceilings and featured a sculpture of the Goddess Cresiolle.

There's a sculpture of the Goddess, but not one of God. I guess that's probably because no one knows what he looks like since he can't interact with humans?

"Please let me know when you've finished with your prayers," the priest said before exiting the chapel to give us some privacy.

We've got the whole chapel to ourselves. That will make it easier to give God a piece of my mind without holding back!

Paul and Shinki took up positions on either side of the door.

All right, here goes nothing!

I felt bad for laying out all my beef with God in front of a statue of the Goddess, but she'd just have to bear witness to it all.

I got down on my knees in front of the statue and lowered my head. This was the customary "prayer position" in this world. Some people took it one step further and laced their fingers together, while others spread their arms out, palms facing upward—it depended on the person.

As for me, I pressed my palms together, a throwback to my past life in Japan. With my hands together in prayer, I let my complaints flow silently inside my

mind.

I'm grateful you let me be reborn into a kind family, but haven't you taken things a little too far? You supposedly gave me an important mission to decide whether or not you should destroy all the humans, but you've actually been playing with me for your own amusement this whole time, haven't you?

And you didn't tell me anything about this whole "beloved child" thing. You really should've told me about something that important!

Also, it hasn't escaped my notice that I'm surrounded by monsters. Don't tell me you're also trying to make me the Queen of Monsters?! You're hearing all of this, right?

Don't blame me if the world falls to pieces while you're slacking off doing weird stuff!

Stupid God!

I stuck my tongue out peevishly and thought once more for good measure, *Idiot!*

At that moment, the statue of the Goddess began to glow faintly, and a butterfly appeared.

Butterflies are the messengers of God... So he did hear me!

I frowned and glared fiercely at the butterfly. Not seeming the least bit bothered by my ire, the butterfly flittered over and landed right on the tip of my stubby little nose.



Hey God! Are you trying to piss me off here? I'm well aware of just how stubby my nose is, okay! It might get more regal and pronounced as I grow, you know! I snorted out a brisk huff of air through my nose, trying to get the butterfly to fly away.

"It's because I believe in you."

It was the voice of God. Despite having heard it once before, I realized that I'd been mysteriously unable to recall what it had sounded like until the moment I heard it again.

The instant the voice spoke, the butterfly disappeared. The intense sincerity the voice carried left me trembling. There was something ominous about it as if I were being warned of things to come...

In any case, this seemed to be all I was getting for today.

I stood and made my way over to where Shinki and Paul were waiting.

"You certainly were praying devotedly." Paul reached out to straighten my dress and smooth my hair back into place.

I counted myself lucky he didn't seem to have heard my unlady-like snort earlier. I would've gotten an earful about it if he had, no doubt about it.

Shinki didn't say anything either, so it was possible that neither of them had seen the statue start to glow or the butterfly appear out of nowhere.

As soon as we exited the chapel, the priest appeared to lead us to a reception room. This reception room was for the priest to give private counsel about a person's troubles and explain the church's teachings in a simple, easy-to-understand way.

I didn't require those services but ended up following the priest anyway.

In contrast to the church's ornate exterior, the reception room was simple and austere. However, the sofa we were directed to sit on was so plush and comfortable that I could only assume it must've been very expensive.

We were served tea, and because I was thirsty after all that angry praying, I wasted no time reaching for my cup.

The priest urged my attendants to help themselves as well, but Paul refused. Shinki seemed to sense it would be perceived as rude if he refused because he relented and accepted a cup of tea.

I was just about to sigh with pleasure at the delicious taste of the high-quality tea when Kuro fired off an agitated warning from inside my body.

There was a strong sedative in the tea I'd just drunk.

Thankfully, Kuro negated the poison immediately, but when I glanced over at Shinki in alarm, it was just in time to see him tumble off the sofa.

"Shinki!" I shouted, but it was too late.

Out of nowhere, a group of masked men surrounded me, preventing me from running to Shinki's aide. The spacious reception room suddenly felt cramped, so there must've been around twelve of the masked goons in total.

"Lady Neema, don't move!"

It was a critical situation—we were surrounded by unknown enemies. But even so, Paul maintained his cool.

Thanks to this, I calmed down just a bit as well.

But the next moment, one of the masked goons suddenly went flying. And that's no exaggeration—his body literally soared through the air, crashing first into the ceiling, then falling to the floor.

The masked goon crashed to the floor with a resounding thud, leaving no doubt that he'd sustained severe injuries.

"How dare you inflict violence on Lady Neema... I hope you've prepared yourself for the consequences?"



His calm, pacifying demeanor moments ago had been an act designed to get the masked goons to let their guard down. The vicious smile on Paul's face at this moment, however, was terrifying.

If I make the wrong move, I'll just get in the way. I knew Paul was strong but had no idea it was anything like this...

In the blink of an eye, the fallen bodies of the masked goons began piling up on the floor.

"Shit!"

One of the masked goons closest to me started panicking, but I was in no position to pay him any mind. Two more of the masked goons wordlessly grabbed me, and the next thing I knew, I couldn't see a thing.

...It feels like I've been... stuffed into a sack?! Is that a thing in this world or something? When you're kidnapping someone, you're obliged to stuff them in a sack?!

I heard men shouting and Paul's frantic-sounding voice.

A faint creaking was probably a hidden door opening to reveal a secret passage. Then the other voices faded away, leaving only the ragged breathing of the two masked goons carrying me.

I had no idea where I was being taken, but as a last resort, I would summon Sol.

But first, elemental spirits! Please let someone know about this emergency!

I was tossed into a wagon that rocked and swayed horribly as we barreled haphazardly away from the church.

I struggled to free myself from the sack but was kicked roughly, which I took to mean, "Stay still!"

That freaking hurt! I think that was the most painful thing I've experienced so far in this life, you massive jerky jerkface! I fired off a series of expletives in my mind, all directed at whichever of the masked goons had kicked me.

After a short wagon ride, I was once again picked up and carried for no more

than a minute or two before being dumped unceremoniously on the ground.

We must've arrived at their safehouse, but based on the time we'd spent traveling in the wagon, it seemed we were still somewhere in the royal city.

"Don't worry, we have no intention of killing a beloved child."

That's one of the masked goons, right? Even if you don't plan on killing me, there's still absolutely no chance I won't be worried!

...Wait a minute, did he just call me a beloved child?!

"We need to get out of the country before they come after her."

"...Don't panic. *That person* has secured an escape route for us."

They're taking me out of the country?! This is not looking good for me! Maybe I should call Sol right away, after all? But if I'm right and we're still in the royal city, innocent people might get caught in the crossfire...

I wonder if Sol can do a pin-point attack...

Oh! The pendant I received from the king! Which stone did I put inside today? I think I took the maid's advice and selected the blue stone to accent my yellow dress. The blue stone contains a water magic spell...

It creates a massive tidal wave! Ugggh, I can't use that! If I used that spell, no less than a third of the royal city would be swept away along with my enemies! Why couldn't I have chosen the stone that contains an earth magic spell?! Then I could've thrown up some protective walls around me and sat tight and waited until help came!

I guess I'll just have to bide my time and wait until they move me again...

"We'll draw attention if we try to move her now. We'll wait until night falls, then we'll go."

Looks like we're staying where we are for now. But how long do they plan to keep me in this sack?

...I can't stand it anymore... I have to go to the bathroom!

"Will you please let me go to the lavatory?!" I pleaded.

By "lavatory," I was obviously referring to the bathroom.

Aristocrats couldn't possibly say *vulgar* words such as "do my business" or "go pee" in polite society, so instead everyone used the genteel term "lavatory."

But no matter what pretty words you dressed it up in, the toilet only had one use.

"...Take her out of the bag."

