

FLUFFY PARADISE 6

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Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[1 - All Aboard, Heading to the Linus Empire!](#)

[2 - We Made Lots of Friends!](#)

[3 - Attack of the Imperial Princes!](#)

[4 - Are We Being Welcomed or Not?](#)

[Small Talk: Give Me a Break! \(POV: Director of the Intelligence Department\)](#)

[5 - I Was Played With, so I Decided to Play](#)

[6 - Apparently, a Lot Is Going on Below the Surface](#)

[Small Talk: Don't You Think I'm Being Abused Just a Tad?! \(POV: Director of the Intelligence Department\)](#)

[7 - An Outing With the Emperor!](#)

[8 - The Helios Province and Maidells](#)

[9 - You Can Really Feel How Far We've Come!](#)

[Small Talk: I'm an Exhausted, Cranky Old Man! \(POV: Director of the Intelligence Department\)](#)

[10 - You'll Never Believe What Arrived!](#)

[Side Story: Together Is Best!](#)

[Other Series](#)

Fluffy Paradise Volume 6

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Fluffy Paradise Volume 6

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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.

"WOW,
YOU'RE BOTH
AMAZING!
GOOD JOB!"

"ME TOO!"

"I GOT
PRAISED!"

Seigo
A KOBOLD WHO
WAS NAMED BY NEEMA.

Rikusei
A KOBOLD WHO WAS
NAMED BY NEEMA.



"SO BEAUTIFUL!"

Euche
A BLUE PEGASUS.

"MAY YOU PASS THE NIGHT
IN SAFETY AND PEACE."





“JUST AS I
THOUGHT! WHAT A
BEAUTIFUL PICTURE
YOU MAKE!”

Kai

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

1 - All Aboard, Heading to the Linus Empire!

“NOOOOOOOOOO! I don’t wanna! You can’t make me!”

“Neema, you’re troubling Ralf.”

I’m in the middle of an incredible tantrum right now, so Ralf will just have to deal with it!

“Neema, we promised to write to each other every day, right?”

“But I don’t want to be so far from you, Ralf!”

Today, we were departing for the Linus Empire, but now that the moment had come, I was overcome with loneliness and couldn’t pry myself away from Ralf. And I do mean literally—I was clinging to him so tightly that his clothes would need to be ironed afterward.

“Oh, Neema, what are we going to do with you?” Papa said. “I guess we’ll just have to give up on sending you to the Linus Empire after all, huh?”

“Dayle.”

A frigid air wafted off of Mama as she reprimanded Papa. Even I could tell I’d better quit while I was ahead.

“Ralf, promise you’ll come to visit?” I pleaded.

“Of course. Should I bring Will with me, too?”

I don’t care about Will, but I would like to see Lars... And anyway, is it okay for the crown prince to flit around other countries whenever he pleases?

“Weeell... I think it would be fine if you came alone,” I said. “It would probably turn into a needlessly big deal if Will came.”

“All right, Neema, it’s time. Your new servants are waiting for you.”

At Papa’s urging, I turned toward the carriage and spotted two familiar faces. “Spica?! And Kai, too?!”

Spica was in a servant's uniform, and her hair was longer than I remembered. She looked absolutely gorgeous.

It's my wildest dreams come true in one adorable package—a bombshell with animal ears, dressed in a maid's uniform!

“Mistress, I'm so hungry...” Kai wasn't wearing a servant's uniform; his clothing appeared to be traditional formalwear. But anything looked good on someone as handsome as him. I was pretty sure there was supposed to be a belt that went on over the long jacket, but Kai wasn't wearing one, maybe because he didn't like how restricting it felt. In any case, his jacket billowed around him almost like a dress, adding to the androgyny of his look.

“Long time no see, Lady Neema!” Spica exclaimed. “I'm finally ready to serve at your side.”

It was clear from how her ears stood straight up, and her tail energetically wagged that Spica was *very* happy.

In the past, she would've leapt on top of me at a time like this... I have to admit, I'm a bit sad to see this change in her!

“Spica, I heard all about your training from Father and Aurphan. You worked really hard!” I raised my hand to pat her head, but she was taller than me, so I had to stand on my tiptoes and stretch to reach.

“Yes! I promise I'll protect you, Lady Neema!”

Agggh! She's so cute!

In the end, I got Spica to crouch down so I could ruffle her hair—and pet her wolf ears while I was at it. Spica complained, “Oh no, my hair!” but her tail was wagging so hard I could practically hear it slicing through the air, so I figured she didn't mind.

“Me too!”

“Me too!”

Surprised by the sound of two young boys' voices I'd never heard before, I looked around, trying to determine where they had come from, and spotted two fluffy critters.

“Seigo and Rikusei?!”

“Woof!”

The two Shiba Inu kobolds with their adorable eyebrow patches were sitting at attention.

“Mistress, I worked hard too!”

“I worked harder!”

Umm, can somebody please explain this? Why can Seigo and Rikusei speak? I mean, I know that when a kobold evolves into a high kobold they gain the ability to speak, but...

Seigo and Rikusei are the same size as before! They look like normal dogs; they haven't taken on a humanoid appearance and aren't walking on two legs like all the high kobolds I've seen!

“Seigo and Rikusei, you evolved? Then why hasn't your appearance changed?” I asked.

“We want to serve at your side, mistress, so we requested to keep these forms!”

“...You can do that?!” I gasped.

The way their eyes were sparkling, clearly begging to be praised, was super-duper adorable!

“I can't say for certain, but I believe that due to being named by you, Miss, they were able to evolve differently than usual.” Shinki's attempt at an explanation only made my head hurt.

So now God's playing around with your lives as well...?! Oh, Gooood! Can you hear me? Won't you pretty please stop messing around with my people for your own amusement?

Shinki went on to explain that it wasn't just these two either; the slimes were also developing differently than normal. I'd never seen a “normal” slime, so I didn't know what the differences were, though.

“I see... You both worked very hard! Good job!” I patted the two kobolds on

the head, then wildly rubbed the area all around their necks.

“We got praised!”

“Yeah! We got praised!”

Both pressed their bodies against my hands, urging me to pet them even more.

They're both such good boys!

“All right, Neema. It's about time to go.”

Karna and I gave Papa, Mama, and Ralf each one last tight hug, and then Karna said with a wide smile, “We're leaving now! I'll take care of Neema, don't you worry!”

“Bye-bye!” I added with only slightly forced cheerfulness.

Paul and the others bowed to those staying behind and loaded into the carriage as well.

The adults had decided that we would travel directly from the royal palace to the imperial palace in the Linus Empire via teleportation circle. Apparently, that was incredibly rare and only possible because the emperor of the Linus Empire had specifically sent King Gauldi a precious jewel made of magical stone to enable the teleportation circle to transport us there.

When I considered how many days the journey would've taken by carriage, I was grateful. I wasn't sure how I would've survived the stress of such a long journey. Although, I also wouldn't mind if they'd just gone all-in and invented a magical item to allow us to fly through the sky.

Will somebody please invent me a pair of magic flying shoes?

When we arrived at the royal palace, a distinguished group, including the king, queen, and Will, was gathered to see us off.

I won't be able to see Lars for quite some time, so I'll take this opportunity to enjoy every inch of his soft fur! Of course, it's all glorious to touch, but my absolute favorite is the ultra-fluff-zone between his ears and neck. It's like a huge squishy muffler!

“Lars, I’m going to miss you so much!” I cried.

“Growl.”

“He says he’ll fly there in an instant if you’re ever in trouble. Lucky you, eh?”

Don’t you even start, Will! I still haven’t forgiven you for taking Kai out without asking me first! I shot Will a petulant frown, but no matter how obvious I made it that I was peeved with him, Will staunchly ignored it and gently patted the top of my head like a dog.

“In any case, if you find yourself in trouble, turn to the holy beasts and the elemental spirits,” he said. “People can sometimes be held back by things that can’t be seen with the eyes or take actions that go against their own will. But the holy beasts and elemental spirits will never betray you. Got it?”

By “things that can’t be seen with the eyes,” is he referring to things such as political authority and social status?

“If anyone bullies you, come home immediately,” King Gauldi added emphatically.

Is that a serious possibility?!

You’re starting to make me think I’d be better off taking my chances here in the Kingdom of Gaché! I don’t wanna go to the Linus Empire!

“Oh, you two! Stop it. You’re just making her even more uneasy. It’s going to be just fine, Neema dear. If anyone gives you any trouble, tell my parents or my sister-in-law about it right away. They’ll punish anyone who bothers you!”

Why does “punish” sound twice as terrifying when Queen Relena says it just as cheerfully as you please?!

“Sorry, Sorry. But you never know what might happen. It doesn’t hurt to be prepared,” King Gauldi explained.

“Just make sure to take care with how you use your power. You’ve got enough to destroy people. But if you’re not careful, the people you destroy could end up being those most important to you,” Will cautioned me gravely.

King Gauldi and Will are both very worried about me.

Just hearing that it was okay to ask for help and to come home if I needed to was incredibly reassuring. It meant that I wasn't alone and had a place where I belonged. I didn't think anything that drastic would happen, but I could read between the lines well enough to know that they were telling me it was okay to run away if things got too hard.

I'm sure nothing will happen that would cause an international incident between our two countries... Right?

"Take care, Karna and Neema."

"Thank you. We'll be going now, then!" Karna said, performing a bow of gratitude to the king, queen, and Will.

I copied her bow, then loudly called out, "Goodbye!"

After checking to confirm that everyone was safely inside the magic circle, Karna took a deep breath.

"Azurite Palace!"

As soon as Karna chanted the name of the palace in the Linus Empire's capital, the imperial city, a multitude of sparkling lights converged around us.

Once the sparkles faded away, we were in an unfamiliar location, surrounded by people.

"Welcome, and thank you for coming," a person of seemingly high rank greeted us, and as one the crowd fell to their knees, lowering their heads in a reverent bow.

"Thank you very much. I am the prime minister of the Kingdom of Gaché, Dayland Osphe's oldest daughter, Karnadia. My younger sister Nefertima and I will be in your care for the foreseeable future." Karna performed the first-rank official greeting, and I quickly copied her.

Just then I heard a familiar voice coming from somewhere at the back of the crowd.

"Sorry, I'm late! Oh, are Neema and the others already here?"

That's definitely Louis.

“Welcome, Neema. Oh, and of course, Lady Karnadia as well.”

“Your Highness!”

It was somehow reassuring to see that Louis was just as flighty and casual as usual.

The high-ranked man who’d first greeted us wasted no time admonishing Louis for his lack of decorum.

“We’ve been waiting for you. I’ll escort you to His Majesty,” said another man. This time, it was Theo, just as blank-faced as usual.

I’m glad to see he’s looking well. I feel a bit more at ease, seeing their familiar faces among this sea of strangers.

“Lord Theo, where should Paul and the others go?” I asked.

“Your servants can accompany you. It’s just an informal family gathering, so don’t worry.”

As you might imagine, that didn’t prevent me from worrying in the slightest.

By “informal family gathering,” does he mean it will just be members of the imperial family? That’s still pretty intimidating! But I guess it’s better than having the entire nobility gathered for a formal reception or something.

While Theo led us through the palace, Louis seemed fascinated by Seigo and Rikusei.

“Are these guys also kobolds?” he asked.

“That’s right. Their names are Seigo and Rikusei,” I said, introducing them.

“Woof!”

They’d been instructed not to speak Larshian anywhere they might be overheard, blowing their cover as normal dogs. So, for the time being, they were sticking to communicating with barks.

“Wow, who would’ve imagined a bodyguard could be so adorable?! I want one too.”

Right?! They’re cute but also strong—the ultimate combination! Spica, Seigo, and Rikusei are all really, really cute! I was tempted to brag like a disgustingly

proud parent—or, I guess, disgustingly proud master? *Somebody pat me on the back for resisting the urge to brag about how great they are!*

“We’re here.”

Since we were about to meet with His Imperial Majesty, I’d assumed we were heading to the throne room, but that wasn’t where we ended up.

It was a rather ordinary-looking room with an unlit fireplace, a thick carpet and cushions on the floor, a coffee table and sofa set, and even a rocking chair.

No matter how you look at this, this clearly isn’t a public area, right?

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Karna asked Theo hesitantly.

“This is a private lounge reserved only for the imperial family. We figured you might feel more at ease here.”

I was grateful for their consideration, but there was also something a bit nerve-wracking about suddenly being let into the imperial family’s private space.

More than that, though, I was curious about a large vessel I spotted in the room. It wasn’t in the sitting area; it seemed to have its own separate area. And it wasn’t in the center of the room but placed off to the side, further emphasizing the unusually large empty space.

Before I could ask about it, Louis spoke first.

“His Majesty will be here shortly, so please take a seat. What would you like to drink?”

We can’t just make ourselves at home before His Majesty even arrives...

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to wait until after the greetings are finished to enjoy my tea.”

I was grateful to Karna for politely rejecting Louis’s offer, but he seemed a bit dissatisfied with her answer.

And then there was Theo, who had already flopped down and was in full relaxation mode...

I can smell the aroma of his tea from here!

“Sure, he’s technically the emperor, but he’s just a normal old man, you know? There’s no need to be so formal...” Louis said.

What is “normal” about that?! There’s nothing “normal” about the emperor of the mega-country that rules over half the landmass in the entire continent of Larshia!

Although, I strongly suspected, based on the fact that he was Louis’s older brother and Theo’s Father, that he was probably an unusual person himself...

“Louis, who are you calling an ‘old man,’ hm?”

I was so startled by the sudden appearance of another man in the room that I clung to Karna’s arm.

“Oh, sorry. Did I frighten you?”

He walked over to us and, slowly moving like you might when dealing with a frightened animal, crouched down to put himself at eye level with me.

That only surprised me even more.

Only members of the imperial family are allowed in here, right? Even Will picks me up to put us on eye level whenever people are around. Not only are his clothes touching the unclean ground, but it’s an affront to the dignity of someone of such a high social status to kneel before anyone...

“E-Excuse me, my lord, but could you please stand?” Karna requested. “My sister and I are quite surprised by this...”

“Forgive me. I’d forgotten how strict people from the Kingdom of Gaché are about following proper manners.”

Thanks to Karna’s quick save, we avoided the devastating faux pas of allowing a member of the imperial family to kneel before the daughters of a duke.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Dayland Osphe’s oldest daughter, Karnadia, from the Kingdom of Gaché.”

“I am his youngest daughter, Nefertima.”

We both curtsied formally, and the man surprised us again with what he said next.

“I am Celiunos Raux Linus. I’d like you to treat my palace like a relative’s house and make yourselves at home.”

“Huh?!” Karna shrieked, so overcome by shock that she momentarily forgot all decorum.

I felt exactly the same.

I never would’ve imagined the emperor would look so young!

But I was also surprised by how well my servants continued to conceal their presence despite the emperor’s sudden and unexpected appearance. Even Spica, Seigo, and Rikusei practically seemed to fade right into the walls.

Where did they learn to do that?

“Forgive me, it’s just that you’re so much younger than I’d expected, it startled me... Oh, how embarrassing.”

The way Karna clasped both hands over her cheeks in embarrassment as she said this was really cute. Even though I was pretty sure it was a calculated gesture, it was still cute.