My vision returned after several hours in the dark, and the first thing I saw was one of the masked goons filling my line of sight. To keep me from escaping, they clasped a pair of shackles around my wrists, then tied them with rope as well, for good measure.

If it was just the rope, I could've had the wind spirits cut it for me...

Then the masked goon dragged me along until *finally* we arrived at the bathroom.

Don't even think about coming in! I'll scream and call you a perverted pedo!

Thankfully, even the masked goon seemed to have at least a shred of delicacy because he didn't try to come into the bathroom with me. Once I got into the bathroom, I was confronted with another problem.

With these shackles on, I can't even pull down my underpants...

For my normal daily attire, I typically wore medium-length skirts with bloomers underneath, but today, I was dressed more formally for the outing to the church. The long skirt of this dress was unwieldy and had several cumbersome layers underneath to boot.

"...Um, could you please take these off?" I asked the masked goon, cracking the door open again.

Thankfully, he seemed to realize the problem—that I couldn't use the toilet with the shackles on—because, without a word, he removed them for me.

Once I finished my business and came back out of the bathroom, I felt a little better.

But then the masked goon clasped the shackles right back on me!

Now that I had the peace of mind to take in my surroundings, I was surprised

to realize the building we were in was in much better shape than I would've expected. Based on the architecture and furnishings, it appeared to be an aristocrat's manor. However, judging by how old everything looked, the place seemed long abandoned.

If I had to guess, I'd say this is probably where the middle and lower nobility reside? Based on the sunlight shining through the windows, it seemed to be afternoon, but not yet evening.

I wonder if help will arrive before night falls. They should already know where to find me, thanks to the elemental spirits. But Shinki was poisoned too! He should be fine if it was the same sedative they gave me, but what if his tea contained a deadly poison?!

But Shinki's not the only one who can communicate with the elemental spirits. There's also Lars and Will, and Ardo should be back in the royal city by now. I'll just have to pin my hopes on them!

When we returned to the room we'd been in before, the two masked goons tied me up with rope, winding it all around my body.

They even tied my bunny-backpack in here with me! I suppose that's preferable, though, since it prevents the ropes from digging into my back and causing pain.

They're certainly not taking any chances, are they? Do they think I'm some kind of monster or something? There's no way I could tear my way out of rope and shackles!

With me tied up like a trussed turkey, I figured the masked goons would at least chat to pass the time, but neither said a word.

Silence had never felt so heavy before. Perhaps because of the overwhelming silence, when a faint noise did come, it seemed to echo unnaturally.

"I heard something."

"Me too. I'll go look outside. Get ready to make a run for it, just in case."

One of the masked goons left the room, and the other started preparing the sack.

Not the sack again!

“Shit!”

It was the masked goon who’d just gone outside.

The remaining masked goon tensed, then immediately began stuffing me into the sack, apparently planning to grab me and make a run for it.

I sensed the door open and then felt an impact, followed by pain shooting through my body.

Did he just chuck me on the floor?!

“Grrr...”

There was a low, menacing growl, and then...

“Woof! Woof, woof!”

I know that voice... It’s Dee!

“S-Stay back...!”

I heard the distinctive metallic *SHING!* of a sword being drawn. Panic colored the masked goon’s voice.

Why don’t I hear anyone else’s voice but Dee’s?!

I knew that this was a dire situation. I struggled with all my might but couldn’t free myself from the sack.

What should I do...?!

“Elemental spirits, please cut this sack and these ropes off of me!” I requested.

A gentle wind swept over my body, and the next thing I knew, both the sack and the ropes lay in shreds around me.

Realizing I’d gotten free, the masked goon turned and rushed towards me.

Fluffy white fur suddenly filled my line of sight.

I heard a *SLASH!* then Dee let out a pained shriek.

“That’s what you get for biting me, you little shit!”

Suddenly, the other masked goon, who'd returned at some point, was there.

He stood over us, holding a bloody sword...

All at once the fluffy whiteness obscuring my vision disappeared, and a dull, heavy *THUD!* echoed unnaturally loudly through the air.

I dropped my gaze and saw Dee lying collapsed in front of me on the ground.

As I watched, a puddle spread around him and red increasingly stained Dee's fur. He was taking short, heaving pants of breath, but they became smaller and smaller as the moments passed.

"...Dee?"

What am I seeing?

Why is Dee lying on the ground?

Why is his fur red?

*Why? **WHY?!***

I hugged Dee tightly, and he weakly licked my face.



My mind finally started working again. “Ralf! RALF!” I screamed, calling out to my brother desperately for help.

Ralf was the only one who could save Dee now.

Please, please hurry, Ralf! I begged in my mind.

Dee’s life was about to flicker out at any moment.

“Let’s go!”

The masked goons reached out, trying to drag me away from where I sat clutching Dee.

The moment the swords in their hands caught my eye, something came over me, and anger ate away at everything else. I let the anger feed, ignoring the other... *something*... that I felt rising inside me.

“...Hey!”

“Shit! What is this?!”

The masked goons were saying something, but it didn’t matter to me.

I hated them more than I’d ever imagined it possible to hate anyone for doing this to Dee.

As red eclipsed my vision completely, I *felt* the moment Dee died.

Then I lost consciousness, never comprehending what exactly I was seeing before me that had turned my entire world red.

13 - The Beloved Child (POV: Wilhelm)

I'D just finished my tasks for the morning when a gaggle of frantic wind spirits burst into the room.

"Danger! The beloved child is in danger!"

They all kept shouting about "danger" but failed to clarify what the danger was.

"Calm down and explain what's happened to Neema."

Lars had already returned to my side from where he'd been lounging in the sun, giving off a deadly, fierce aura. One thing was for sure: this was serious.

"The beloved child was kidnapped!"

"You have to save her! Please, hurry!"

"Shinki passed out, so the beloved child is all alone!"

The elemental spirits, who normally delighted in chatting fondly about Neema, were so frantic that they blurted out fragmented bits of information.

Neema was kidnapped. Shinki was injured somehow, so he isn't with her. Did I get that right?

"Let's go, Lars."

Lars would know where to find Neema.

The bracelet I'd given Neema for her birthday contained a wind orb, similar to the dragon orb she'd received from the fire dragon. It had a drop of Lars' power, which allowed him to know where she was at all times and even feel a bit of her emotions.

I climbed up on Lars' back, and he leapt from the terrace, flying across the sky. Lars flew in a straight line towards his objective, never faltering. At least not until he caught sight of something that caused him to change directions and descend towards the ground.

"Growl."

I looked down to where Lars had indicated and spotted something white racing past at breakneck speed.

There was a figure on horseback chasing after a white creature.

"It's Ralf," I said.

Ralf, too, seemed to notice us, but he quickly returned his attention to the white creature he was following.

That white creature is probably Dee. But how could they have gotten the message and made it here so quickly, even if the Osphe family's shadows notified them immediately?

We passed from the neighborhood where the upper nobility lived into the slightly less affluent neighborhood that housed the middle and lower nobility. We hadn't made it halfway through the neighborhood when Dee and Lars suddenly stopped.

After a glance back to confirm that Ralf was following, Dee burst into one of the manor houses without waiting for him to catch up. I, too, hurried to get my feet back on the ground but was blocked from charging straight inside the abandoned manor, as Dee had somehow done.

A narrow path leading to the manor was cluttered with protruding roots, loose stones, and overgrown hedges. But the real obstacle was the fallen tree blocking the path.

Ralf finally caught up while I was debating the best way to deal with the literal roadblock. It seemed he'd left his horse outside because he was on foot now.

"Will, please help me..."

I was planning to, whether you asked or not. You just have to keep up!

"Lars, make us a path," I said.

Lars sliced through the obstacles barring our way with his wind magic, blowing the rubble aside to form a path. We broke down the rotting door and made our way into the manor. That was when we heard Neema's voice.

"Hurry!"

Lars took the lead, with Ralf and I hot on his heels, running full speed through the abandoned manor. Just as we were about to charge into the room, we could hear Neema's heartbroken screams for Ralf coming from...

The impact and a fiercely hot rush of air from an intense explosion drove us back.

I planted my feet firmly, fighting not to be sent flying.

"What just happened?!"

"Growl!"

...What do you mean, "The beloved child lost control"?!

Lars' wind fought to subdue the rising flames, but the fire burned with unnatural fury. Already, more than half the manor was alight.

"Neema!"

It took all my strength to hold Ralf back from charging headlong into the flames.

This is no ordinary fire. Even though Ralf can use water magic, I doubt it would do anything.

"It's no use right now."

"Let me go! Neema's in there! I have to get to her!"

You don't have to tell me that. But if something happens to you too, Ralf...

"Elemental spirits! Put out this fire!" I ordered.

If Neema was in there, the elemental spirits Shinki and the fire dragon each assigned to watch over her must be nearby.

But the elemental spirits didn't answer.

I looked away from the fire to search for the elemental spirits. To my shock, the always-smiling elemental spirits were wearing expressions of anguish.

...Are they, too, caught up in the beloved child's—that is, Neema's power?!

I could do nothing but stand there and watch.

I was filled with shame and self-loathing at my uselessness. Despite having

received the God of Creation's protection and being granted the honor of bonding with a revered holy beast, I couldn't even protect one small child.

I ground my teeth and searched my mind for any method to put out the raging fire.

Then, a voice heavy with authority and wisdom rang out from somewhere above.

"Nefertima, calm your heart."

I looked up, and a massive crimson beast was all but blocking out the sky.

"The fire dragon!"

The fire dragon flapped his powerful wings, and the raging fire slowly—ever so slowly—abated.

While I was distracted, Ralf broke free and ran towards the blaze again.

"Tch! Ralf, wait!" I shouted after him.

Even if the fire had weakened slightly, it was still hot and fighting to spread.

Lars seemed to be using his magic to hold back the flames, but I threw my magic into the fray, too, desperately attempting to shield Ralf as he charged forward.

"Neema!"

A short distance ahead of Ralf, Neema lay on the ground. She was draped over something as if attempting to protect it, and the flames formed a circular barrier around her, almost like walls keeping her safe from harm.

The fire dragon let out a bellowing roar, and the remaining flames merged and were sucked straight into his body.

Once the fire was finally extinguished, the fire dragon landed on the ground next to us. His massive body destroyed most of the remaining structure of the building as he landed. It was safe to say the manor was ruined.

The room we were in was the only one somehow miraculously still standing.

As he immediately cast a healing spell on Neema, Ralf looked relieved. But that only lasted for a moment.

“Dee...” He called out to another precious member of his family, but there was no response.

A large area of the charred floor and wide swatches of Dee’s fur were stained red.

Did the people who kidnapped Neema kill him?!

I searched the burnt-out rubble all around us until I spotted what appeared to be two blackened lumps a short distance away. Compared to the damage elsewhere, this area was burnt the worst of all. Whatever the lumps were, they now resembled little more than charcoal.

Based on the fact that the lumps were vaguely human-shaped and partially melted swords were lying next to them, these were likely the corpses of the men who’d kidnapped Neema.

You’re saying Neema did that...?

“Fire dragon, can you explain what’s happened here?” I asked, trying to remain calm.

“Neema was overcome with rage and reached for my power unconsciously, but it overwhelmed her.”

It was an oversimplified explanation, but what I questioned most of all was whether Neema could truly do something like this, given that she had almost no magic of her own. *Well, the evidence is all around us. I guess her magic level is irrelevant.*

“My power is too great a burden for Neema to bear. I thought it would be okay as long as we didn’t fully bond until she was older, but humans always do the most unexpected things...”

So he didn’t complete the true-name bond with her out of consideration for the burden it would place on her?

“It’s fortunate that this was the extent of the damage, but nonetheless, I apologize for my oversight in entrusting her with the dragon orb so carelessly.”

I also bore a share of the blame for failing to teach her about the bond with a holy beast because of her age. The fire dragon had nothing to apologize for.

“Fire dragon, is Neema going to be okay?” Ralf asked.

Ralf’s eyes were red from holding back tears. He must’ve been suffering, having just lost Dee, but even so, he was doing his best to keep it together for his sister’s sake.

“...I don’t know. I wouldn’t think that my power, given to me by God, could hurt his beloved child, but...”

Hearing this, Ralf hugged Neema tightly. “Goddess Cresiolle, please, I beg you—cast your mercy upon Neema.”

It wasn’t a healing spell, simply a desperate prayer. As if responding to this prayer, the elemental spirits gathered around Neema. A beam of light shone down from everywhere and nowhere all at once, and the fire dragon gasped in shock as the light materialized into a figure.

“Goddess Cresiolle...”

The fire dragon bowed his head reverently.

She looked just like her statues—ethereal and divine, with a benevolent smile that made her look like the epitome of a loving mother. She turned to Neema, and when her eyes fell on Dee’s lifeless body, her face clouded with sadness.

“Solgrantio, you should be ashamed of yourself for failing to protect our beloved child.”

“...Forgive me, my lady.”

Her voice was clear and melodic, calling to mind the sound of a peuxpaugar, an instrument often referred to as the “instrument of God.”

“Ralfreed, bring Nefertima here.”

At the Goddess’s order, Ralf rose on unsteady legs and carried Neema over to her.

“Nefertima. Poor child, beloved by the God of Creation. Sleep now until your wounded soul has healed.” The goddess stroked Neema’s head, and a faint hint of peacefulness stole over Neema’s sleeping face. *“As for you, soul that gave all to protect our beloved child, you will stay with me. At least until the time comes for you to journey onward.”*

Dee's body rose into the air before dissolving into millions of tiny particles that reformed as sparkling orbs suspended between the Goddess' cupped hands.

"Nefertima will awaken when the time is right. Until then, she is under my protection, so do not fear for her."

With this, the Goddess turned back into a beam of light before fading away completely.

For a long moment, no one moved or spoke.

"...Thank you, Goddess Cresiolle," Ralf professed his sincere gratitude to the Goddess, tears streaming down his face.

Neema was saved, and Dee had crossed over with the Goddess' guidance.



NEWS of the Goddess' descent spread throughout the kingdom.

It had been witnessed by numerous residents of the royal city, but it also didn't hurt that, for some reason, the Church of Divine Creation also began announcing it as if it were their own personal achievement or something.

For our part, we wiped all traces of Neema's involvement from the retellings.

If it were revealed to the public that Neema was a beloved child, the Church of Divine Creation would probably try to steal her away to enshrine her in their temple.

Ever since Neema fell into her deep sleep, the situation around the world only continued to worsen.

Our country was doing everything we could to counteract it, but we could only hold off the inevitable for so long.

Neema, please wake up soon.

Everyone is waiting for you.

14 - A Time for Healing

I was in an impossibly huge field.

The grassy plains stretched out in all directions as far as the eye could see. There was nothing around me, but the field was teeming with life. Tiny insects and all manner of animals roamed about, completely carefree.

I crouched down to observe an insect that looked like a praying mantis as it ambled by. A large bird flew past overhead, and far off in the distance, I spotted a herd of land bulls.

“What is this place anyway? What was I doing just now?”

My memory was hazy. I couldn’t remember how I’d gotten here. I vaguely recalled coming home from work and collapsing exhausted into my bed, but it also felt like I’d gone somewhere after that...?

Do I feel like something precious has just been ripped away from me because I’ve lost my memories? But how did that happen? For some reason, I don’t feel at all uneasy, though.