“I guess you could say I’m a bit of a throwback. Every now and then, someone in our family line is born with a stronger-than-average inheritance of elvish characteristics from our distant ancestor.”

Does that mean His Imperial Majesty also possesses a longer lifespan?

“Will you also live as long as an elf, Your Majesty?” I asked curiously.

“Not as long as an elf, no. From what I hear, the others of our family line who were born with strong elvish characteristics all lived about one and a half ages.”

Considering the guild master of the adventurers’ guild, Ardo, is over 300 years old, I guess that’s not a very long life by elvish terms. But even if he only lives 150 years, his children will still pass away before him. That must be very hard to come to terms with.

“Come to think of it, have you louts even properly introduced yourselves? You were traveling incognito while in the Kingdom of Gaché, right?”

In response to His Imperial Majesty’s prodding, Louis and Theo formally

introduced themselves.

“I am His Majesty’s cute little brother, Louivence Taux Linus. Let’s continue to be good friends.”

“I am His Majesty’s oldest child, Theoval Shea Linus.”

Louis’s mannerisms were perfect, but there was a sense of irreverence in the way he spoke. I got the feeling that he was more relaxed and revealing more of his true self because we were in his country now.

I can totally tell he’s Queen Relena’s younger brother, that’s for sure!

As for Theo, well... he was Theo.

I’ll just count it as “reassuring” that he never seems to change!

“Please allow me to introduce my partner as well,” the emperor continued.

By “partner,” he must be referring to Her Imperial Majesty, the empress, right? Is the empress coming too, then?

“Come here, Euche!”

Water shot out of the mysterious vessel like a geyser, revealing a holy beast.

Even the servants gasped at the sudden appearance of a holy beast in our midst.

He was a clear, deep blue, the color of the sky in winter, and his stunningly beautiful wings seemed to change in hue as he moved.

This type of holy beast was known as a “blue pegasus.”

“He’s so beautiful!” I cried.

This blue pegasus was a completely different shade of blue from the one I’d met before, so I deduced that there were clearly individual traits even among holy beasts of the same species.

“This is my holy beast, Euche.”

“The holy beast is your partner?” I asked.

“That’s right. We’re bound by our true names. That makes him very important in my life, a true “life partner.” Of course, I love the empress very much as

well!”

That last part was unnecessary. I mean, I'm glad you have a happy marriage, but I'm surrounded by more than enough sappy couples, thanks.

But, you know, it's hard to think of Will and Lars as "life partners" without snickering. They're more like a pair of mischievous buddies.

“Euche, is it okay if I touch you?”

I wasted no time asking permission to pet Euche, and his reaction seemed to be something along the lines of *“What, you want to touch me? Sure, I suppose it's fine,”* because he obligingly knelt down so I could reach.

I began by stroking the side of his long muzzle, and the sensation that met my fingers was very unusual. His coat felt chilly and almost insubstantial, like dipping my fingers into cold water.

The firmness of his skin was both hard and soft at the same time but in a different way than the slimes. By all appearances, it looked just like the coat of any normal horse, but when you touched it, it was like touching water inside a barrier of some kind.

I want to play in the water with him on a hot day!

“My name is Neema. Will you play with me sometime?” When I said this, Euche's eyes widened.

“Euche loves to play,” His Majesty said. “You might have a hard time keeping up with him, though...”

I very much doubt that. I'm sure it will be fine!

For his part, Euche seemed to vigorously agree to my invitation to play together sometime because he was now rubbing his face against me.

I hugged his muzzle, enjoying the unusual sensation of his skin.

I can't get enough of this strange but wonderful feeling! It's like riding over gentle waves while floating in the ocean!

“Incredible... I've never seen Euche warm up to someone like this before...”

“This has me looking forward to three days from now.”

I was entirely focused on Euche, so I had no idea what the emperor and Louis were talking about.

Karna later told me that a banquet would be held in three days. Apparently, it was in our honor—a welcome ceremony of sorts.

“Although, at least half of them aren’t ‘welcoming’ us at all.”

“Why is that?”

“All of His Imperial Majesty’s children, the imperial princes, are still unmarried. Furthermore, none of them even have more than ‘candidate’ fiancées, so naturally, all of the nobles with daughters of suitable ages feel threatened by our presence here,” she explained.

Oh, that makes sense. They’re right to feel threatened by an epic beauty like Karna! I wouldn’t be surprised if more than one young man fell in love with her at first sight!

All right! I’ll make it my mission to ensure no weird guys get anywhere near her!

“But why have none of them finalized engagements if suitable candidates are available?” I asked.

If they finalized the engagements, it would put a lot of drama and power struggles to rest.

“Because none of the imperial princes have bonded with a holy beast.”

Oh, that’s right. I’d forgotten that the imperial family here in the Linus Empire has a tradition of one member in each generation bonding with a holy beast. So the real problem is that whoever bonds with the holy beast can only marry someone the holy beast approves of?

But that wasn’t it, at least according to Karna.

“To the imperial family, the holy beast is the most important thing. Therefore, they want to keep their children all above reproach so that the holy beast can choose from any of them.”

I don’t see how having a fiancée would interfere with that...

Just because they're engaged doesn't mean it can't be broken off if the holy beast bonds with that person but doesn't approve of their fiancée.

“More importantly, I have to go out tomorrow, but what do you want to do, Neema? Do you want to come with me?”

The next day, Karna was scheduled to tour the school where she would be studying abroad and would also have to take a simple test.

“Yeah, I wanna go too!”

It would be lonely and boring to be stuck here by myself when I wasn't used to the imperial palace yet. So, I planned to stick with Karna for the time being.

“I wasn't looking forward to the test since it sounds boring, but if you'll be there with me, I think I'll be able to do my best!” she said.

But, come to think of it, I haven't seen her studying for this so-called test at all! Is it really going to be okay?

Of course it will! What am I thinking? Karna's super smart on a totally different level from mere mortals like me!

“I'm looking forward to tomorrow!” Karna chirped.

If it helps Karna feel motivated to do her best, I'm happy to accompany her.

“Me too!” I said.

2 - We Made Lots of Friends!

FOR some reason, Theo was leading me by the hand as he showed us around the inside of the school. The school Karna would be attending wasn't far from the imperial palace. Although it wasn't referred to as a "school"—no, they called it "the Hall of Learning."

The Hall of Learning was divided by ranks, with the highest being the Hall of Advanced Studies, followed by the Hall of Secondary Studies, and finally, the Hall of Primary Studies. I guess you could equate them to college, high school, and middle school?

The Hall of Advanced Studies was the same as our country's Royal Academy in that students possessing outstanding ability could enroll regardless of social status and attend on government-sponsored scholarships.

However, admittance was by referral only. Without a referral from the principal of the Hall of Secondary Studies, a member of the imperial family, or one of the highest-ranking noble families, you couldn't get in.

Karna explained all of that to me.

Theo had offered to show me around the Hall of Learning while we waited for Karna, and I'd accepted.

I don't think it's necessary to hold my hand the whole time, though...

"Lord Theo, what's that?" I asked.

A huge dome loomed in front of us. Some kind of transparent film covered it, almost like an impossibly large greenhouse.

"It's a greenhouse. Using Kaideetay's power, they're growing all kinds of rare plants in there."

Wait, it really is a greenhouse?! That calls to mind a very unpleasant memory...

The Royal Magical Research Center had a special greenhouse. It was much smaller than this one, but some of the plants there were carnivorous. Just looking at them was enough to give me the creeps.

Theo opened the greenhouse's door, and immediately, we were enveloped in warmth from within. But it wasn't an unpleasant, humid type of heat. It was the pleasant warmth of a cheery summer day.

"Wow, this is incredible!" I cried.

The greenhouse was full of all kinds of colorful plants I'd never seen before. There was everything from tropical-looking flowers that reminded me of hibiscuses to massive, probably poisonous purple sunflowers.

"It sure is a sight to behold, isn't it?" Theo agreed.

"Oh, there are even fruits growing in here."

Paul and Spica both seemed awed by the greenhouse as well. As for Shinki, he was crouched down on the ground, not moving.

"Shinki, what's wrong?" I asked.

"There's an insect I've never seen before."

At Shinki's feet, there was a bizarre-looking insect. At first glance, it looked like an ant, but a large mushroom was growing out of its torso. The ant portion of its body was almost an inch long, so it was much too large to be an actual ant. And the mushroom was right around an inch tall. The shape of the mushroom reminded me of a certain brand of mushroom-shaped chocolate-dipped cookies that I'd loved eating in my past life.

"It's a parasitic plant known as a glomfungus," Theo explained.

In the brief moment I turned to look at Theo while he was speaking, Gratia leapt out from his usual hiding spot in my hair. Just as I registered the flutter of motion atop my head, Gratia flew across my field of view and sank his fangs deep into the parasitic plant before I could react.

"Gratia?!"

Shinki and Theo were both just as shocked as me.

After apparently immobilizing the parasite with his poison, Gratia extracted his fangs before turning his attention to the mushroom, which he wrapped his little body around and promptly began eating. He deftly used his fangs to cut off the cap of the mushroom, which he energetically gobbled down one bite at a time.

Once the mushroom was gone, Gratia moved on to the ant portion.

“...Gratia?”

The ant disappeared soon after, and when Gratia began cleaning up his face and front legs, I attempted to call out to him again.

Gratia clicked his fangs together as if announcing, *“That was delicious!”*

“I’m so sorry, Lord Theo,” I apologized.

He’d said it was a parasitic plant, so I figured it was one of the species they were painstakingly raising here in this greenhouse. At least until Gratia went ahead and *ate* it without permission...

“It’s okay. I guess frost spiders are another of the glomfungus’ natural predators.” Although he was just as expressionless as ever, Theo sounded almost impressed. “Glomfunguses’ natural habitat is in a deserted area to the south. It’s well known that the flame spiders living there love to eat them.”

Flame spiders were close relatives of frost spiders. While frost spiders lived in cold climates, flame spiders lived in hot, arid climates. Theo explained that flame spiders loved glomfunguses so much that they often used glomfunguses as bait to lure them out when they needed to be exterminated. He also remarked that since their close relatives were so fond of eating glomfunguses it wasn’t strange to learn that frost spiders also liked them.

“Gratia, you aren’t allowed to eat without asking first.”

I knew he was following his instincts, but I did my best to make Gratia understand he needed to ask first to make sure it was okay.

He clicked his teeth irritably at me in response.

“When you see something you want to eat, you have to tell me first,” I stressed. “I’ll have to say no sometimes, but I’ll let you eat it whenever

possible.”

Gratia seemed satisfied with that because he obediently climbed back up onto my head.

I think I'd better learn how to raise glomfunguses for Gratia's sake.

“I'll have the workers here prepare some glomfunguses for you.”

I gratefully accepted Theo's generous offer. In addition to supplying me with a few glomfunguses to get started with, he also arranged for an expert to teach me how to raise them.

When we return home, I bet we can continue to raise them in Mama's conservatory.

We left the greenhouse and carried on with the tour, next visiting a strangely familiar place.

“What is this place...?”

“I thought you might like it here, Neema.”

Since we'd become pretty friendly by this point, I'd asked Theo to drop the honorifics and just call me Neema. It felt a bit arrogant to keep having the imperial prince of a mega-country calling *me* “lady” all the time.

In any case, we were currently in a place that looked an awful lot like the dragon stables, and creatures were here that looked an awful lot like lindblossoms.

“These are retired soldiers from the Linus Imperial Army's Dragon Corps,” he explained.

These dragons were even larger than the largest lindblossom at the dragon stables, their leader, Ghazel.

Lindblossoms had a reptilian face that resembled a cross between a crocodile and a lizard, but these dragons looked more like Sol. They were heavily muscled and fierce, with a large spike at the end of their tail. I could tell at a single glance that anyone who got stabbed or slashed by that spike was done for.

“Are those wyverns?” Paul asked, and Theo confirmed that he was correct.

Shinki looked unfazed, but Spica's ears were pressed flat against her head.

The reason the Linus Empire was considered the foremost country on the continent wasn't just because of its landmass. It was also due to their unparalleled military might, spearheaded by the infamous Dragon Corps, who were reputed to be even stronger than our own country's Dragon Knights Legion.

"Wyverns who can no longer serve in the army due to injury or old age live here," Theo said.

"Why in the Hall of Learning?"

I thought it would be kinder to let the wyverns retire somewhere more spacious and wild, out in the country somewhere.

"I heard this was what the wyverns themselves wanted. As for the Hall of Learning, apparently, they always threaten that they will 'let down the noble wyverns who protected this country' to prevent the students from doing anything shameful."

Ohhh, yeah! Look at that!

We'd finally gotten close enough to see better, and many wyverns were lying in the sun, relaxing all around us.

According to Theo, the wyverns had been released from their true-name bindings when they retired, so they could easily leave this place if they wished to, yet none ever did.

I can't say I blame them; they've got a safe place to sleep and plenty of food to eat.

"This is the boss of this flock. His name is Kalce," Theo introduced one of the wyverns. The wyvern he'd indicated was lying down and didn't even bother to look over at us.

"Hello, Kalce. My name is Neema. Nice to meet you!"

Kalce dragged open his heavy eyelids, and after blinking a few times, he opened his huge mouth and let out a cry of "Kwah!"

The dragon's roar raised goosebumps along my skin, but thankfully, the

dragon orb's power translated his words for me so I could understand them.

"I sense the fire dragon's presence... Are you a dragon's maiden?!"

Ghizel had used that same word, "dragon's maiden," to refer to me when we first met.

"I have Sol's dragon orb."

"You've traveled a long way. Welcome."

Apparently, Sol's influence won me instant acceptance among the wyverns as well.

Sol is useful in a lot of ways!

Kalce gave a big stretch before standing and flapping his wings several times. I thought the powerful wind might blow me over, but thankfully, Paul held me upright.

"Kalce, is it okay if I touch you?"

"You can ride on my back."

He skipped right over petting and gave me permission to ride on his back?!

Kalce laid back down.

However, I figured riding such a large dragon would be difficult, so I decided to have Shinki ride with me to prevent me from falling off.

Shinki picked me up, and with one powerful leap, he jumped onto Kalce's back. Once Shinki and I were settled, Kalce slowly stood back up.

"Whoa!"

I felt the impact of each of Kalce's heavy footfalls as he walked.

It feels like I'm riding a dinosaur!

...I suppose that's not too far off though, huh?

The sensation of Kalce's skin was smoother than I expected for scales. When I looked closer, I noticed the scales had tiny spikes, almost like sandpaper. However, the area where Shinki and I were sitting was strangely smooth.

While enjoying our walk with Kalce, some other wyverns called out to us.

“A dragon’s maiden, eh? Live long enough, and you really do see everything!”

“What a tiny little whipper-snapper she is.”

“Come visit any time.”

Compared to the dragons at the dragon stables, these ones spoke like old people.

I guess Sol also tends to speak in an old-fashioned manner.

All the wyverns seemed more content to lay around sunbathing and napping rather than moving around.