Maybe this was for the best.

I meandered across the field, leisurely observing the animals I caught sight of as I passed. It was only then that I realized something.

My footsteps didn’t make any noise.

I could see my feet hitting the ground, but I couldn’t feel the grass underfoot, and it didn’t make even the faintest of sounds as I walked. I examined myself and concluded that I was perfectly solid—not the least bit transparent—so I couldn’t be a ghost.

I conducted a series of tests, experimentally stepping on stones and pinching myself to see if it hurt.

Who knows how long I did that?

Then, a familiar barking reached my ears.

“Woof!”

I turned towards the voice and saw a white mass streaking towards me.

“...Dee!”

The moment I saw that white mass, I knew what it was.

Everything flooded back to me. Meeting God, being reborn, spending every day happy and loved by my family, and playing with all kinds of fluffy animals.

Dee leapt on me, his tail wagging furiously as he licked my whole face.

“Dee! That tickles!”

“Nefertima, come here.”

A woman called out to me by name, startling me. I let out a reflexive shriek.

“There’s no need to be so surprised...”

The woman wore a sad expression.

Oops...

“I’m sorry.”

After apologizing, I looked the woman over again. More closely this time.

The first thing my eyes were drawn to was her gorgeous, thick, glossy black hair. Mysteriously, it almost appeared blue or green, depending on the angle of the light.

This is what they mean when they talk about hair the color of a raven’s wing, isn’t it?!

She had delicate features and clear, almost translucently pale skin like a porcelain doll. Her outfit consisted of a loose-fitting long skirt and a top that looked fashioned from a single long sash of fabric wrapped and draped around her torso. I wasn’t familiar with this style of dress, but there was no doubt about one thing—she had a killer figure!

I didn’t know anyone this unbelievably gorgeous, but for some reason, she looked oddly familiar.

Where have I seen her before?

“No, it’s my fault for suddenly calling out to you. Now then, sit over there, will you?”

While I was still trying to figure out where I knew her from, a table and chairs suddenly appeared out of nowhere. This, too, surprised me, and for a moment, I couldn’t do anything but stare open-mouthed in shock. Then, the heavenly smell of delicious food snapped me back to my senses.

The table was laden with fragrant pies straight out of the oven, fresh fruits, and cups with steam rising from them. Reacting to the tempting smells, my stomach grumbled loudly.

I sat in one of the chairs, but the moment my eyes rested on the teacup in front of me, my stomach soured.

What would’ve happened if Kuro hadn’t been there?

...That’s right—what happened to Kuro?! And Hai, Silver, and Charcoal, too!

The slimes who’d previously been inhabiting my body were all missing.

“It’s not poisoned.”

As if sensing my uneasiness, the super-hottie took an elegant sip from her cup of tea.

“I’m sorry, who did you say you were again?” I asked politely, knowing full well that she hadn’t introduced herself.

“You don’t remember? My name is Cresiolle.”

Cresiolle?

Cresiolle... Cresi...

“The Goddess!”

I leapt to my feet so abruptly that it caused the dishes on the table to clatter and nearly overturned my tea cup.

“Correct. You are currently in the ‘world of the dead.’ This place is brimming with my power, so you will never be injured or fall sick as long as you are here.”

Hold on a minute! If this is the world of the dead, does that mean I died again?! Hey, God! What's the meaning of this?!

"Hmm, I can see you're misunderstanding. This is going to be a long story, so please sit."

At the Goddess' urging, I retook my seat. If the Goddess was going to explain everything to me, I might be able to get more information from her than I'd been able to get from God.

Seeing that I'd calmed down, Dee laid down by my feet.

A soft grass bed, huh? It does look pretty comfy.

"I guess I'll start by explaining what happened to you."

Cresiolle carefully explained everything that had happened after the point where my memories cut off. Due to the trauma of being kidnapped and seeing Dee fatally wounded, I'd unintentionally unleashed Sol's holy beast powers.

Because of this, my soul had been injured.

Unfortunately, Dee hadn't survived.

"Dee, you really died?"

Reacting to his name, Dee sat up and looked at me.

Then he laid back down as if saying dismissively, *"Isn't it obvious?"*

You know, I don't think I've seen Dee this relaxed in a long time.

"This soul can claim the meritorious deed of having protected a beloved child. If I keep him close to me, I'm sure his wounds will heal quickly."

Cresiolle explained that once a soul healed from the damage accrued during its previous life, it would be reborn into the world.

In this world, souls were bound in a constant cycle of life, death, rejuvenation, and rebirth.

"So I won't be able to meet Dee again?" I asked.

"That will depend on both of you. There is only so much I can interfere in the mortal world."

“But God is always...”

I'd been about to say, “messing with me for his own amusement,” but thought better of it and trailed off instead.

God is still Cresiolle's father, after all. Although, I suppose it's a little late to watch my mouth now, after how much I complained about God at the church earlier.

“I can interact with the living to a certain extent by granting blessings, but my father cannot. It's lonely to have no choice but to watch over his creations from afar, never getting close.”

“Is that why he creates beloved children?” I asked.

“I suppose you could say that, but it's not the entire truth.”

Then the Goddess told me something truly shocking.

“Beloved children are souls that were transferred here from another world. They are outside of the laws governing the balance of this world, so both my father and I can interact with them.”

So that means all the previous beloved children were also reborn here from another world? Although, by “another world,” she's probably not referring only to Earth. But what did she mean by “outside the laws governing the balance of this world”?

“Er... what are the laws governing the balance of this world?”

“Hmm, how should I explain it...? It's often referred to as ‘the will of God,’ but I guess you could say they're the requirements for the world to maintain its current form.”

I thought back to Earth as an example.

During my lifetime, the planet suffered from deforestation, climate change, new diseases, and widespread animal extinction. If what Cresiolle was saying was correct, that would mean that Earth had stopped being able to meet these requirements. If things didn't change, this path could only lead to its complete and utter destruction.

“As I'm sure you already understand, there is not only one world. There are a

multitude of worlds, each with its own God. But there is no separating the God and their world. If the world is destroyed, so too will be the God."

"God will die?!"

But he's God! If he's capable of creating the world once, shouldn't he be able to create it again if it's destroyed?!

"Even I don't know if God was born because of the world's creation or if the world was created because God was born. From my earliest memories, both God and the world were already there."

Uh... You're saying it's a case of "which came first, the chicken or the egg"? In short, because of the way the world is, it's impossible for God to do anything that goes against the requirements?

I'm starting to feel a little sorry for God...

"I don't know exactly what my father is thinking. But it's clear that while you have been dealt exceptional divine blessings, you are also bound by equally heavy shackles."

I have no idea what that's supposed to mean...

"Shackles?"

"Unfortunately, I can say no more than this."

She can't tell me the details of these supposed blessings or explain what she means by "shackles"? Come on! I'm dying to know now that you've brought it up!

"All will become clear in time."

Looking at the Goddess' face, somehow, it didn't seem like such a bad thing.

But, shackles? Really? I really am being treated like some kind of rabid beast or something, aren't I?!

"Will I be able to meet you again, Goddess?"

"Nefertima, I'd like you to call me by my name."

"Um, Cresiolle...?" I ventured, uneasy at referring to a Goddess so irreverently.

"You can call me Creo. ...Unless you prefer 'big sister'?"

She said this with playful sincerity, but it was too terrifying an idea to even consider.

You're putting me in a tricky situation by even suggesting it!

"I have a blood-related older sister already, so that title belongs to her," I said carefully, trying not to give offense.

Karna would definitely complain if anyone, even a Goddess, tried to usurp her title! She'd probably make me the target of one of her hug attacks until I relented.

"We're both souls that Father brought into this world. In a way, that makes us siblings," Cresiolle reasoned.

This and that are very different things! By that reasoning, that would also make me God's daughter! I'm just an innocent victim whom God dragged into all of this...

No, that's not quite right. I'm not exactly a victim, but more of a... co-conspirator?

But that makes it sound like I'm doing something bad.

...Birds of a feather? Enemy of my enemy?

There's no word for a situation like this, huh? In any case, please don't think of me as his daughter!

"I'll call you Lady Creo!" I finally declared.

"...I suppose that's the best I'm going to get."

Thankfully, she seemed to have given up on getting me to call her big sister.

"Nefertima, do not blame yourself. All living things are fated to die. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Lady Creo was smiling kindly at me. For a moment, it almost seemed as if Mama's face was superimposed over hers. Then she reached out with one of her slender, elegant hands and stroked the top of my head.

I think it's almost time to go.

“The time you’re given is for finding joy in the trying times and appreciating the happy times by paying forward your good fortune to others. Furthermore, it’s for making recompense for your sins and cultivating your soul. If you allow yourself to be trapped, wallowing in negative emotions, your soul will wither. Be careful, beloved child.”

...She’s right. I can’t just lay around moaning and weeping that Dee died because of me. I need to honor his sacrifice!

“Dee, thank you for protecting me.”

I hugged Dee—who’d been half asleep, lounging comfortably in the grass—tightly as I said this.

He barked once in reply as if saying, *“You’re welcome.”*

For some time now, I’d been hearing voices calling my name, and they’d gradually grown louder until I could no longer ignore them. I wanted to stay with Dee like this forever, but I knew that wasn’t what Dee would want.

One last time, I let myself enjoy the familiar, comforting fluffiness of Dee’s fur.

Like always, Dee smelled of fresh sunlight.

“Thank you, Lady Creo.”

I thanked Lady Creo for arranging this precious moment for me, then turned back to Dee...

“See you later, Dee!”

I won’t say goodbye. We’ll surely meet again someday!

Bonus: The Life of a Hero

HE joined the Osphe family almost immediately after his birth. He was anxious after being taken from his mother and siblings and brought to a strange new place.

A red person carried his trembling body to another tiny creature like himself. This creature was larger than him, but somehow, he knew instinctually it was weaker than him.

“We’re going to call you Dee from now on. I hope you’ll become good friends with my son, Ralfreed.” The person holding him spoke in a kind tone, then placed him beside the tiny creature named Ralfreed.

Just like him, Ralfreed smelled like milk, and it made him think of his mother and siblings.

“Whine!”

He whimpered sadly, a high-pitched noise that leaked unbidden from his nose.

The baby snow wolf named Dee grew up strong and healthy together with Ralfreed. He matured more quickly than Ralfreed, and one day, he was taken away from the place he’d come to think of as “home.”

At some unknown location that wasn’t home, he encountered another creature for the first time that resembled his mother and siblings despite differences in coloring and size.

“Dee, you need to learn how to fight so you can protect your master.”

A person he’d never seen said this to him, but Dee didn’t understand. In his eyes, the red person was the alpha of his pack. You could say he saw the red person as almost a father figure.

Ralf was a sibling and a playmate to him. For now, he crawled on four legs like Dee, but Dee knew one day he would walk on two legs like the red person. Dee

looked forward to the day they could chase each other around, playing tag.

Under the stranger's directions, Dee did many things; some were fun, some not so much. Whenever Dee tried to get out of doing the not-so-fun things, the stranger would pull out a treat, and Dee would end up doing as he said.

"Once you learn how to fight properly, you can go home."

These simple words changed Dee's attitude completely.

*I need to buckle down and master this so I can go home as soon as possible!
Then I can play with Ralf again!*

Once he came to this realization, Dee rapidly grew stronger day by day. Before long, he finally returned home.

"Dee-Dee!"

It finally sank in for Dee as he watched Ralf crawl towards him at top speed. This had been necessary so that he would be able to protect Ralf from his enemies.

From that point on, Dee kept a watchful eye over Ralf, stepping in to stop him if he wandered off somewhere dangerous and consoling him when he was crying after being scolded for getting into mischief. Even the most boring, ordinary days were peaceful and happy.

Dee became an adult, and Ralf learned to walk upright.

One day, they were playing tag, just as Dee had always dreamed of. On that day, another new family member joined the Osphe family. She was a tiny, weak little thing, just like Ralf had once been.

"Dee, dis ish my wittle shishta! Her name ish Karnadia!"

Despite having a big brother of sorts in Dee, this was his first time having something like a little sister.

Clutching Karnadia's tiny hand, he introduced her to Dee.

Smelling the familiar scent of milk on the baby, Dee felt the same thing as Ralf: they had to protect her, no matter what.

Together, Ralf and Dee watched over baby Karnadia, getting into all kinds of

mischievous, such as occasionally rolling around in the mud out in the garden. Their days were just as happy as ever.

But then a sudden misfortune befell the Osphe family.

The woman Ralf and Karna affectionately called “Grandmother” journeyed home to be with the Goddess.

The light seemed to go out of all the members of the Osphe family after that.

There was nothing Dee could do to fix it.

When he invited Ralf to play, Ralf would simply pat Dee’s head and refuse to leave his room. When he invited Karna to play, she hid her face and started to cry.

The days passed, with Dee unable to do anything but stand by, patiently watching over them, until one day, their smiles suddenly returned.

“Mother and Father said we’re going to have a new baby brother or sister!”

“Which do you want, Dee? I bet they’ll be cute either way!”

Dee knew the word “sister.” He’d heard Ralf refer to Karna as his sister.

“Woof!”

The two of them reclaimed their smiles, and while doting on their mother as her stomach grew ever larger, they waited eagerly for the new life within to be born.

When the baby’s first, almost unnaturally energetic cries filled the halls, the Osphe family rejoiced.

Ralf gave thanks to the Goddess, and Karna cried in happiness.

When their mother showed Dee the newest family member, he felt instantly that she was a precious treasure.

The *most* precious treasure.

And she was the entire family’s precious treasure.

This tiny creature sparkled so brightly that even the treasures Dee had kept secret from Ralf and Karna grew hazy in comparison.

“Her name is Nefertima. Please play with her lots and lots, Dee!”

Wagging his tail, Dee moved closer so he could see Nefertima’s face, and then he licked her cheek.



From that point on, Dee hardly ever left Nefertima's side.

Of course, Ralf and Karna were both right there with him.

Nefertima grew with every day that passed, and she soon became so active that she would quickly injure herself somehow or another if Dee took his eyes off her for even a moment.

Around that time, Ralf and Karna were too busy with their studies to spend as much time with Nefertima, but Dee worked hard enough for all three of them. He protected Nefertima with his own body so she wouldn't get hurt. When she cried, he swooped in to comfort her. Sometimes, he even let her ride on his back, and they went on adventures.

Then, they gained another new friend named Nox.

Sometimes, at night, Dee would play with Nox in secret.

When Nefertima was gone from the house for a long time, to stave off his loneliness, Dee went where he'd hidden his secret treasures. They didn't sparkle as brightly as Nefertima, but they were all gifts from his beloved family.

A worn-out, very well-loved old dog toy, a small doll Karna had made for him, the bone leftover from a chunk of meat he'd received as a treat...

These really *were* treasures, he decided. He hid them away once more, secret and safe.

When Nefertima returned, more strange creatures accompanied her. One had many legs, and the other had none.

He immediately recognized that they were different from Nox.

But they didn't give him a bad feeling.

Dee sniffed at the legless creature, and it jiggled like pudding. He was surprised by its strange softness, which was different from that of humans. He'd never seen such an unusual creature before.

The many-legged creature was moving in a strange way. But it seemed fun.

Since Nox didn't seem wary of them, Dee decided they were probably all right.