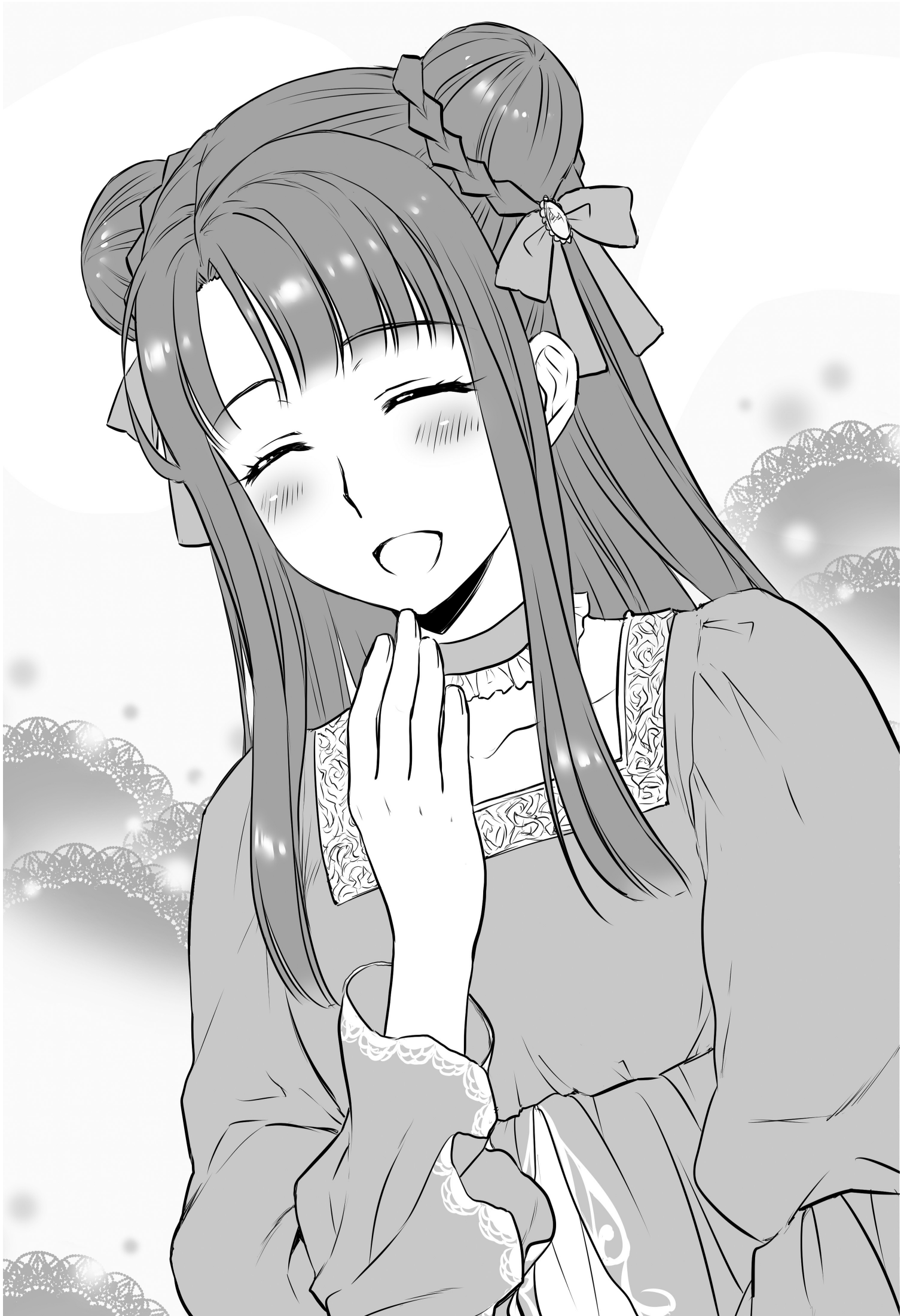
Two of them flew off somewhere, but Kalce said they were just going for a leisurely stroll through the sky.

I was jealous, but Paul had sternly warned me before I got on that I wasn’t allowed to fly, so I would have to give up on that—for today, at least.

After our walk, we returned to where Theo and the others were waiting and found Karna and Louis had joined them.

“Karna, how was your test?” I asked.

“I enjoyed every moment of it, of course!”



...Huh? It wasn't a written test? Maybe it was the sort of practical exam where she got to fire off a bunch of spells?

“The rumors of Lady Karnadia’s extraordinary ability were not exaggerated. It was a very impressive demonstration,” Louis said.

“Thank you very much. Oh, and please call me Karna. If it’s all right, may I call you Lord Louis instead of your full name?”

“You can call me whatever you like, Karna.”

Hmmm... They seem to be getting along well...

What exactly happened while I was gone?!

Theo also seemed surprised by their chummy behavior—so surprised, in fact, that I could swear I even saw a twitch of some kind of expression on his face for just a moment there!

On the way back to the imperial palace, Louis gallantly offered his arm to Karna and escorted her back through the Hall of Learning to the carriage outside.

This isn't the first bloom of romance or something, is it?

Hmmm...

“Oh, Kaideetay is here,” Theo muttered as he climbed out of the carriage once we’d reached the imperial palace.

I followed his gaze and spotted what looked like a differently colored Lars! His contrasting stripes of sparkling silver and black fur were absolutely stunning.

“Kaideetay, should we take your presence to mean that the retired empress would like to see us?”

“Growl,” Kaideetay confirmed Louis’s guess.

I think he might be a little smaller than Lars.

Kaideetay approached our group, and when he reached me, he sat down right in front of me.

“So you’re the magnificent Kaideetay I’ve heard so much about, huh? My

name is Nefertima, but you can call me Neema!”

After I introduced myself, Kaideetay roared again and crouched down in front of me.

“...Are you saying ‘get on’?”

That was what Lars did when he wanted me to ride on his back, so I thought that might be what Kaideetay wanted as well.

I was right because he nodded.

“I think Kaideetay will refuse to move until you get on, Lady Neema.”

Louis seems amused, but is it okay to ride someone else’s bonded holy beast without permission?!

...I suppose it’s okay if it’s what the holy beast himself clearly wants?

Louis also reassured me it was fine, so I accepted Kaideetay’s offer and climbed onto his back.

Where Lars’s fur was soft and fluffy, Kaideetay’s fur was silky and glossy. It was the difference between cotton and silk, blankets and sheets, Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers.

While petting him, I could simultaneously enjoy the contradictory sensations of my fingers slipping through his silky fur and the individual hairs clinging to them. But the fur around Kaideetay’s neck was voluminous; unlike the rest of his coat, it was pillowy rather than sleek.

I was also curious about the fur on his legs and belly, but for now, I decided to be content with petting the areas I could actually reach. When I wrapped my arms around Kaideetay’s neck and scratched the soft fur under his chin, Kaideetay began purring deep in his throat.

“I’ve never seen Kaideetay in such a good mood anywhere but at the retired empress’s side.”

“It certainly is rare, but Kaideetay has a soft spot for children.”

I overheard enough of Theo and Louis’s conversation to gather that Kaideetay had played with both of them when they were young.

Theo's brothers, on the other hand, had played—or rather gotten into mischief—with Euche, and been scolded by Kaideetay and the other water holy beast. Based on the respectful way they spoke about the holy beasts, it was clear they held them in high regard, but I also sensed that they loved them like family.

“Kaideetay, you seem to be the older brother of the group, huh?”

I got the same “reliable older brother” feel from Kaideetay that I got from Lars, so maybe that's just how sky tigers and earth tigers were.

However, Kaideetay didn't seem entirely satisfied with that description.

We've come to what appears to be a heavily guarded area, but I wonder if we'll be allowed to pass? The guards look very surprised to see me riding on Kaideetay's back...

But they didn't try to stop us, and Kaideetay didn't seem bothered, so it was probably okay. Theo and Louis didn't say anything either, so it seemed the guards were letting us pass on face recognition.

Continuing, we came to a garden where two people sat beneath a square gazebo. Beside them was another water holy beast who wasn't Euche.

Kaideetay stopped just before the gazebo and crouched down, so I took that as my signal to get off. Before I could wiggle my way down, Theo grabbed me from behind and lifted me off.

“Thank you.”

Theo nodded expressionlessly in response as if saying, “Don't worry about it.”

“My, what a rare sight. When was the last time we saw Theo smile?”

The soft, elegant-sounding woman's voice seemed more shocked by Theo's alleged smile than by the sight of me riding on the holy beast's back.

When did he smile?! I didn't see anything that by any stretch of the imagination could be construed as a smile...

“Your Imperial Majesties, the retired emperor and retired empress, please allow me to introduce our honored guests from the Kingdom of Gaché.”

“Louis, this is a private space. There’s no need to be so formal,” the older man, who Louis called the retired emperor, said.

In response, Louis’s expression softened, and he casually answered, “Sure thing.”

“Well then, Father and Mother. These are our adorable guests from the Kingdom of Gaché: Lady Karnadia Osphe of the Osphe ducal house and her younger sister, Lady Nefertima.”

“It’s an honor to make your acquaintance. I am the prime minister of the Kingdom of Gaché, Dayland Osphe’s oldest daughter, Karnadia.”

Perhaps because the former emperor and empress expressly stated that this was an informal setting, Karna greeted them not with a formal greeting but merely a respectful curtsy.

“I am his youngest daughter, Nefertima.”

“Be at ease. I am Bergadino Will Linus. I’m just a hapless old man who’s always being mistreated by my sons.”

Umm, are we supposed to laugh at that? But...

“Lord Bergadino, you mustn’t tease such sweet young ladies. My name is Aidelena.”

Lord Bergadino was a cool and handsome older man. He retained the dignified aura of a ruler, but it starkly contrasted with the playful side of his personality.

Lady Aidelena was a refined and beautiful older lady. Her cheerful and kind personality reminded me strongly of our queen.

“Neigh!”

The holy beast suddenly stuck her face out from between the two of them.

“I was just about to get to that! This is my holy beast, Sache. She says she wants to be friends with Lady Nefertima in particular.”

Sache was a darker shade of blue than Euche, and depending on the lighting, some areas of her coat looked almost purple.

Euclia was pretty, too, but Sache was incredibly beautiful!

Now, I perfectly understand why Louis was so eager to brag about the holy beasts living in his country.

“She’s pouting because Kaideetay stole the opportunity to escort a beloved child,” Lady Aidelena said with a regal chuckle as she pet Kaideetay. She looked like a wickedly beautiful witch with a large feline familiar, an image that suited her very well.

“Nice to meet you, Sache!”

Sache strut over to me, and I gave her a big hug to seal our new friendship.

I can’t get enough of the strange but delightful sensation of water holy beasts’ skin!

“King Gauldi told us all about Runohark. We will see to it that you are well protected here, so please be at ease and enjoy your stay in our country.”

“Thank you very much for your kind consideration,” Karna said with another curtsy, and I hurried to copy her.

“Now then, why don’t we all have some tea? If you don’t mind, maybe you could tell us how Relena’s doing these days?”

...Who’s Relena?

Just as I was thinking this, Paul covertly whispered in my ear, “The queen!”

Oh, right! I always think of her as “the queen,” so it slipped my mind for a second! I’m not sure I could accurately recite the king and Will’s full names either, come to think of it...

I’ll have to make sure to brush up on those later!

I was the one who spent the most time with our queen, so I did most of the talking.

Karna helped keep me on track and stepped in from time to time to elaborate on what I was saying. She emphasized how much the Gachean citizens adored their queen and explained the kinds of charity works the queen oversaw.

Nice job, Karna!

“Come to think of it, have you two decided yet what you’ll wear to the welcome banquet in two days?” Lady Aidelena asked.

“Yes! The queen had matching dresses made for Karna and me!”

With the excuse that she wouldn’t be able to “play with” me while I was in the Linus Empire, the queen had taken the opportunity before we left to turn me into her own personal dress-up doll. She’d invited Karna along as well and gifted us with matching dresses. For some reason, she’d most *emphatically* requested that we wear them to our first banquet after arriving in the Linus Empire.

“I look forward to seeing them. And have you both selected escorts already?”

“Not just yet...” Karna said hesitantly, and Lady Aidelena’s eyes began to sparkle.

“Goodness! What are the young men of our country doing, sitting on their hands and missing such a chance?! Hmm, in terms of age, I think Aise and Daux would do nicely.”

I have no idea who “Aise and Daux” are...?

“They’re my younger brothers,” Theo filled in helpfully.

If I remember correctly, there are four imperial princes and one imperial princess in the Linus Empire. The emperor and his wife certainly have a lot of children!

“I’ll instruct the two of them to ask for the honor of escorting you ladies, so don’t you worry about anything.”

Personally, I’d prefer to go with Louis and Theo since we’re already on friendly terms, but I suppose that’s impossible since Theo said he already has a candidate-fiancée...

Oh well, I’m sure it will work out one way or another.

When we left the imperial family and returned to our rooms, exhaustion swept over me.

I guess I was more nervous than I realized!

Spica prepared tea for me, which I gratefully accepted, along with the opportunity to rest for a moment.

“Seigo and Rikusei, what did you guys do today?”

They were lounging on cushions, but I wondered what they’d done while we were gone.

“We went exploring!”

“We found secret passages!”

We’d received the emperor’s permission to move about freely within the imperial palace, so that wasn’t a problem. And no areas were off-limits. It *had* been a little frightening how the emperor had said there was nothing he would mind us seeing and that if we *did* end up seeing something he didn’t want us to, he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

I hope he wasn’t referring to imprisonment or assassination!

“Wow, you’re both amazing!”

The two of them had thoroughly explored the palace to familiarize themselves with its layout.