It seemed to make Nefertima happy to see him playing with the strange creatures, so he did so often. It was fun, but it wasn't the same.

Dee felt lonely with Ralf and Karna's ever-more frequent absences.

Nefertima was his treasure, but Ralf and Karna were his important people.

Nothing made him happier than when they were all together.

Even more so if the red father and the slightly scary mother were also there.

In the middle of Dee's struggle to adapt to how much things were changing, a new, large creature arrived.

Nefertima instructed them to get along, and the large creature stared unwaveringly at Dee.

He was scary, but Dee wasn't afraid. Dee recognized this large creature as being the same as himself.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dee."

Gazing into this "Shinki" creature's eyes, Dee understood two things. One, he was stronger than Dee. And two, they both guarded the same treasure.

"Woof!"

He wasn't sure if the message was clear or not, but Dee attempted to convey that he'd accepted Shinki as a friend and companion. Although Dee had deemed him an equal, it seemed that Shinki hadn't quite understood what he was trying to say.

Dee played with Nefertima again and slowly forgot the loneliness that had settled over him while she'd been gone.

Then, one day, Nefertima went on an outing. Dee was sunbathing in the garden when a sense of uneasiness he couldn't quite describe came over him. He couldn't see or hear them, but this "sense" was due to the elemental spirits around him frantically shouting that Nefertima was in danger.

Without hesitation, he followed his instincts.

He all but forcibly dragged Ralf along with him, barking nonstop in an attempt to make him understand they needed to get to Nefertima right away.

Ralf seemed to realize, based on Dee's highly unusual behavior, that something was wrong because he obligingly let Dee out.

Dee took off running the moment the gate swung open, and Ralf raced after him on a horse, desperately trying to avoid losing sight of him.

Dee searched for Neema, following the faint trail of her scent.

He had no way of knowing the wind spirits sent him her scent trail.



ELSEWHERE, shortly before...

In the basement of the church Nefertima had visited, people were moving about hurriedly.

"It seems she really is on her way here now."

"To be getting a chance like this so quickly, the God of Creation really must be guiding us."

The men did as instructed, preparing the sedative and outfitting themselves for the mission. The person they reverently called The Teacher wanted Nefertima. To create their ideal world, one where man walked together with God, they needed his beloved child.

They had no idea that the acts they were trying to carry out went against the God of Creation's will.

"Is everything ready?"

Altogether, there were over a dozen men.

They made their way through the labyrinth of hidden tunnels and waited anxiously for the perfect moment to burst into the room where Nefertima was.

Their co-conspirator urged Nefertima's attendants, Paul and Shinki, to drink the sedative-laced tea, but Paul refused. That was fine—they still had numbers on their side. They figured they could take one man easily enough.

But for some reason, although Nefertima and Shinki drank the tea, only Shinki fell asleep.

"The drug didn't work? Well, whatever. Get rid of the man."

The signal came, and the men charged into the room. Taking advantage of the element of surprise, they first secured Nefertima, then turned to eliminate Paul.

But Paul was stronger than expected. First, one man fell, then another.

Realizing they were likely going to be wiped out, two men grabbed Nefertima and fled.

Stuffed in a bag as she was, Nefertima had no hope of resisting.

“Damn it! Come back here!”

Paul started to chase after them, but the remaining men fought with an unnatural fervor, heedless of their own safety, preventing him from going after Nefertima.

“Very well then; you leave me no choice. I’ll get it out of you all instead.”

In the end, Paul would find out where they were planning to take Nefertima, but by that time, Dee and Ralf were already rushing to her aid.



ONCE Dee reached the manor where Nefertima was being held, he paused just long enough to glance back and confirm he hadn’t lost Ralf before taking off again.

To Dee, the uneven footing and obstacles barring his path were trivial matters.

When he reached the end of Nefertima’s scent trail, a bad-smelling person jumped out at him. Dee wasted no time, leaping at the man he immediately recognized as an enemy. Aiming for the neck, he sunk his sharp teeth into the bad-smelling man’s body.

However, the man moved at the last minute, and Dee bit his shoulder instead of his neck. Dee knew from his training that he should ideally dispose of this enemy once and for all before moving on, but he chose to prioritize getting to Nefertima as quickly as possible.

His muzzle stained red, Dee dashed through the open door.

He growled menacingly at the other bad-smelling man, warning him away

from Nefertima. Dee calculated the distance between himself and the enemy and crouched down, ready to leap on him at any moment.

The man drew his sword, prepared to fight the snarling snow wolf off.

Dee recognized this as a dangerous item.

For this reason, he didn't make any move to approach.

There was a rustling sound, and then he heard Nefertima's voice.

Just as he was thinking, *Thank goodness, she's okay...* Everything changed in the blink of an eye.

The man turned and raced not towards Dee but for Nefertima.

Dee's body moved before he even stopped to think.

At this point, it was already an instinctive reaction.

He would always, always stand between Nefertima and danger.

At the same time, he noticed another source of danger, but he didn't stop.

He knew to protect his precious treasure, he would need to halt the falling blade with his own body.

Hot pain lanced through him, and it was all he could do to muster his final bit of strength to bask in the satisfaction of having protected his most precious treasure.



HE awoke in a field with a cool breeze blowing through his fur. There was a person in front of him, staring at him strangely.

"You did well. As a reward, I'll give you a chance to say goodbye."

He didn't understand those words, but he caught a whiff of a familiar scent. Without hesitation, he ran full speed towards the source of that scent.

When the scent intensified, he caught sight of his treasure.

"Woof!"

He made no attempt to conceal his excitement; his wagging tail made it more than obvious.

Nefertima embraced Dee happily.

This was the way they were always meant to be.

Nefertima started engaging in some kind of conversation with the person from earlier, but Dee was content just being by her side.

But he knew full well that their time together was almost up.

For this reason, he chose to spend the little time they had left the way they always did.

“See you later, Dee!”

He continued watching long after his treasure disappeared.

“Ah-woooo!”

A heartbroken howl echoed across the endless plains.

“Now then, Dee. What is it that *you* want?”

He had only one answer to this question...

“Woof!”

Side Story: Animal Lovers' Tea Party

I'D come to the royal palace to play, only to be told that all the important division leaders were in a meeting.

If Dan and Lestin weren't around, I couldn't play at the dragon or beast stables. I suppose I could've waited for them in the office, but I didn't want to get in the way of the knights working there, so I gave up on that idea.

Seeing no other option, I spent some time reading in the library. To this end, I requested an escort. If someone guided me there, I wouldn't need to worry about potentially getting lost along the way.

I was walking down the hall, excitedly thinking about what kind of book I would read, when familiar voices reached my ears.

"Why can't any of you see how naïve you're being?!"

"Says you!"

"I understand how you feel, but even if we do it frequently, it will only fan the citizens' uneasiness."

I recognize Dan and Lestin's voices, but who's the other person with them? I'm sure I've heard their voice before, but...

They seemed to be arguing about something, but when the maid offered to ask them to keep their voices down, I told her there was no need.

We're acquaintances, so I'm not frightened by the sound of them arguing or anything. But I wonder what they're getting so heated about?

"What are you all doing in a place like this?"

The person speaking very loudly right before I interrupted turned out to be Gwynn.

It's sure been a while since I've seen him!

"Lady Nefertima!"

Dressed in formal attire, Lestin smiled at me and bowed.

He looks even more handsome in uniform!

What about uniforms makes anyone wearing them look instantly more attractive?

Following Lestin's lead, Dan too quickly bowed in greeting.

Seeing Dan in uniform is a rare event! I don't think I've ever seen him in formal attire other than at government functions.

And then there was Gwynn, who bowed stiffly, frowning the entire time. He was just as much of an "ice beauty" as usual, but at the moment, he mostly just looked irritated.