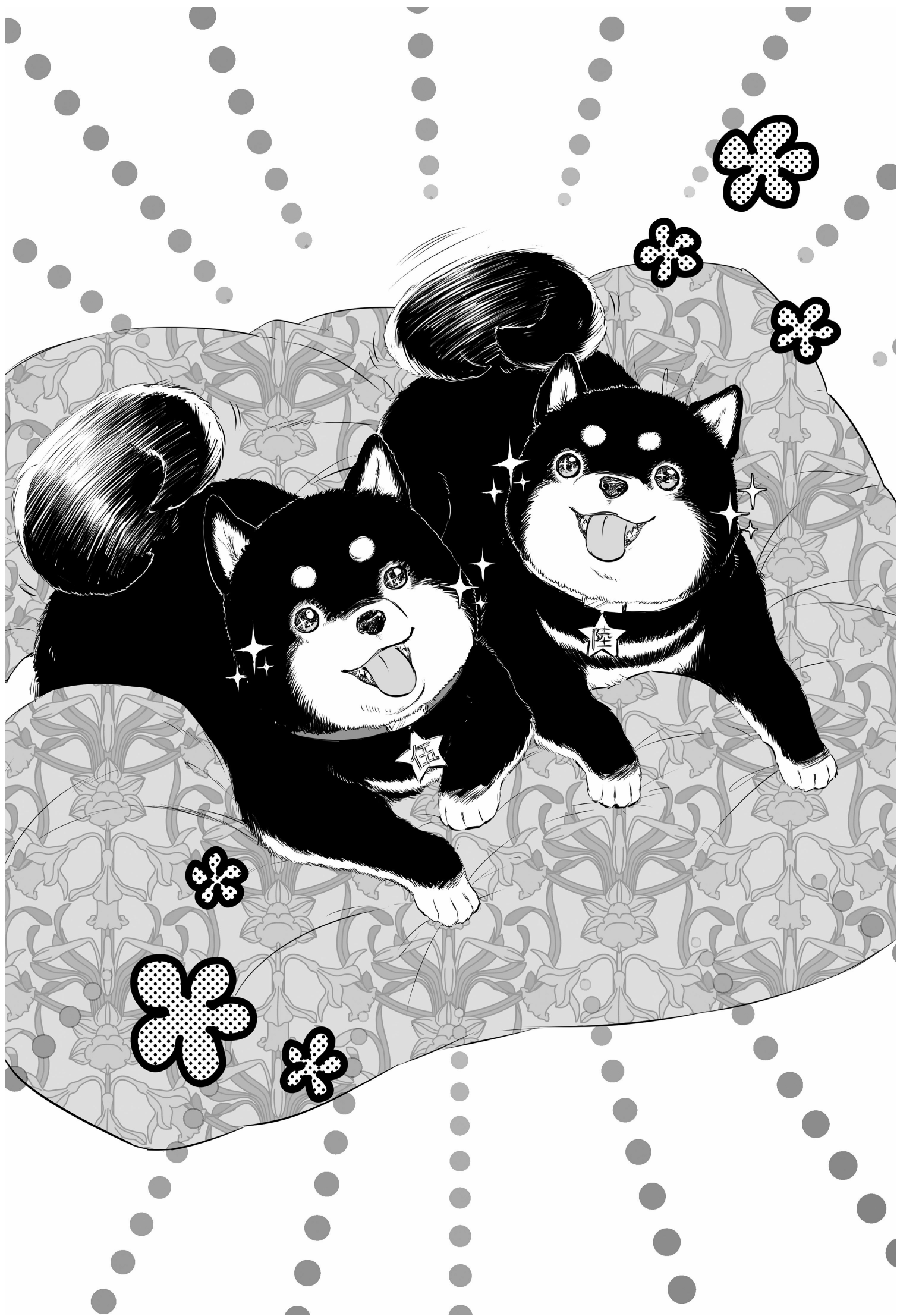
I have to make sure to praise them thoroughly for their hard work.

“I got praised!”

“Me too!”

Both of their tails were wagging like mad.

Sigh, just looking at them is soothing to my tired soul...



“Come to think of it, where’s Kai?”

I hadn’t seen him since we left that morning.

He’s not lost somewhere inside the imperial palace, is he?

“Kai said he was going to search for food.”

“He said he would search for people who wanted to do bad things to mistress.”

Huh? What does that mean?

“Kai was instructed to search out people who are planning to do you harm and feed on their desire to do so,” Paul spoke up, elaborating on Seigo and Rikusei’s confusing explanations.

Who instructed him to do such a thing?!

“Was Father the one who gave him those instructions?”

I figured it must’ve been Papa.

“No, it was His Highness.”

Will, you—! Hmph!

And Kai! You don’t have to listen to anything Will says! I’m your mistress, not him!

“He said that Kai’s most effective tool for protecting you is his ability to consume your enemies’ desire to do you harm. And besides, wouldn’t it cause trouble for you, Miss, if one of your servants killed people, especially here in a foreign country?” Shinki interjected, taking Will’s side despite how peeved I was.

“Exactly,” Paul said. “If they are clearly an enemy intending to cause you bodily injury, that’s obviously not an issue, but when it comes to members of the nobility, it becomes tricky. Fortunately, Kai is in a unique position to eliminate those threats to you without actually harming anyone.”

Does that mean they chose Kai to avoid causing an international incident? Will thought all this through and went as far as to train Kai to fulfill this role?!

I was still reeling in shock from this revelation when Kai returned just at the opportune moment.

“I didn’t find anything that seemed tasty...” he pouted.

I’m not sure what Kai’s criteria for “tasty” entails, but...

“Kai, do you remember what you’re supposed to say when you return?”

“...I’m back?”

“That’s right! Welcome back, Kai.”

If he was going to live among humans he would need to learn our common greetings, so I was trying to teach them to him bit by bit.

Paul claimed that Will had taught Kai the basic etiquette for interacting with nobles, so that should be fine at least, but there were still gaps in his day-to-day common sense.

“I’m hungry...” Kai staggered over and tried to hug me, but Karna stopped him.

“Stop right there, Kai! I told you how you’re supposed to approach a lady, didn’t I?”

Even Karna’s been in on it, instructing Kai in secret?!

Kai knelt down on one knee before me and gently took my hand. Then he fixed me with a breathtaking smile...

Th-This is dangerous!

All the young ladies of the world are in serious danger—who among us could possibly resist a beautiful young man striking a pose like a fairytale prince about to propose and turning this megawatt smile on them?!

“Just as I thought!” Karna cheered. “What a beautiful picture you make!”

...Karna, please stop fooling around...!

3 - Attack of the Imperial Princes!

AFTER we finished enjoying a charming breakfast, Seigo and Rikusei announced they were going out.

“Are you going to play?” I asked.

“We’re not playing!”

“Yeah, we’re exploring! This place is huge!”

I was mistaken. They were not going out to play but to work. I warned them not to get in any of the staff’s way before sending them off.

“Those two are impressive. Rumors have already begun to spread about them within the imperial palace. Everyone’s talking about ‘those adorable animals.’”

I nodded emphatically in agreement with Paul’s observation.

They’re undeniably adorable!

People tend to let their guard down around cute animals. That was exactly what Paul was counting on. It would make it easier for Seigo and Rikusei to gather information and get an idea of the imperial palace’s complicated design.

Kai was also operating based on the information the two of them gathered. If any of the aristocrats seemed displeased by our sudden appearance, Kai would make contact with them and, if necessary, consume their desire to conspire against us.

Those might be people who wanted to have their daughter become engaged to one of the imperial princes to strengthen their own political standing. Or it could be people who wished to ingratiate themselves with us because they were scheming to use us for their benefit in foreign relations.

Currently, however, Kai was monopolizing my bathtub. To be more precise, he was in his siren form, playing in the water. I figured it would be fine to leave him to it for the time being.

I was relaxing with Karna, discussing whether we should go sightseeing in the imperial city or visit the theater to see a play when Spica announced the arrival of visitors with a troubled expression on her face.

“I wonder who it could be?” Karna mused.

Spica’s response to Karna’s question was entirely unexpected. “It’s the third and fourth imperial princes.”

“Lord Theo’s younger brothers?”

“Yes. The names they gave matched those in the family tree of the Linus Empire’s imperial family that Paul taught me,” Spica said.

Huh? They’ve got a copy of the family tree that they study from?

I’d also tried to memorize the names of the imperial family members, but there were just too many of them. Even if the dynasty changed, as long as the previous emperor still lived, all of his children—the current emperor’s siblings—retained royal status. Once the previous emperor passed, his children would lose their royal status and become titled nobles instead.

In all the countries on the continent of Larshia, the ruling families used their country’s name as their family name, so they were immediately identifiable as royalty. If a member of royalty married into the royal family of another country, they would retain the name of their country of origin as their middle name.

Other than this, each country had different traditions regarding middle names.

Will’s full name was Wilhelt Rega Gaché, and apparently, his middle name, Rega, meant “crown prince.” When he became king one day, his middle name would be changed to Russ.

That was why the king’s name was Gauldi Russ Gaché.

I brushed up on this stuff yesterday!

“Their Imperial Highnesses Aisent Shea Linus and Dauxrouge Shea Linus?” Paul named the third and fourth imperial princes, seeking confirmation that these were the names Spica had been given.

Oh yeah, those names sound vaguely familiar...

Spica confirmed those were the individuals who'd come for a visit and explained that she'd shown them into the adjoining room.

"We can't very well keep Their Highnesses waiting," Karna announced firmly.

"In that case, I will assign bodyguards just to be safe," Paul said, and both Spica and Karna's maid, Shell, headed for the adjoining room.

Shell had already prepared tea to serve our guests.

Paul offered his elbow to Karna, and Shinki did the same for me as they escorted us into the room.

"Our apologies for keeping you waiting," Karna said.

The adjoining room was a sitting room that served as a barrier between the entrance to our suite and the private rooms further in.

Two boys were in the room; one was lounging carelessly in an armchair, and one seemed unreasonably frightened.

"...Heh, she's even prettier than Uncle described."

The smirking boy who said this had hair that was a dull shade of olive-green and brilliant emerald eyes, the two colors strikingly incongruent despite being of the same color family. I assumed that the healthy wheat-colored tone of his skin was thanks to a suntan.

The trembling boy hiding behind him was young—he appeared to be only a year or two older than me. I couldn't see his face, but his hair was yellowish-green.

...Are they really imperial princes?

"Thank you for the compliment. My name is Karnadia Osphe, and this is my sister, Nefertima Osphe."

"I'm grateful to Grandmother. It's an honor to escort a beauty such as yourself."

...Are they really imperial princes?

The boy who'd spoken seemed to be around Karna's age, but he talked like a stereotypical playboy.

“Lucky for you, Daux, the younger sister’s cute, too!”

The younger boy, called Daux, clung to the playboy and turned his head away.

“Sorry, he’s super shy.”

“Sigh...”

Karna, too, looked bewildered. This whole situation was so unexpected that she seemed to be having trouble keeping up.

Not only is Theo super eccentric, but one of his brothers is a playboy, and another is painfully shy...

Is everything all right with the imperial princes?!

“Aise! Daux!”

Suddenly, the door flung open, and a man burst into the room.

Shell and Spica reacted faster than my eyes could follow, racing over to the man and pressing their short swords against his throat... At least, they tried to before their swords were sent flying across the room.

Paul and Shinki moved as well, stepping in front of Karna and me to protect us from the potential threat.

Shell and Spica both pulled out spare weapons and took up fighting stances.

“Ahhhh! I’m sorry, it wasn’t on purpose! I just reacted to the situation unconsciously...” The man began frantically apologizing when he saw our servants’ killing auras.

...What on earth is going on here...?

“Wait a minute, come back here, Theo...! Damn it, he ran off!” the man shouted out through the open door, and the playboy shot him a glare.

“You’re so loud! Uggh, now you’ve done it—Daux is crying.”

“Daux, I wasn’t yelling at you...” the man explained quickly, picking up little Daux and attempting to console him.

“Um, I’m sorry, but who might you be?” Karna hesitantly asked the man who’d instigated all this uproar.

The instigator's eyes widened, and with a quick "Forgive me!" he set Daux on the ground, put his hand on his chest, and gave a deep bow. "Forgive me for allowing you ladies to witness such an unsightly spectacle. I am His Imperial Majesty's second son, Clayris Shea Linus."

In stark contrast to his previous floundering, the practiced smoothness of his formal introduction carried the air of regal dignity I'd been expecting from a member of the imperial family.

"Forgive me for not recognizing you, Your Highness. My name is Karnadia Osphe."

Perhaps because he'd formally introduced himself to their satisfaction, Paul and the others finally relaxed their fighting stances.

Maybe it was just my imagination that Karna still seemed a bit...prickly?

"...Don't tell me my poor-mannered younger brothers have yet to properly introduce themselves to you ladies?" Clayris asked.

"I'm afraid that's exactly the case," Karna said. "I'm starting to wonder if these two might not be imposters trying to pass themselves off as imperial princes..."

Come to think of it, Karna had introduced herself, but the playboy and little Daux hadn't reciprocated. Maybe that was why she seemed so irritated.

"Then it seems we owe you both yet another apology. Not only did they not send word of their intention to visit, they also failed to properly introduce themselves..."

"Karnadia, darlin', you can call me Aise!"

Clayris was doing his best to salvage the situation, but the playboy couldn't seem to resist sticking his foot in his mouth.

Clayris sure has his work cut out for him!

Despite his unfortunate first impression, Clayris seemed the most normal of the imperial princes. Unfortunately, that meant he had his hands full trying to deal with the rest of them.

"I most certainly will not," Karna returned icily, dealing a death blow to the

playboy's flirtatious invitation.

He is still an imperial prince, though, so I'm not sure it's okay to be so direct in your rejection of him, Karna...

I was mentally twiddling my thumbs in uneasiness when suddenly I heard a heavy *THUNK!*

Clayris had cuffed the back of the playboy's head hard.

Oww, that had to hurt...

"Good grief, are the two of you *trying* to smear mud on our country's good name? These are His Imperial Majesty's personal guests! If, as imperial princes, you can't even introduce yourselves properly, you need to be sent back to your etiquette tutors for reeducation!"

He's not wrong. It would be in the Linus Empire's best interest for these two to get a refresher course on basic manners...

Being scolded by his older brother had done the trick because the playboy petulantly introduced himself.

"I am His Imperial Majesty's fourth child, Aisent Shea Linus."

Little Daux, who'd hidden himself behind Clayris, hesitantly inched out from behind his brother and introduced himself in a tiny voice. "...I am His Imperial Majesty's fifth child, Dauxrouge."

Clayris praised the boys, saying, "Very good," and little Daux smiled happily.

Little kids' smiles really hit you right in the feels!

Karna, too, seemed to soften in response to the youngest prince's precious smile because her previously prickly attitude evaporated.

"Prince Clayris, Prince Dauxrouge, please have a seat. I will have a fresh pot of tea prepared," she said.

I pressed a hand to my chest in relief, happy that the situation had been successfully de-escalated.

Shell brought out a fresh pot of tea, and without even taking a sip, Clayris bowed his head suddenly.

“I am truly sorry for the unforgivable insults we have dealt to you as our honored guests.”

Huh— Whaaat?! Imperial princes don't just go around bowing to people of a lower rank!

“Prince Clayris, please raise your head,” Karna said. “It’s simply not appropriate for a person of your rank to bow his head over such a small matter.”

“I take full responsibility for my brothers’ poor manners. The fault is entirely theirs, so it’s only fair for me to apologize as their older brother.”

Oh yeesh. I thought he was an upstanding person, but he’s just got a brother-complex, doesn’t he?

“Why should you be the one to apologize, Prince Clayris?” I asked. “The two of them were the ones at fault. It might be one thing if they were bowing their heads along with you, but...”

Clayris looked stricken as the meaning behind my words sunk in.

No, no, no, I don't want you to make a face like that either! But as an older brother, it's your responsibility to teach your younger brothers, isn't it? Even imperial princes need to apologize sincerely if they're rude to a state guest. If it was one of the nobles from their own country, that might be a different case, but...

Even so, people will lose respect for royals with no manners.

“My older brother stands beside me and takes the scolding with me when I’ve done something wrong, then comes with me to apologize,” I said. “But he always tells me that it’s meaningless if I don’t apologize as well since I was the one who did wrong in the first place.”

“That’s exactly right, Neema,” Karna agreed with me. “Since they were rude to us, Prince Aisent and Prince Dauxrouge should apologize first. That alone would be enough, but to express even greater sincerity it would be acceptable for Prince Clayris, being of a higher rank, to convey his apologies as well.”

The playboy grimaced as if this were all incredibly troublesome for him, and

little Daux hid behind Clayris.

“...Are you suggesting this happened because I go too easy on my younger brothers?” Clayris asked.

Uh-oh, did we piss him off?

“Indeed, I am,” Karna challenged, essentially pouring oil onto the fire.

However, I wasn’t expecting Clayris’s reaction—he sighed and clutched his head in his hands.

“You’ve seen how our oldest brother is, and Eliza can’t help either, so I thought I at least should do my best to be a good influence on them, but it seems I’ve only made things worse...”

Is this “Eliza” the sole imperial princess? I haven’t met her yet, but if she’s anything like the rest of her siblings, I imagine she’s a very unique person as well?

“If they don’t start taking their positions as imperial princes seriously, Prince Aisent’s womanizing will likely get him caught up in the power struggles of the nobility, and Prince Dauxrouge will be unable to determine for himself who he can trust and might even become a puppet to someone with ulterior motives.”

Karna! That’s going a little too far, don’t you think?! Not to mention, that is a very detailed prediction!

“You’ve only just arrived in our country, so how can you claim to already have such a concrete grasp of the situation here?”

“The Osphe family’s servants are... uniquely talented,” Karna said vaguely.

Does that mean her prediction was so detailed because that’s the actual situation? And she knows all this due to the information our servants have gathered? I wouldn’t put it past our super-multitalented servants...

On the other hand, I’d like to know if there’s anything they can’t do!

“It was my understanding that the retired empress wanted us to escort the two of them...” Aisent insisted.

Umm... What does he mean? I’m starting to have a hard time following the

conversation...

“Yes, but after discussing it with the emperor, they decided Uncle Louis and myself would be better,” Clayris said.

What difference does it make if Clayris and Louis escort us instead of the playboy and little Daux?

“Karna, why do they have to change it?” I asked.

“Well, if Prince Aisent and Prince Dauxrouge escort us, there will be those who assume they are involved with the Osphe family.”

Karna explained that if people saw us as interlopers from a foreign country, they might attack us or use sweet words and fake kindness to try to cozy up to us.

Does that mean the retired empress was hoping to divert attention from the imperial princes by focusing it on us?

“Would that not be the same for Lord Louis and Prince Clayris?” I asked.

I understood now what would happen if the playboy and little Daux escorted us but failed to see how it would be any different for Louis and Clayris.

“In Lord Louis’s case, he has no chance of inheriting the throne, and his position within the Linus Empire is well established. Before long, he will lose his rank as a royal and receive a suitable title amongst the nobility. As for Prince Clayris, I imagine that just like Prince Theoval, he’s already got a firm grasp on the games of politics the aristocrats play and can hold his own.”

So, she’s saying that since Louis is free from the constraints of power struggles, it won’t be a problem even if people assume he’s “in league” with us.

And Theo and Clayris have already gathered reliable and trustworthy subordinates, so even if they create a few waves, they’re more than capable of dealing with the repercussions.

I really can’t picture Theo having subordinates, though... I bet it must be difficult to work for someone like him.

“I see your reputation as one of the Kingdom of Gaché’s most clever women is well-deserved. Please do us the favor of accepting this sudden change of

plans,” Clayris said.

“Yes, well... I’d be happy to agree as soon as those two apologize properly.”

I couldn’t get over Karna’s fierceness. I also couldn’t shake the feeling that she was getting a bit of pleasure out of reprimanding the two youngest imperial princes.

In the end, we received apologies from Prince Aisent and Prince Dauxrouge. When Prince Dauxrouge’s turn came, he looked so ashamed that my heart hurt for him; it felt almost as if we were bullying a small child.

“Prince Dauxrouge, let’s play together sometime!” I said cheerfully. “If Euche joins us, you won’t be afraid, right?”

It wasn’t to assuage my own guilt—or at least that wasn’t my *only* motivation—but because this was as good a time as any, I decided to invite him to play. I figured he would be frightened if it was just us, so I planned to get Euche to help out, too. I’d heard that Euche loved to play, so I figured the imperial children must play with him often.

“Euche will come too?”

“Yeah!”

I nodded vigorously, and little Daux gave a small nod in response.

It will take time, but I think we’ll be able to become good friends.

“It’s a promise!”

Karna watched the exchange between little Daux and me with a faint smile.

Karna has a soft spot for little kids.

She made the same face when she looked at Spica and the baby slimes.

Clayris’s relieved and happy expression made him look much more at ease than before.

Hmm, come to think of it, the three of them don’t look very much like the emperor.

The emperor’s hair and eyes were shades of blue, and his facial features resembled his father, the retired emperor. Queen Relena and Louis, on the

other hand, looked more like their mother.

Theo resembled both of his parents in different ways, which could explain why he came across as so androgynous. The playboy and little Daux's hair and eyes were shades of green, and both had more chiseled features than Louis and Theo. It seemed likely that little Daux would grow up to be a ruggedly handsome young man, and the playboy was already well on his way there.

Clayris also shared their chiseled features, but he had purplish-blue hair and lighter-blue eyes. They were more like aquamarines than sapphires, a clear and beautiful shade of blue.

Since Clayris also had the same wheat-brown skin tone as the playboy, I reconsidered my earlier assumption that it was a suntan; they likely had naturally darker skin.

I assume the three of them resemble the empress, who I haven't met yet? Wait a minute... If they have naturally darker skin, that would suggest that there are racial differences here, just like on Earth, right?

Or maybe it's just a regional trait? The Linus Empire is massive, after all.

In any case, the imperial princes were all handsome young men that I was sure the noble young ladies would all be drooling over. Not that this affected Karna and me—we were more than accustomed to seeing handsome faces by this point.

Since everything had been decided, we promptly ushered the troublesome siblings out.

Things seemed to be a bit more easy-going in this country, but I was starting to worry if we'd made the right decision to come.

"It must be difficult being from such a large country. I'm glad I was born in the Kingdom of Gaché," Karna remarked with conviction.

I agreed completely.

I suppose that, at least, is something I'm genuinely thankful to God for.



AFTER that, I spent the rest of the day chatting with Karna and walking in the

garden with Spica and Kai.

That night in the bath, I was scrubbed within an inch of my life in preparation for the following day, but I didn't see the point when they'd just do it all again in the morning anyway.

That was absolutely exhausting!

4 - Are We Being Welcomed or Not?

“**JUST** when I thought you couldn’t possibly be any more lovely...”

Karna seemed genuinely pleased as she covered her face and giggled, feigning modest shyness in response to Louis’s compliment.

Hmm...

Was I right after all? Maybe I should report this to Papa... I’m pretty sure that Karna was one of the contenders for the position of Will’s fiancée. But they’re not formally engaged, and as the emperor’s younger brother, Louis’s rank is certainly suitable...

But there’s still the matter of the age difference...

Louis is 30, and Karna’s 14. That’s a 16-year age gap! He’s going to be called a lolicon if he’s not careful. No, scratch that; I’m going to just go ahead and call it. He’s definitely a lolicon.

“You look lovely as well, young lady. Your dress embodies the Kingdom of Gaché’s traditional flare.” Clayris attempted to praise me as well, but I knew he was just being nice.

Such voluminous dresses don’t suit me at all. I get lost in them.

The skirt was so long that it dragged on the floor. The weight of the yards and yards of fabric that had gone into making the dress made it quite heavy, and the sleeves were massive. All in all, it was incredibly difficult to move.

They’d also affixed a ribbon made of the same lace that dripped off the sleeves of my dress onto my bunny backpack’s ear. It looked much better on the bunny than on me.

And so, with Louis escorting Karna and Clayris escorting me, we headed to where this so-called welcome banquet would be held.

Today, Shinki, Haku, and Gratia would be staying behind. Our servants, along

with Seigo and Rikusei, would be at the banquet hall, staying unobtrusively out of the way watching. Kai, on the other hand, was dressed up so he could mingle with the other guests, looking for “food.”

That was on Paul’s orders, so I trusted his judgment that it was okay.

Little Daux was escorted by a young lady who also happened to be his cousin. That’s right; he wasn’t escorting her. *She* was escorting him.

As for the playboy, the girl at his side was his older sister, the imperial princess.

Theo was attending the banquet with a young noblewoman who I learned was his candidate-fiancée.

When attending a party in a foreign country, it was customary to proceed under the protocol of the host country, so I’d done my best to burn the Linus Empire’s etiquette into my brain.

“Are you nervous?” Clayris asked.

“Yes. Even in the Kingdom of Gaché, I haven’t attended many formal social events like this before,” I said.

Rather than being forced to attend parties and other social gatherings, I’d mostly been left to my own devices, free to spend my days playing and enjoying myself. I realized now what a privilege that was.

Thank you, Papa!

I *was* a little lonely from time to time because I didn’t have many friends outside of my immediate family due to my social isolation.

“It’s going to be fine. Just leave everything to me today.”

“Thank you, Prince Clayris. I’ll be counting on you!”

At his core, Clayris was a “reliable older brother” type, so I felt safe following his lead.

“You can call me Clay.”

Theo and his partner entered the banquet hall first, followed by Karna and Louis, and finally Clay and me. The hall was full of people chatting amongst

themselves, but a momentary silence fell over the room as we entered, after which conversation resumed with twice the fervor.

I could make out all kinds of comments, such as *“She’s just a little kid!”* and *“They don’t look like anything special to me...”*

Louis and Clay must’ve also been able to hear the comments, but they didn’t react at all, maintaining their perfect princely smiles.

I’ve seen Will do the same... Royals are really incredible! Their poker faces can’t be beat!

The imperial family’s thrones were one tier below the highest dais. Karna and I would be seated there with our escorts. The retired emperor and retired empress would be on the highest dais with the emperor and empress.

Those of us on the “imperial family” tier bowed along with everyone else in the banquet hall as the current and former emperors and empresses entered the room.

Unlike in the Kingdom of Gaché, the custom here was for both men and women to place their hands over their hearts and bow from the waist. I found that much easier than curtsying.

A moment later, the emperor proclaimed, “Be at ease,” permitting everyone in the room to rise. The only sound in the now-silent banquet hall was the rustling of clothing. Then, the members of the imperial family turned to face the gathered crowd.

With my back to the thrones, I looked out over the room and was surprised to see how many more people there were than I’d anticipated.

And it wasn’t just humans, either—there were also beastpeople and even elves.

Perhaps because the imperial family’s line was mixed with elven blood, noble titles had been distributed without consideration for species. I recalled reading about that in a book.

In that case, Shinki and Spica might not stand out much after all.

“Allow me to introduce our honored guests from the Kingdom of Gaché.

These are Lady Karnadia Osphe and her younger sister, Lady Nefertima, of the Osphe ducal house.”

As our names were called, we took a step forward and curtsied.

This curtsy was also simpler than what would’ve been required back home. We placed one hand on our chest and bent our knees slightly. It was important to lower our gazes but not bow our heads.

We could use this curtsy with everyone other than the members of the imperial family. Apparently, the reasoning behind this custom was to express that although the members of the nobility were all of different ranks, species did not make anyone superior to anyone else.

I’m just glad I don’t have to remember and correctly use a whole bunch of different curtsies here!

“I’m very grateful to everyone who’s made it possible for me to study at the Hall of Advanced Studies. It will only be for a short while, but I look forward to living among you all.”

Way to go, Karna! You sounded so cool!

...Huh? I’m supposed to say something, too? Nobody warned me about this!

With a brief jerk of her chin and a pointed stare, Karna ordered, “*Next is your turn!*”

Even Clay gave me a little push as if saying, “*Go on, then!*”

Oh, man...

“I’m looking forward to making many new friends. Let’s get along well while I’m here.”

Ugggh, I sound like a dweeby elementary schooler on a mission to make 100 new friends or something...

I suppose it’s okay, though, since, at least on the outside, I look like a five-year-old?

Clay patted me on the shoulder, effectively saying, “*Good job!*” That made me feel better that I hadn’t *totally* bumbled it.

Next, a representative from the imperial family and their partner would dance to begin the party. That much, at least, was the same as back in our country. Since the purpose of the banquet was to welcome us, Karna and Louis were chosen to dance.

While I was entranced with watching Karna dance, Clay explained what would happen next.

First, we would greet His Imperial Majesty, the emperor, and Her Imperial Majesty, the empress. Next, we would be introduced to the others we'd not yet formally met: the imperial princess, Theo's candidate-fiancée, and the young noblewoman escorting little Daux.

But you know, for a "banquet," it's a little disappointing that there isn't any food in sight!

In the Kingdom of Gache, it was customary for refreshments to be served buffet-style in one corner of the banquet hall during gatherings like this.

But in the Linus Empire, food was served in a separate, adjoining room. They had separate rooms for different purposes: one for eating, one for drinking alcohol, and another for socializing.

I was looking forward to trying some new and rare sweets!

When Karna finished her dance, she returned to my side, and we went to greet the emperor and empress.

"Thank you for your kind hospitality in preparing such a splendid banquet for us."

"It's our hope that you'll be able to enjoy the unique style of events in our country during your stay here."

While Karna and His Imperial Majesty exchanged pleasantries, I was focused entirely on the empress.

Her wheat-colored skin, the same shade as Clay and the playboy, fascinated me. She had deep, jade-green eyes and lustrous hair, a color I could only describe as "amber." It was a dark shade of yellow that I wouldn't quite classify as blond. Her dress was cut to emphasize her voluptuous curves, drawing

further attention to her exotic charm.

“Lady Nefertima, does my skin color seem strange to you?”

I’d been staring fixedly at the empress, which, apparently, gave her the wrong impression.

“Forgive me! You’re so beautiful that I just couldn’t stop staring...” I rushed out.

Well, that’s one mystery solved; the three imperial children who don’t look like the emperor take after the empress!

“Heh, it looks like my empress’s beauty enchants even little children.” The emperor smiled, seeming happy to hear me praise his wife’s remarkable beauty.

I’ve seen many beautiful women in this lifetime, and there’s only one thing that all of them have in common: all of them wear the aura of a well-loved woman!

The same was true of Mama, as well as Queen Relena, Uncle Sanrus’s wife, and Grandma Mishri. Maybe the confidence that came from being loved and treasured made women more beautiful?

Auntie Olive, on the other hand, was the type of woman whose self-confidence made her dazzling and magnetic.

“Goodness, you flatter me!”

I hurried to assure her it was true, and the empress laughed kindly.

Next, the retired emperor and empress bade us enjoy the party, and Theo expressionlessly introduced the young noblewoman who was his candidate-fiancée. The young lady was graceful and polite and was enrolled in the Hall of Advanced Studies, which Karna would also be attending.

The imperial princess, Elizashera, was an extremely frank and friendly person. It was especially remarkable to see how she had the playboy wrapped around her little finger.

As for the cousin who was little Daux’s escort, she was around the same age as him but gave off a precocious air as if desperately trying to be seen as

mature beyond her years.

“I won’t allow you to bully Daux!” she harrumphed.

Louis scolded her, “Don’t say such rude things to our guests!” but the girl didn’t seem the least bit sorry as she took Daux by the hand and led him away.

“I, too, went through a period like that,” Karna said knowingly, but I frowned and tilted my head to the side, having a hard time picturing it. “Back when you were a baby, every time they tried to feed you baby formula, you would start wailing. I would yell at Mother and Leah, ‘Stop being mean to Neema!’ and pick you up and barricade the both of us in my room. Don’t you remember?”