Attractive people are lucky; even when they're making an unpleasant expression, their face still looks gorgeous! It's not fair!

"What's wrong, Gwynn?" I asked.

"No, it's nothing..."

Based on how loud you were yelling, I have a hard time believing that!

I glanced at Dan and Lestin and found them both looking incredulous.

"I heard there was supposed to be a meeting today... Has it already ended?" I asked.

"Yes. It just concluded, but Gwynn wasn't satisfied with the outcome..."

I don't know what the meeting was about, but that's why Gwynn was so worked up?

"It's wonderful to try and deepen your understanding of decisions you disagree with, but there might be a better place to do that than in the middle of the hallway," I suggested.

Don't blame me if your superiors yell at you for causing a scene in a place like this!

Gwynn's frown only deepened. At this point, the wrinkles between his eyebrows were so deep that they looked more like gutters. "This does not concern you, Lady Nefertima."

I was surprised by his cutting remark.

But I couldn't deny that it was the truth. When it came to matters such as public safety and national security, even if they went through all the trouble of explaining them to me, I still probably wouldn't understand completely.

If Dan and Lestin were done with their meeting, I could change plans and go to either the dragon or beast stables, but...it didn't seem like they'd be heading back for a while yet.

Lestin reprimanded Gwynn for speaking so rudely to me, but I elected to take the high road and respond like a proper noble lady.

"Indeed. Then, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'd like to go to the library, so please let me through."

I'd merely been trying to pass through, after all. They were the ones blocking the entire hallway with their argument. The hallway wasn't particularly narrow, but I *did* outrank all of them in social status. If it were discovered that they didn't move to let me pass, they would be punished.

As if finally realizing the extent of his transgressions, Gwynn rigidly apologized.

I'd thought he was the unshakeable, always-in-control type, but it turns out he can get heated when it's something he feels passionately about, huh?

I graciously accepted Gwynn's apology and bid farewell to the three of them. I was just about to continue to the library when...

Something round and pink is heading this way at a very high speed! I know who that is!

"Princess!"

At my delighted cry, three of the people in the hallway—including the maid acting as my guide—all tensed. Only Lestin seemed happy to see Princess as he stepped in front of me, blocking my path once more.

No, I think he's attempting to shield me from Princess's "special attack." He's not being sneaky and trying to cut in line for the first chance to pet Princess, right?

Locking on to Lestin, Princess picked up her speed even more and jumped straight at him.

Regardless of the loud and heavy *BAM!* that I could practically feel from here, Lestin caught Princess gently in his arms.

Huh? I could've sworn Princess scored a critical hit, but maybe the impact was weaker than it looked?

"It's always a pleasure to see you looking as healthy as ever, Princess," Lestin said in a gentle, patient tone he reserved exclusively for animals. Lestin couldn't seem to help himself because he reflexively looked Princess over, giving her a quick physical exam.

As I looked on in amusement, he systematically checked her fur, ears, nails, and eyes.

"It looks like you're being well taken care of," Lestin concluded, satisfied at last.

Her owner, the captain of the royal guard, had received passing marks by Lestin's estimation for his care of her. If he caught someone neglecting their pet, it didn't matter if it was the captain of the guard or the king himself; Lestin would give them a thorough lecture on the importance of looking after one's pets properly. He was strict when it came to animals.

"Are you out for a walk today, Princess?" I asked.

When I spoke to her, Princess pounded on Lestin's arms with her back legs, attempting to break free. Lestin loosened his grip, and Princess hopped over to me.

I caught the fluffy furball in my arms, and Princess snorted happily.

Her fur is as amazingly thick as ever!

I doubted there was another creature in the entire world that could match the unique texture of her fur.

"Your way with animals never fails to amaze, Lady Nefertima... You've even tamed Princess." Dan seemed impressed, but I thought everyone was overdoing it a little with their excessive fear of Princess.

“What are you all doing here?”

Speak of the devil—Princess’ owner has appeared!

The three men snapped to attention, bowing deeply, and the maid escorting me curtsied gracefully.

“Long time, no see, Captain Nahal!” I called out cheerfully.

“It certainly has been a while, Lady Nefertima. So that’s why Princess suddenly ran off, hm? She must’ve realized you were nearby and came to find you.” Captain Nahal reached out to stroke her head fondly, and Princess let out an adorable little churling noise of happiness.

Princess, you came running all the way here just to see me?! You’re such a good girl!

I rubbed my cheek against Princess’ soft fur, and in response, she turned her head to give my cheek a lick with her small tongue.

Aghhh, she’s so cute! I can’t take it!

“Lady Nefertima, if you have the time, would you like to join me for tea? Princess seems to want to play with you a little longer, too.”

Ooooh, what a tempting invitation!

“If you’re sure it wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

“Not at all. Oh, and the lot of you come along as well. The head maid was complaining about a bunch of uncultured louts causing a scene arguing loudly in the hall.”

Eep, so they did get tattled on after all! Did he come here just to follow up on that complaint? The captain of the royal guard, himself?!

Thank goodness it wasn’t the terrifying head maid in charge of the east building, at least! From what I hear, the head maid in charge of the west building rarely loses her temper. Although they say that, in exchange, she’s very strict about proper manners. I suppose that makes sense, though, considering the west building often gets visitors from among the upper nobility.



CAPTAIN Nahal led us to his office, and after we settled down on the comfortable sofa, delicious-smelling tea was brought out.

“You lot have some tea as well. Once you’ve finished drinking your tea and cooling your heads, I expect a full explanation of what exactly you were butting heads about in a place like that.”

Umm, is it okay for me to be here for this conversation? Glancing covertly at the three men, I brought my teacup to my mouth. *Hm? What is this flavor...?*

“Captain Nahal, what kind of tea is this?” I asked.

“Oh, so, you noticed the blend, did you, Lady Nefertima?”

He seemed happy about this for some reason, but there was no way I could pinpoint the specific blend of tea with just one sip. But it did taste very nostalgic, somehow.

“Isn’t this the ‘ettie tea’ that’s said to be grown exclusively in the island country of Shumiarta?”

I was shocked by Gwynn’s words.

Ettie tea was often referred to as “the phantom tea” due to how difficult it was to get ahold of and how expensive it was.

“Is it really okay for the three of us to indulge in such a valuable tea?” Lestin asked, clearly just as surprised as I felt.

As for Dan, he sat frozen like a statue, with the cup lifted halfway to his mouth.

“Just think of it as a good experience and enjoy the tea, boys.”

That might be fine for Gwynn, a brigade leader under your direct command in the royal guard, but Dan and Lestin are members of the royal knighthood! It’s a very delicate matter to offer expensive gifts to high-ranking members of another division!

Captain Nahal was either incredibly generous or unbelievably dense... I hoped it wasn’t the latter.

I took another tentative sip of the tea, and nostalgia hit me again.

In any case, knowing that it was expensive didn't affect the taste. The hue of the brewed tea was a bit different, but the flavor strongly resembled oolong tea. Or rather, as far as I could tell, it *was* oolong tea. This tea didn't taste cheap, but I'd never had the opportunity to drink expensive oolong tea in my past life, so I couldn't say how it compared.

While everyone had been discussing the tea, Princess had climbed up on my lap and was contentedly watching the scene unfold, almost as if saying, "*Don't mind me!*" Since she was borrowing my lap for her bed, I shamelessly indulged in petting her fluffy fur. When I scratched her behind the ears, she narrowed her eyes in obvious pleasure.

"She's especially cute when she's relaxed and looks sleepy like this."

Lestin nodded emphatically in agreement with my quiet observation.

"Sometimes Princess kicks her legs in her sleep as if she's running around even in her dreams."

Out of a morbid sense of curiosity, I kind of wanted to see that.