Ohhh, yeah, I kinda remember that. Baby formula tastes horrible! In fact, I think it might just be the most disgusting thing I’ve eaten in either of my lives! At least Mama’s milk was tolerable. I wouldn’t go as far as to say breastmilk is delicious, but at least it’s slightly sweet.

“...I don’t remember.”

Normally, people don’t remember things from when they’re less than a year old, right? I’ll just do my best to repress those unpleasant memories.

“Neema was so cute back then, too!”

“You’re a very doting older sister,” Clay remarked generously.

He’s putting it kindly... She’s got such an extreme sister complex that even Will was alarmed by it!

“Yeah! I’m so proud of my big sister!” I added.

She might have a severe sister complex, but she’s beautiful, a talented magic user, intelligent, loyal to her family, and only occasionally violent. It was an honor to have her as a sister.

“Now then, shall we make our rounds greeting everyone?” Louis suggested, and with him leading Karna and Clay leading me, we made our way down to the main floor of the banquet hall.

Just then, Kaideetay appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

“Whoa!”

“Kaideetay can travel through anything affiliated with the attribute of earth, so he often suddenly appears like this.”

“Growl.”

As if demanding to be petted, Kaideetay rubbed his head against me.

“Are you going to accompany us, Kaideetay?” I asked as I pet him, and Kaideetay growled again, this time in confirmation.

If a fluffy cutie is by my side, it will make this trial more bearable!

While I was focused exclusively on Kaideetay, Louis seemed to be trying so hard to hold back his laughter that his shoulders shook.

“What’s wrong, Lord Louis?” I asked.

“...It’s nothing; the others’ reactions are just amusing, that’s all.”

I glanced around and found people furtively whispering to each other in pairs and small groups.

“Kaideetay has never acted this affectionately towards anyone in public before, so they’re surprised,” Clay explained, sounding amused.

Well, if that’s all...

With Louis taking the lead, we made our way around the room, trading introductions with the country’s most highly-ranked nobles, the prime minister, and government officials. I was surprised to learn that the prime minister was a female elf, and the imperial army’s most highly ranked official—the commander-in-chief—was a grand tiger tribe beastperson.

“This is the commander-in-chief of the Linus Imperial Army, Kwon Stoughan. As you can see, he’s a ria beastperson,” Louis said, introducing the commander-in-chief, and almost before he’d finished speaking, his head suddenly blurred.

It took me a moment to work out exactly what had happened, but it seemed that the commander-in-chief had moved faster than the eye could see and smacked Louis on the back of the head.

“Don’t fool around in front of guests. I am a proud member of the grand tiger tribe. Don’t you dare call me a ria again.”

The commander-in-chief then turned to greet Kaideetay respectfully, but the holy beast seemed entirely disinterested because he turned away without even acknowledging the commander-in-chief.

Come to think of it, the ice bear tribe beastperson, Luck, also greeted Lars with the utmost respect.

The commander-in-chief didn't seem bothered by Kaideetay's blatant snub, which I took to mean this was probably a common occurrence.

"Are there many beastpeople in the imperial army?" I asked. Gazing up at the commander-in-chief, I couldn't shake the feeling that something felt off about him.

...Oh, I've got it! He's so thin!

Since he was the commander-in-chief, I could only assume he was a fierce warrior like Grandpa Gouche, but his form was lean, more like a runner than a fighter.

Just by looking at him, I got the impression that Shinki was probably the more muscular of the two. He could be the type who looked thinner with clothes on, but in any case, I would've never guessed he was the highest-ranking officer in the imperial army.

"Yes, almost half of the soldiers in the Linus Imperial Army are beastpeople. However, all of the members of the Dragon Corps are human."

When I asked why, he explained that due to their strong primal instincts, beastpeople couldn't get close to wyverns without cowering.

That explains why Spica's ears and tail indicated fear when we went to see the wyverns in the Hall of Learning.

While I was talking to the commander-in-chief, someone said, "Excuse me!" and I was unexpectedly scooped up from behind.

I froze in shock and confusion before finally realizing that Theo had picked me up.

"Your neck must've been hurting from gazing up at everyone all evening, right?"

Being at eye level with Theo also put me nearly at eye level with the other adults around us.

Who would've thought being picked up and held would be so useful?! Is this the reason Will and Ralf are always picking me up whenever we're in public?

With me looking up at everyone and them looking down at me, *everyone* ended up with sore necks eventually. But having someone pick me up took care of that problem, effectively killing two birds with one stone.

"This arrangement suits you somehow, Neema." Louis was chuckling to himself, but he had no way of knowing how right he was; I was *always* being picked up by somebody!

More importantly, Theo! Is it okay to go off and abandon your candidate-fiancée?

I voiced my concern politely, but Theo said he'd fulfilled his basic obligations to her and further justified his negligence by claiming that Will had asked him to watch out for me.

Will again?!

The commander-in-chief invited me to come observe the army training, and after eagerly promising I would, we parted ways.

I'm curious to see what kinds of beastpeople are there!

Because the wyverns could be dangerous, I was once again given the restriction that I could only visit when the person in charge was available to accompany me. Apparently, the commander-in-chief would introduce the lieutenant of the Dragon Corps next time we met.

"Brothers, don't you think it's about time to release our guests?" a feminine voice interjected smoothly.

"Eliza, didn't I ask you to keep an eye on Aise?" Clay responded to Eliza's sudden appearance by asking why she wasn't with the playboy.

"Our foolish younger brother is going around making passes at all the most beautiful young ladies," she said.

"That's precisely what I asked you to *prevent!*"

“But I would much rather be chatting with our adorable guests than staring at our foolish brother.”

She keeps calling him her “foolish brother,” so I guess that means she’s sick of having to keep an eye on him?

Based on Eliza’s obvious irritation, it looked like a full-blown sibling fight might break out, but thankfully, Louis intervened.

“Eliza and Clay, both of you calm down. Eliza, you want to get to know Karna and Neema, right?”

Eliza nodded in confirmation, and Louis stared at her sternly for a long moment.

I can tell Louis has a soft spot for Eliza. He’s making the same face Papa often makes. Although, unlike Papa, Louis doesn’t look dweeby—his expression is just soft and tender.

“Then I’ll leave you in charge of accompanying them. Clay, you go retrieve Aise.”

Clay caved, saying, “If that’s what you wish, Uncle.”

“Sorry, Neema. I’ll catch up with you later, okay?” Clay apologized, patting me on the head before disappearing into the sea of people.

It must be hard being the responsible older brother to such unique siblings...

“You too, Theo. Please put Lady Nefertima down now,” Eliza ordered.

Theo promptly refused, “I don’t want to.”

I braced myself again for another potential sibling fight to break out.

After several minutes of bickering, exchanging “Put her down!” and “I don’t want to!”s, Theo finally, petulantly set me on the ground.

Looks like Eliza was victorious in the end.

“Oh, and you can’t come either, Kaideetay.” In response to Eliza’s demand, Kaideetay flashed his fangs and let out a roar. The people closest to us fled, frightened by the holy beast’s roar. “But the other noblewomen will be too frightened to interact with us if a holy beast is hanging around! If you’re

worried about Lady Nefertima, you can hide and watch over her from a distance.”

...Wow. Eliza's got guts!

Maybe it was forgivable because they were practically family, but I was impressed by her nerve, straight-out saying “No” to a revered holy beast. Kaideetay looked *very* unhappy about it, but in the end, he obediently sank into the ground and disappeared.

Earth tigers' ability to travel underground is incredible. While sky tigers could manipulate the wind to fly in the sky, earth tigers could manipulate the dirt to travel underground. *It's just like I read in the books!*

I would've preferred to stay with Kaideetay, but at Eliza's urging, we parted ways with Theo and Louis and followed her into a room where only women and girls were gathered. It was almost like a tea party among titled ladies and their daughters, but the moment we entered the room, all eyes focused on us.

Eeep! This is a little scary!

“Ladies, please! You're frightening our adorable little guest.”

Thankfully, the women and girls all good-naturedly heeded Eliza's words and looked away.

Eliza explained that only the highest-standing females were allowed in this room. Most were married ladies whose husbands were dukes or marquesses or women who'd inherited those titles in their own right. The only young ladies present were those accompanying their mothers.

Eliza introduced us to the movers and shakers in the Linus Empire's social scene. Among these, one of the most unusual to me was a woman who was married to a member of the imperial family but had no title or rank of her own.

The emperor's brothers and sisters were considered royalty, but their spouses and children were not. Technically, they did have the phrase “provisional royalty” to refer to these people, but until their royal relative lost their status as a member of the imperial family and gained a title among the nobility, the provisional royals would continue to be regarded based on the rank of the non-royal partner's birth family.

As a member of the nobility from the Kingdom of Gaché these unseen power dynamics went right over my head. I had no idea just how much power the woman in front of me might hold in this court.

“Lady Nefertima, I heard you invited His Imperial Highness Prince Dauxrouge to play. I do hope you’ll also become friends with my daughter.”

Of course, I answered, “I’d be delighted to,” but in reality, the woman gave me the creeps. Her lips were smiling, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Her gaze was stone-cold and calculating. She was the mother of the precocious cousin escorting little Daux.

In the first place, how does she know about my promise to little Daux? The princes were the only ones there with us. They didn’t even bring any servants with them. It seems likely that little Daux must’ve told someone, but given how painfully shy he is, I imagine there are only a few people he would even speak to...

Hmm, this is going to bother me! In any case, this whole situation is scary. I’ve never been out in society before, and now, suddenly, my first sink-or-swim experience has come, and it’s in a foreign country to boot!

I don’t have many allies here, so I’m not sure how I should proceed. One thing’s for sure, though—I need to keep my wits about me at all times!

The last person Eliza introduced us to was a beautiful woman dressed in men’s clothing. The most shocking thing about her appearance, though, was that despite her position as an aristocrat, even her hair was cut short like a man’s. A person’s hair wasn’t the beginning and end of the world by any means, but it pretty much goes without saying that virtually all of the noblewomen wore their hair long.

Furthermore, her male clothing was a serviceable military-esque uniform, like the highest-ranking government officials in this country typically wore.

In short, she looks really cool and powerful!

“This is Earl Frantina Helios. She is also my mentor.”

“It’s an honor to make your acquaintance, Earl Helios.”

In response to Karna's greeting, the crossdressing beauty came out with a line that I found to be a touch exaggerated.

"I will have to inform Their Majesties that the Goddess has descended in human form. My heart sings with joy at the pleasure of meeting such a fair lady."

Did she get that line from a stage play or something?

Karna giggled politely and exclaimed, "You exaggerate, my lady!" but her cheeks were bright red.

"I was also hoping I could meet you tonight, little lady. I desperately need a beloved child to save the people of my province."

Unlike when she was speaking to Karna, Earl Helios met my eyes straight on, pinning me with a serious gaze. But I couldn't understand what she was saying.

What does she mean by "save the people of her province?" And how does she know I'm a beloved child, anyway?

"It will all become clear tomorrow." Earl Helios winked mysteriously at me, but now I was even *more* confused.

Something's going to happen tomorrow...? We've really come to a terrifying country, haven't we?!

Small Talk: Give Me a Break! (POV: Director of the Intelligence Department)

HAVE five cycles already passed since I became director of the Intelligence Department? Considering I joined at age eighteen, isn't it about time for me to retire? So then, why am I out in the field?!

I suppose that just goes to show how important this mission is...

"Miya, I'm back!"

"Oh, welcome back. How'd it go?"

Half a cycle had passed since we started using Icouxian names as part of our cover for this infiltration mission in Icoux. Only now was I finally getting used to them.

My subordinate, a woman pretending to be my wife in our fake identities, was going by the name Sawa.

"I met up with my friends, but it seems like in all this chaos, sales aren't going well at all!"

My other subordinates working with us on this infiltration mission aren't making any progress in their investigation either, huh? If the situation in Icoux weren't so dire, it would make our jobs a hell of a lot easier!

"I suppose rushing things at this stage won't help anything."

That said, if we didn't do *something* soon, our own country would start feeling the effects before long. Although Runohark's bases in our country had been all but wiped out, we still had no leads on the mysterious "holy master" allegedly holding the reins of their organization.

If we, the Intelligence Department, are unable to dredge up any information for all our efforts... Does he really even exist?

Nearly all the members of the Intelligence Department—a subset of the

Kingdom of Gaché's Royal Knighthood—were dispatched on infiltration missions in Icoux and the Alliance of Nations. According to reports, strange weather patterns and natural disasters completely paralyzed the governmental functions in most of the small countries making up the Alliance of Nations.

The only place that seemed to be doing okay was the country of Pasdeeta.

In Icoux, too, while the interior of the country wasn't seeing any rainfall at all, torrential rainfall wouldn't seem to let up near the ocean. It wasn't by any stretch of the imagination a suitable environment for crops to grow. I'd heard that people who could use water magic were earning a killing just by producing clean drinking water to sell, which just went to show how bad things were.

There was no end in sight for the quarrels over food supplies, either.

At one point, the Linus Imperial Army was attacked while transporting emergency supplies to be distributed. Fortunately, no one from the Linus Imperial Army was injured during the attack, but it turned out that the attackers had been all that was left of another country's army.

Things were so desperate that soldiers were forced to behave like highway robbers.

Every day, I received reports from the other members of the Intelligence Department, but those from the agents dispatched to the most dangerous areas were especially heartbreaking.

In countries in the Alliance of Nations where fighting had broken out, any and all commoners who could use magic, including women and children, were being rounded up and thrown out onto the battlefield.

In other countries, they had started feeding the corpses of the dead to animals so they could slaughter those animals to eat themselves.

Finding themselves in extreme, inhumane conditions, people had turned into little more than rabid beasts, doing whatever they could to survive.

I tossed the report away from me and heaved a ragged sigh.

There was one simple method for breaking through this situation.

War.

The more prosperous countries—the Kingdom of Gaché, the Linus Empire, and Milma—could band together to defeat Icoux and the Alliance of Nations and take them under their control.

That, however, was exactly what the enemy was hoping for.

If only we could've infiltrated Runohark, it would've made this so much easier. But it was our own fault for not noticing before the matter went public.

It was no easy feat to infiltrate an organization using brainwashing while staying free of it yourself.

The Church of Divine Creation would probably be much easier.

But if an organization like *that* were going to try something, things would be moving.

Things like food, supplies, and weapons.

If the agents infiltrating the merchants' guild got a lead on their movements, we might have a shot at victory.

“Seerio! The beloved child has awoken!”

The woman who suddenly appeared out of nowhere was an earth spirit with whom I was bonded. Her normally intelligent and calm face was split with the widest smile I'd ever seen, as if she were overflowing with happiness. That spoke volumes about just how much of a special being the beloved child was to the elemental spirits.

“Oh, really? That's good.”

I was glad to hear that the beloved child, Duke Osphe's youngest daughter, Lady Nefertima, had finally awoken. She'd been asleep for two entire cycles since being kidnapped by Runohark.

“In that case, for Lady Nefertima's sake as well, I'll have to do my best to scrape together some *good* news to report.”

By that, I meant that for my country's sake and the beloved child Nefertima's sake, I was determined to blow the lid off the mystery surrounding Runohark's true identity.



TEN days later, things finally got moving.

I received word from an agent inside the merchants' guild that a large shipment of food supplies was being transported from Pasdeeta to a church in Icoux.

If Pasdeeta were experiencing bountiful harvests this year, it wouldn't be strange for them to send aid to neighboring countries that weren't so lucky.

However, there was one more interesting bit of information.

This one came from my subordinate, who had infiltrated the heart of Pasdeeta's government.

As a country, Pasdeeta hadn't made any such arrangements to send humanitarian aid. In fact, they were in no position to render aid to other countries; without assistance from the Linus Empire, they would have been hard-pressed just to feed their own citizens.

There was definitely some nefarious intent behind this suspicious shipment, but the real problem was how we would track it.

We couldn't hire adventurers for such a delicate mission, and if the shipment was being officially conducted through the merchants' guild, there was a high likelihood the merchant caravan in question were all Runohark agents. Given that all the animals in the area had either fled or been eaten, we couldn't use the beast knights legion's trained animals either. They would stick out like a sore thumb.

That only left one option.

"Serafi, in the next few days, a merchant caravan will pass through a certain town. I would like you to watch them and see where their cargo is being delivered."

By calling her by her nickname rather than her true name, I conveyed that this was not an order and that she had the right to refuse my request.

The relationship with an elemental spirit was always tenuous.

I trusted Serafi explicitly and thought of her as my one and only true partner.

However, elemental spirits were connected to the God of Creation. They held different ideas and values than mortals and had to always be on their guard, determining right from wrong.

With one misstep, I would become “fallen” and Serafi would be “obliterated.”

There were two orders one must never give to an elemental spirit. Those were to interfere with the balance of nature or to intervene in living creatures’ struggle for survival.

However, that was an incredibly broad definition, and I didn’t even completely understand parts of it.

So, I always phrased my wishes as a request and let Serafi decide.

Did it interfere with the balance of nature?

As for the struggle for survival, that mostly had to do with life-or-death situations, so I didn’t *think* it applied in this case.

“You just want me to watch and let you know where the cargo ends up?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, leave it to me!”

Serafi was an intermediate-level elemental spirit, so in theory, she could get lower-level elemental spirits to do her bidding. However, that made me uncomfortable, so she would do it herself. I felt bad making the other elemental spirits work on my behalf when they weren’t even bonded with me.



FIVE days later, Serafi returned.

“I followed the merchant caravan, but partway through their journey, they split into two groups. One went to the church in Fulse. The other went here.” As she said this, Serafi pointed to a location on the map. It was an abandoned mine not far from here. *“The earth there no longer has any power left, so it might give way at any time. And yet there are a lot of people inside the mountain! I was surprised.”*

If I remembered correctly, that site was closed after a large cave-in occurred

just as they were about to finish depleting the mine's resources.

But I was sure we'd investigated the incident...

"Sawa, what kind of place is Cleet Mine?"

"The entrance to Cleet Mine was completely closed off by a cave-in. I heard that even when they used magic to try and clear the blockage, it just caved in again right away." Doing her best to act casual, Sawa brought me a document. It was the Intelligence Department's report on Cleet Mine.

Lowen was the agent who'd been sent out to conduct the investigation. He'd used magic to attempt to get inside, but earth magic had proven strangely ineffective, so he'd been unable to clear away the fallen rubble.

The investigation had been abandoned at that point.

"Damn it!"

I was the one who gave the order to prioritize other things...

I'd figured that magic being ineffective in the area must've been a sign that the landslide itself was a natural phenomenon, and therefore, humans were not meant to go inside.

Just like you couldn't use fire magic to stop the rain, in situations where humans were not meant to interfere with nature, magic became ineffective.

However, there were some exceptions.

If holy beasts or elemental spirits used their powers, they could, to some degree, go against the course of nature. However, they rarely did this. Elemental spirits like Serafi, who had a strong understanding of the divine balance, probably wouldn't.

So we could assume that the elemental spirit we suspected was working with Runohark was probably bonded with an earth spirit and that this earth spirit was beginning to stray from God's will.

Only time would tell what would come first: them becoming fallen and obliterated or us destroying Runohark.

"Assuming there's an elemental spirit preventing the mine from caving in

completely, there must be an entrance somewhere...”

“There is. I watched to see where they brought the cargo in.”

Way to go, partner!

“Excellent!”

Now, all that’s left is to determine when to infiltrate...

I asked Serafi to tell me where the entrance was and what the situation was in the area. She said there was nowhere we could hide and scout out the entrance, and there was always someone on guard duty outside.

If we can take out the sentry, could we make it inside undetected? Wait a minute. Somewhere in this town, there should be a map of the mine before it was closed. Normally, it would probably be at the mayor’s house. Either that or in the mining company’s office.

“I’m going to step out for a bit.”

“Take care.”

Sawa saw me off at the door, and I made my way into the main part of town. There, a crowd of people was gathered on a street corner.

Upon closer inspection, I realized they were listening to a town crier.

Town criers traveled around the rural towns and villages conveying the latest news, but I didn’t imagine they were earning much in this economy.

Then why is he here?

“All right, is everyone here? This is big news! You’ll regret it if you miss out!”

Technically, town criers were a part of the merchants’ guild. Shopkeepers who wanted to attract customers to their shop would hire the town criers to advertise it in the local area. To get people to listen to their advertisements, the town criers would also share interesting news about events and catastrophes in other countries. Sometimes, the government would utilize the town criers when there was news they wanted to spread quickly.

“War is about to begin! The Linus Empire and the Kingdom of Gaché have joined forces to attack us!”

An uproar broke out amongst the people gathered around the town crier.

“Why is this happening, you may ask? Remember, all of you! Back when all of our troubles first began...”

Who is spreading this message, and for what purpose?

It was true that the Kingdom of Gaché, Milma, and the Linus Empire had formed an alliance to protect the monsters and deal with Runohark. But they had absolutely no intention of invading other countries.

“The oracle has spoken! This is a manifestation of the God of Creation’s anger! And the cause of his anger is...”

Oh, he’s referring to the Church of Divine Creation’s public announcement that their oracle had received a divine message declaring the drought in Icoux was divine retribution. But considering we’ve already confirmed that Runohark has infiltrated the upper echelons of the Church of Divine Creation, nothing they say is credible.

“The beastpeople! The beastpeople invoked God’s wrath. We’re all just being sucked into the mess they created!”

They’re trying to turn the people’s anger on the beastpeople? But it’s not as if Icoux is the only country where beastpeople live. There are plenty in our country and loads of them in the Linus Empire as well...

Tch! So that’s their aim!

They would fan the flames of the people’s anger.

If beastpeople were driven out of Icoux and became refugees in other countries, the people in those countries would become uneasy, fearing that God’s wrath would extend to their country next by association.

If discord arose between humans and beastpeople, lines would be drawn and factions would be formed, human versus beastperson.

Their aim is the Linus Empire!

In the Linus Empire, beastpeople were interwoven into every level of society, including the government, nobility, and, most especially, the *army*.

I don't know how seriously the citizens will take this message, but if we don't do something, there's a slim possibility that, in the worst-case scenario, the military might overthrow the government!

I forced myself to stop and take a deep breath. I knew that being too focused on my thoughts would narrow my perception. I would make sure this information got to the right people as quickly as possible, but what could I do *right now* that would be the most beneficial?

What do I need to do first?

I would never forgive myself if I let myself become distracted, and Runohark got away as a result.

I decided to first obtain the map of the mine, then notify the agents spread out across the entire continent to keep an eye on the movement of beastpeople.

As for the Linus Empire and this information's effect on them, I would have to hand that task over to the Department of Foreign Affairs.

I moved away from the crowd and began working on developing a link with my target.

5 - I Was Played With, so I Decided to Play

TODAY, I was in a very scary place. Without Karna by my side, I wanted to turn tail and run.

I was in a large council room, surrounded by all the most important political figures in the Linus Empire. My seat was directly next to the chairperson's—in this case, the emperor himself.

Why am I sitting next to the emperor?!

“I asked you all to review the information we’ve received from the Kingdom of Gaché in preparation for this meeting.” The emperor was holding a document of some sort, which I assumed must be the information from our country that he was referring to. “The most pressing concern is the unknown organization. This is only conjecture, but it seems highly likely that they are trying to instigate continent-wide war once more.”

That must’ve been in the document everyone had read because no one seemed shocked by the announcement that war was looming on the horizon.

“For that reason, there is a method we are thinking of trying.” I stole a glance at the emperor, and his expression looked especially excited. “I will serve as a test subject to determine whether it’s true that the bonded master of a holy beast can control monsters using their true name.”

...HUH?! He can't do that! He's talking about personally venturing into the areas where monsters live to meet with goblins and kobolds, right?! Not only is it terribly dangerous, but his bodyguards will probably have heart attacks from the stress!

Shock and concern broke out among the gathered attendees. The only people who *didn't* seem upset were the other members of the imperial family. I understood Louis and Theo, but neither Clay nor Eliza so much as blinked at their father's outrageous announcement.

Is there some underlying meaning to the fact that the playboy and little Daux

aren't attending this meaning?

“What will we do if something should happen to Your Majesty?! Your successor has not yet been selected by the holy beast!”

None of the emperor's children could succeed the throne if they weren't bonded with a water holy beast. If the unthinkable happened and His Majesty were to perish, either his father would need to retake the throne, or someone else bonded with a holy beast would need to be installed as regent.

“There's no need to be concerned on that front. We have prepared a trump card in advance,” the emperor said, pointedly looking over at me.

Don't look at me! That makes it seem like I'm your trump card!

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but what exactly would you have us believe a small child can do?”

I'd like to know the same thing! What can I do? I don't have any special features other than a penchant for petting fluffy critters!

But the emperor just grinned.

“I'd be happy to tell you, but first, I'll need everyone in this room to take a vow upon their name.”

Most attendees seemed shocked that this matter was serious enough to require a vow upon their name. But something in the emperor's expression was enough to convince them because, one after another, they began vowing upon their names. They almost gave off the impression of people who'd seen something that frightened them.

There was just one person who didn't vow upon their name.

“What about you, Earl Helios?” A man I didn't recognize addressed the question to the crossdressing beauty I'd met at the banquet the previous night.

“I've already taken a vow upon my name regarding this topic.”

“What's the meaning of this?” the man protested but was silenced by the emperor.

“I will explain everything in due time.”

The man seemed dissatisfied with that answer, but after the emperor pinned him with a stern glare, he wisely dropped it.

“This young lady, Lady Nefertima, is a beloved child of the God of Creation. Our own country’s holy beasts have confirmed it, so there is no doubt.” After announcing that, the emperor turned to Euche and asked him to publicly confirm the truth of this claim.

In an almost exaggerated manner, as if showing off for the onlookers, Euche rubbed his face affectionally against my cheek.

It was a well-known fact that holy beasts were only affectionate towards their bonded master. Lars didn’t get close to anyone other than Will and me, either. The king and queen were Will’s parents, so he seemed to care about them to a certain degree.

Euche, on the other hand, loved to play, so it seemed he had developed a fondness for the emperor’s children. Even so, everyone was astounded to see Euche behaving so affectionately towards me.

But, Euche! Could you please stop nibbling on my hair?! I tugged my hair out of Euche’s mouth. Sigh! He certainly is a water holy beast!

My hair was soaked with Euche’s saliva.

Euche seemed satisfied, at least, because he wedged his way in between the emperor and me and laid down, using the emperor’s lap as a pillow.

It was striking to see the difference in temperaments between the two blue pegasuses. Sache was a bit more mature. Actually, I suppose “elegant” was a better way to describe her.

“Therefore, while Lady Nefertima is residing in our country, I would like to make as much progress as possible on the project outlined in this document.”

I’m assuming he’s referring to Project Shiana? I’d like to read that document over myself!

“Earl Helios has already vowed upon her name because we will implement this project in the Helios Province.”

So that’s how she knew so much about me.

However, several people expressed discontent with His Majesty's announcement.

"I see. In that case, I suppose you all will be paying for the damages caused by the ogre attacks in the Helios Province?"

Those who'd been complaining immediately fell silent.

So, the Helios Province was one of the places most heavily impacted by the monsters driven out of Icoux?

Leaving the finer details to be discussed at a later date, the more pressing concern was: Wouldn't the local residents be resistant to the idea of a monster sanctuary in their proverbial backyard?

"Looking at the figures provided by the Osphe family, I can understand why you all have opinions regarding the profitability of this venture."

The people objecting responded to His Imperial Majesty's mocking comment with protests of "Nothing of the sort!"

...I see... I had no idea what a financial risk our family took by investing in Project Shiana. Now I'm even more interested in having a look at that report...

"History tells us that the world will change considerably in times when a beloved child appears. Whether our dynasty will fall or continue for another ten or twenty ages depends entirely on our choices here and now."

Hold on, don't get it twisted! Things aren't going crazy because a beloved child appeared—a beloved child became necessary because things have already begun to go crazy!

God has an infuriating tendency to delegate the resolution of serious issues to other people. Even so, a country like this one that clearly has God's favor will surely continue for another thousand or two thousand years!

"Despite consisting of various species, we have worked together for many years to protect this country. As if we would allow a group of faceless cowards to do as they like in our lands now! Are you in agreement?"

Wow. No wonder he's the emperor of the largest country in the continent of Larshia. Although what he was saying was only fitting as a member of the

imperial family, everyone's expressions changed in an instant. Their faces glowed with a mixture of pride and honor.

"Here in our country, as well, we will implement a plan designed to impede the unknown organization we are calling Runohark. This operation will be called Project Roslan. I will not allow anyone to disgrace this name."

I didn't understand what the emperor was saying.

Is there some kind of special significance attached to the name Roslan?

"Roslan is the name of the first emperor who ruled over this land back before it became an empire—when it was simply the country of Linus," Karna furtively whispered in my ear.

Oh, I see. So he's warning them not to disgrace the name of their founding emperor. Is this also designed to inspire them?

"We'll end here for today. An excessively long meeting would only serve to tire our guests, after all." With the emperor's proclamation, the meeting officially concluded. However, no one could leave the room because the emperor hadn't yet stood from his seat. "Lady Nefertima, would you like to read this?" the emperor asked, waving the report in his hand.

"Yes, please!"

I want to read it very much! I've been dying to read it this whole time!

"Hmm, what should I do..."

Huh? Is he playing with me?

I reached out to grab the paper being flaunted right in front of me, but before I could reach it, it was snatched away. When I withdrew my hand, the paper moved closer again until it was being dangled tantalizingly within reach.

Grrr!

"Euche, can you get that for me?" I sweetly asked the holy beast who was using the emperor's lap as a pillow, and a moment later, he bit down on the report. In one smooth movement, Euche tugged the paper from the emperor's hand and offered it to me.



Euche had moved so quickly that even the emperor was left gaping in surprise.

“Thank you, Euche!”

I accepted the report with a cheerful “thank you” and heard the emperor grumble half under his breath, “Euche, you traitor!”

“*Neigh!*” Euche sounded decidedly petulant to me, leading me to suspect he might be sassing back at the emperor.

“I suppose it can’t be helped. Now then, Lady Karnadia and Lady Nefertima, let us adjourn to a separate room. We can’t relax here in this stuffy council room.”