Her frankly disgusting little legs popping out and kicking around while she slept were probably a horrifying sight but also strangely appealing for some reason?

"Yes, she's cute when she's sleeping."

Princess is cute, but you know what's even cuter? The baby dragons!

"The baby dragons are cute, too! It always soothes my heart to watch the cute baby lindblossoms and lindrakes scurrying around playing," I said.

Nothing beats the sight of them wagging their stubby little nub-tails and pouncing on one another!

"They're at their cutest when they're eating! The way they wolf down the meat, deftly avoiding the healthy vegetables we sneak in for the sake of nutrition, is adorable."

Oh... Dan was getting into his explanation, but it made me realize I'd never seen them eating before.

"...I've never seen them eat..." I said quietly.

“In that case, next time you visit, would you like to try feeding them a snack?”

Give the baby dragons a snack?! Heck, yeah!

“Is it really okay?!”

Awesome! Now I have another thing to look forward to!

“Heh. They’re so guileless and innocent when they’re eating. It really *is* cute,” Captain Nahal agreed.

I see that you’re a man of impeccable taste, sir! We’ll get along just fine if you’re also an animal lover who enjoys pampering and playing with animals!

After learning that Captain Nahal was a fellow animal lover, Dan and Lestin seemed to become less wary of him almost instantly, and the three fell into a light-hearted discussion about cute animals.

The men debated which animal behaviors were the cutest; it was ultimately agreed by all that the way rias washed their faces by licking their paw and stroking it over their faces was right at the top, tied with how they reacted when surprised by the sight of their reflection in a mirror.

Another honorable mention was how baby rye panthers and toetails chased their own tails.

Oh yeah, I love that one! It’s so cute! I can’t get enough of watching them spin around trying to catch their tail and then chewing on it with their stubby little baby teeth once they get it!

“I love the way Princess stomps her feet when she’s trying to get my attention,” Captain Nahal said.

I suppose all pet owners have an innate bias towards thinking that their pet is the cutest. You sure are lucky, Princess!

“For me, the cutest thing is probably when the dragons are lying around relaxing. They look so adorable when they yawn!” Dan said.

I mean, I get it, but somehow, I don’t think most people would agree with you there, Dan. It’s not much different from suggesting that a crocodile or a Komodo dragon is cute when they yawn.

When that big mouth opens up, it reveals all those sharp teeth!

...What am I saying?! Obviously, that's adorable! Who could disagree?!

"All of the different types of animals at the beast stables have their own unique allure, so I couldn't possibly convey them all. But it's especially cute how the smallest animals tend to sleep together in a pile, sharing body heat, like sabuppies and tolquegs."

I knew what tolquegs were, but I'd never heard of sabuppies before.

"I think that's pushing it a bit, calling sabuppies cute..."

It was rare for Dan to contradict something Lestin said so directly.

Gwynn, who up until this point had merely been listening silently to the conversation going on around him, suddenly showed interest.

"Sabuppies? ...They're the species often referred to as 'tiny murderers,' right?"

What a nickname! Tiny murderers?!

"Oh, you mean the beast knights legion's final-resort secret weapon that can only be unleashed with the king's permission?" Captain Nahal chimed in.

Now I'm really curious! What kind of animals are sabuppies?!

When I asked Lestin about it, he responded with a question of his own.

"Lady Nefertima, you've seen the off-limits aviary before, right?"

The off-limits aviary...? Come to think of it, I vaguely remember hearing some of the beast knights refer to the large building in the corner of the bird habitat by that name. They told me that even among the beast knights, only a select few were allowed to go inside.

"The sabuppies live in there. They're only about 2 gel long but are carnivorous and attack anything that moves."

A bird that's only 2 gel long? That would make them smaller than a sparrow! And yet they're carnivorous and prone to attacking humans?!

"When the beast knights go in to feed the sabuppies they have to wear special protective gear and a magical item that wards off physical attacks. Even

with all this, they still need to be extremely careful, as the sabuppies have been known to use the force of numbers to destroy the knights' protective magical items in the past."

I can see now why they're considered a final resort! I had no idea such a dangerous animal even existed.

Lestin explained that sabuppies didn't naturally live in Larshia; in the wild, they were found exclusively on the continent of Wazhite.

The demons there also had a hard time dealing with the sabuppies. Fortunately, they lived primarily in one specific region in the mountains, so they didn't interfere with the demons' daily lives too much. However, on the rare occasions when the sabuppies did come into the towns and villages looking for food, the resulting casualties were on par with a natural disaster.

The sabuppies would swarm anything that moved, and due to their small size, they could easily slip through the small gaps in people's clothing. Each bird could only eat so much at once, but I shuddered to think of the damage a swarm consisting of tens of thousands of the "tiny murderers" could do.

I was both in awe and a bit incredulous to learn that the beast knights were raising creatures that were essentially living natural disasters.

"Sabuppies are the type of animal that becomes docile at night. Without sunlight, they can't see anything."

So if you need to exterminate a nest of them, you have to do it at night. Good to know!

The beast knights had deduced through careful experimentation that sabuppies didn't react to artificial light; they were only active when the actual sun was out.

They sure are an unusual animal... I might give them a pass, just to be safe. I don't want to get eaten.

Following this, Lestin monopolized the conversation. One after another, he shared stories of adorable mishaps that had occurred while he and the other beast knights were training with the animals.

For example, one time, a toetail tried to jump from one perch to another but misjudged the distance and fell. Another time, a flare hog was so preoccupied with following a scent trail that it ran directly into a wall.

Some animals at the beast stables loved getting into mischief, such as hiding the beast knights' personal items or sometimes even destroying them. These pranks were so common that they became the knights' daily bread and butter, so to speak.

"The same types of things happen at the dragon stables. Those rascals sure love causing trouble for us!"

I often saw the dragon knights being toyed with by the dragons when I visited the dragon stables. I knew the dragons did this to test the knights and determine, based on their reactions, which knight was most compatible with their personalities. Many of the dragons were stubborn, like Ghizel, and would only let specific knights they'd approved of ride on their backs.

"I pity the fools who let themselves become a dragon's plaything..."

Gwynn! What are you saying?! You've just made everyone freeze up in shock with your rude words!

"Our family's pet shulgi is never disobedient like that."

...Huh?! Shulgis are a massive breed of dog that's basically a cross between a golden retriever and a German shepherd, right? Gwynn, are you telling me that you've had a pet dog this whole time and never thought to mention it before?!

Dan wasn't the only one shocked by Gwynn's statement; Captain Nahal also looked surprised. Lestin didn't seem fazed. He must've already known.

I assumed Gwynn hated animals, considering he's always telling Dan that he "reeks of animals."

"It's always waiting for me in the entryway every day when I get home, always stays obediently by my side without running off, finishes all of its food, doesn't make a mess inside the house, and *never* barks," Gwynn bragged of his unbelievably well-behaved pet dog.

Lestin was nodding in agreement... Had he met this amazing hound before or

something?

But Dee can do all that and more! He always comes to bid me farewell when I leave and comes to meet me when I return. He naps with me and even catches me when I'm about to trip and fall!

Once I started extolling Dee's virtues, there was no end in sight.

But a lot of people in this country have pets, huh?

"Do many of the nobles and common citizens also have pets?" I asked.

"Yes, historically, there seems to be a correlation between a member of the royal family bonding with a holy beast and a sharp rise in pet ownership among the populace," Lestin explained.

There's just something special about the relationship between a pet and its owner, after all! I should've known, though, that Lars' presence would have such a huge influence on the country.

"I guess in the end, everyone loves their own pet most of all."

Everyone nodded in agreement with Lestin's wise conclusion.

All animals were cute, but *my* pet was the cutest of all!

I LOVE YOU, DEE!





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