The other members of the imperial family were also “invited” to join us, an order disguised as an offer that they swiftly obeyed. The other attendees finally seemed to relax a bit as the imperial family prepared to leave.

The emperor led our entourage through the imperial palace to the lounge where we’d first met him.

Louis and Theo, as well as Clay and Eliza, all joined us. For some reason, Paul and Shinki were there as well. I could only assume the emperor had summoned them.

“Feel free to ask if there’s anything you don’t understand. Well, I suppose *he’s* even more knowledgeable about this particular topic than I,” the emperor said, glancing at Paul. It seemed that was why Paul had been summoned.

I looked over the report.

It was an official government report, so some parts were a bit challenging, but not enough to prevent me from being able to read it. It started by explaining the chain of events that led us to notice the movements of the group we’d ended up naming Runohark.

There was even a graph that tracked the timeline of the monsters being driven north. There were also testimonies from monsters who could speak Larshian; I assumed those had been provided by Shiki and Sicily.

My kidnapping was also listed, as well as a brief mention of the “Osphe

Family's Big Explosion.”

There was no mention of the “holy master,” but the report outlined in great detail all of Runohark’s known criminal activities and the flow of money we’d been able to trace within the Kingdom of Gaché.

At the end of the report was a summary of the current situation in Icoux, everything the Intelligence Department had uncovered, as well as the Director of the Intelligence Department’s theory.

What caught my attention was the news that they’d discovered a large-scale base of Runohark’s. That, along with the supposition that Runohark’s goal was to instigate a military overthrow of the government in the Linus Empire.

“Why do they think Runohark is targeting the Linus Empire?” I asked.

“It seems that there are people in Icoux spreading rumors that the Kingdom of Gaché and the Linus Empire are plotting to attack.”

Based on how he’s phrasing that, I assume it’s not true.

“Are you aware that the Church of Divine Creation previously announced that the natural disasters in Icoux were divine retribution?”

Divine retribution?! Hm, I vaguely recall hearing something to that effect, but I don’t remember clearly.

And, anyway, would God really do that kind of thing? If God was willing to get his own hands dirty, I don’t think I would even be here in the first place.

“It happened three cycles ago, so it makes sense that you wouldn’t know about it, Lady Nefertima.”

As I wondered what this so-called “divine retribution” was all about, the emperor explained that the rumors alleged that the beastpeople had incurred God’s wrath. It sounded absolutely ridiculous to me, but the emperor explained grimly that in times of chaos, lies could quickly become the truth.

“Even though it’s a lie?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. If the information spreads enough, people will come to the wrong conclusion. And if this false information is propagated throughout the entire country and then into the Kingdom of Gaché and the

Linus Empire, by that point, it might as well be true for all the momentum it's gained."

"If war breaks out across the continent, the beastpeople will be blamed? But, no matter how many people believe it, a lie is still a lie. If we spread the truth, maybe we can avoid fighting..." I suggested that to the emperor, but he just shook his head.

"It's human nature to ignore the truth when it's inconvenient."

Even I couldn't deny that this rang true to some part of me, so I couldn't find anything to say in response.

"In summary, Runohark are attempting to cause internal strife within the Linus Empire?" Karna set the report that she'd finished reading down on the table.

"We suspect they are hoping to achieve something by instigating a civil war. The fighting itself can't be their only objective."

But they still don't know what that "something" is...

"However, I can't help thinking we're oversimplifying it by assuming that starting a war has something to do with people's happiness," Karna said.

Thinking about it normally, I would say that, yes, war is misfortune. Before victory or defeat, many people would inevitably die.

"I see. Then what do you think the objective might be, Lady Karnadia?"

"Hm... Well, if it were me, maybe for revenge?"

I was surprised to hear such a loaded word come out of Karna's mouth. Suddenly uneasy, I called out to her, and Karna smiled gently at me, reminding me of Ralf.

"When I burned down Runohark's hideout, all I felt was hatred. Hatred towards Runohark for harming Neema and for killing Dee."

So, she said, there was no room in her heart for regret, even if people died as a result of her actions.

Listening to her, something heavy dropped into the pit of my stomach.

I see... So what I did at that time was also "revenge."

I'd snatched Sol's power and used it to kill the two men who murdered Dee, but at that moment there was *nothing* in my heart. Not guilt or even grief, just soul-deep numbness.

"I would be willing to bet that this so-called 'holy master' views the people living on this continent—the Runohark agents included—as nothing more than pawns in his game of revenge. That's my guess, at least." Karna pushed home the point that this was all just a theory.

"Shall I look into it from this point of view?"

"He doesn't seem the type of person to be caught easily, but... It's very rare for our country's Intelligence Department to have *this* hard a time digging something up."

I was still reading through the report while listening to the exchange between the emperor and Karna when my eyes stopped on the section where the Director of the Intelligence Department had written his personal opinions.

"Despite how thoroughly we've investigated the matter, we've uncovered next to nothing about the so-called 'holy master.' It is doubtful that such a person truly exists.

As I see it, the most likely possibilities are that either the holy master has not revealed himself even to the members of Runohark, or he is a false idol that Runohark created themselves.

Even if we continue destroying Runohark's bases one by one as we have been, I doubt we'll capture the holy master.

For this reason, I recommend changing our approach."

He's saying the holy master doesn't actually exist? And even if he is real, it might be impossible to prove his connection to Runohark? The mystery continues to deepen...

Who is the holy master, really? I'm also curious about the "change of approach" the Director of the Intelligence Department is suggesting. I wonder if it's already underway?

“Your Majesty, what is the ‘change of approach’ recommended here?” I asked.

“I still haven’t received any further information regarding that. The last I heard, they were still working on taking down the large-scale base they’d discovered in Icoux.”

It might be kind of late to worry about this, but is it okay for our country’s agents to do something like that in a foreign country? The Intelligence Department is technically a part of the royal knighthood, after all...

“Won’t it cause an international incident?” I worried.

“Don’t worry, Neema. Our country’s Intelligence Department agents are incredibly skilled. There won’t be so much as a trace of proof left behind that our country was involved.”

...Huh? But that essentially means that if our involvement were discovered, we’d be in big trouble, right?

“Well, even if Icoux did find out, I doubt they would complain about it. They currently lack the forces needed to maintain the peace in their own country, after all.”

Is it okay to take such a casual approach to foreign relations?!

Would “We were trying to help keep the peace!” really be an acceptable excuse for dispatching agents into another country without permission?

Doubt was written all over my face because the emperor explained, “Icoux is standing on the precipice of total destruction. If things continue as they are, their country will fall even without interference from the Kingdom of Gaché or the Linus Empire.”

Meaning that not only Icoux, but also the small countries making up the Alliance of Nations are in truly dire straits? Perhaps several have already begun falling apart?

“They don’t have the strength left to oppose other countries. And yet, an interesting rumor has been spreading... One that makes it even more unlikely they’ll complain about anything the Kingdom of Gaché does.”

If the emperor said it would be okay, I supposed I'd have to take his word that the Kingdom of Gaché wouldn't end up in hot water.

"Yes, they're planning to destroy the large base in Icoux ten days from now. Apparently, they're going to send us a souvenir, so look forward to it!"

Ten days from now? I wonder how that will go... And why would they send us a souvenir to commemorate destroying one of Runohark's bases?

I intended to question the emperor further, but before I could even open my mouth, Euche interrupted. As if complaining, "Pay attention to me!" he rubbed the side of his muzzle against me, and of course, I just *had* to give him a big hug after that!

I really can't get over the strange texture of his skin! It feels just like water, except I can hold on to it! The only way I can describe it is if you tried tapping on the surface of the water in a pool and found it to be solid. It's not like jello or the bodies of slimes either, so I'm at a loss for how to express it!

"Neigh!"

"Euche's saying, 'Let's go play!'" the emperor translated.

Oh, that's right! If we're going to play, I'll invite little Daux to join us!

"Would it be all right if I invited Prince Dauxrouge as well?" I asked the emperor.

"Huh? You want to play with Daux?"

"Yes! We made a promise to play together."

The emperor remarked, "Oh, yes, I see," with a peaceful smile, but Theo and Eliza, who stood flanking him on either side, were both frowning.

It's really rare to see Theo show any kind of facial expression!

"Neema, please be careful of the adults around Daux," Eliza warned me carefully.

That seemed to be related to what Karna had been talking about earlier.

"Perhaps because he doesn't believe a holy beast will ever choose him, he doesn't pay much attention to others. Sometimes, that means that ill-

intentioned people who only want to ingratiate themselves with the imperial family to garner power for themselves are able to get close to him.”

I could sense bitterness in Theo’s voice as he explained that. Coming from him, it was honestly a little frightening.

“Being able to navigate such machinations is a skill that members of the imperial family need to have. Unfortunately, there’s only one way to develop that skill. Leave it alone, you two.” Although he’d been wearing the face of a kind and loving father only moments ago, the emperor’s face now was truly scary! I was more grateful than ever not to have been born in this country.

“If we meet any bad people, you’ll drive them away for us, right, Euche?” I asked the holy beast, hoping to clear some of the tension from the air.

Euche valiantly neighed as if saying, *“Leave it to me!”*

“Oh, while you’re at it, why don’t you invite Kaideetay and Sache?” the emperor suggested. “I doubt that even the most ambitious schemers would dare to show their faces anywhere all three of our country’s holy beasts are gathered together.”

Oh! I like this plan very much!

And so, it was decided that the emperor would send a servant to convey the invitation to little Daux. As for Kaideetay and Sache, he claimed they would come if I called them, so I decided to wait to call for them until we’d decided where to play.

“Euche, where should we play?”

“Neigh!”

“He said he wants to play in the garden with the fountain. That’s one of Euche’s favorite places,” the emperor explained.

I see. So, Euche’s going to introduce me to one of his favorite places, huh?

“Okay, let’s go!”

Euche told me I could ride on his back, so I tried to climb on, but unfortunately, I couldn’t reach. With everyone laughing at me, I was forced to ask Shinki to pick me up and place me on the holy beast’s back.

“Shinki, I will stay with Lady Karna, so please accompany Lady Neema,” Paul said.

Shinki simply responded, “Okay.”

Come to think of it, the way Paul interacts with Shinki has changed. They both speak to each other casually... I wonder if they got closer while I was sleeping?

With Shinki joining us, Euche brought me to his favorite “garden with the fountain.”

Thin channels ran around the exterior of the garden with a fountain in the center. The water for the fountain was piped in via those channels. The water in the channels was shallow and would probably only come up to my ankles, making it perfect for playing in.

I’d removed my shoes and stockings and was walking along in one of the channels when little Daux arrived. I hadn’t expected him to be alone, but I *was* a bit surprised by who’d come with him.

“You! What is your intention in using His Majesty to summon Daux like this?!”

Oh great, his cousin’s here... I can’t stand heavy-handed people like her because they refuse to listen to reason...

“I’m only trying to keep our promise to play together...” I said.

Little Daux remained hidden behind the skirts of the maid accompanying him.

Umm, what was the cousin’s name again? I think it began with an M?

“Lady Marie, that’s terribly rude.”

Oh, that’s right! Her name is Marie!

Unfortunately for me, “Lady Marie” was not about to listen to the maid’s warning either.

“She’s probably just trying to ingratiate herself with Daux because he’s a member of the imperial family! My mother is protecting Daux, so it won’t work!”

“How would being accepted by the imperial family benefit me?” I asked.

“...Well, I mean... You could, um, be plotting to m-marry Daux, or

something...”

Typical. Her face turned bright red just from saying the word “marry.”

“Hm, I think that would be impossible,” I said. “I’m already claimed by a holy beast, and I’ve heard that when you’re bonded to a holy beast, you can’t get married without their approval.”

My relationship with Sol wasn’t a secret, so it was fine for me to talk about it. I could only mention being a beloved child to those who’d vowed upon their name, though.

Apparently, my announcement was surprising because Lady Marie, the maid, and even little Daux looked shocked.

“You’re bonded with a holy beast?! You lie!” Lady Marie cried.

“It’s not a lie! I’m bound to the fire dragon who lives in the northern mountains. Isn’t that right, Euche?”

Figuring they’d be more likely to believe it if it came from a holy beast from their own country, I looked to Euche to back me up, and although he nodded, for some reason, he seemed reluctant.

Why is that?! Don’t tell me he hates Sol just because they’re affiliated with the opposing elements of fire and water or something?!

“More importantly, let’s play!” I said. “We don’t have much time left before it starts to get dark!”

“More importantly?!”

Ignoring Marie’s protest, I insistently tugged on her and little Daux’s wrists.

“Oh, and we have to call Kaideetay and Sache, too!” I exclaimed.

The emperor had claimed they would come if I called, so I tried shouting their names and then waited to see what would happen.

They really did come.

Kaideetay appeared out of the ground just as before, and Sache made her entrance via the water in the fountain.

The maid let out a frightened shriek, but I had a hard time seeing why she had

to be afraid of her own country's holy beasts.

“Lord Kaideetay and Lady Sache...”

Marie's face had gone ashen, and little Daux hid behind me.

“It's okay, they aren't scary!” I insisted.

Kaideetay looked incredulous but not particularly angry. And Sache was busily grooming Euche, so I figured that meant she was in a fairly good mood.

“Let's all play together today!”

Euche eagerly flapped his wings in agreement with my declaration.

Throughout the entire time we were “playing,” Kaideetay mostly just stood by and watched the rest of us without actually participating.

In an attempt to draw him in, I asked Euche to spray a shower of water onto Kaideetay. With his soaking wet fur slicked down against his body, Kaideetay looked like he'd shrunken in size.

With a low, irritable growl, Kaideetay shook his body, splashing the rest of us with water.

Marie and I ran away, shrieking playfully.

Left behind on his own after we'd fled, little Daux ended up soaked. I was worried he'd catch a cold if he stayed like that, so I asked Sache to dry him off.

Our antics had gotten Euche really excited because he stole all the water from the channels and used it to create one giant blob of water.

I watched apprehensively to see what he'd do with the huge blob of water floating in the air when it burst like a popped balloon.

I braced myself for water to pelt down on us like rain, but it never came. When I looked back up at the sky, I saw what must've been thousands of tiny droplets of water suspended in the air. They reflected the sun's light, creating shining sparkles that looked like the sky was full of diamonds.

“It's so beautiful!”

“Amazing!”

“Euche, you’re incredible!”

In order me, Marie, and Daux each commented on the breathtaking spectacle, and Euche responded with a proud whinny.

Seemingly not content to let Euche have all the attention, Sache was the next to demonstrate her power.

The water droplets became even smaller, and then I felt what I could’ve sworn was a cold, wintery breeze blowing through the garden. The next thing I knew, lazy white flecks were drifting down all around us.

“It’s snowing!”

The Imperial City was much further south than the Royal City, so it was still hot here this time of year. And yet, unbelievably, it was snowing!

“Look! I’ve never seen such perfect snowflakes!”

As Marie had said, when the snow fell on my hand, it didn’t melt right away, so I could make out the delicate structure of the snowflake clearly. It almost seemed more like crystals falling from the sky rather than snow.

Now I want to see Kaideetay use his power, too!

I glanced at Kaideetay, but his body language clearly said, “*Don’t look at me; I’m not doing it!*”

“Come on, Kaideetay, pleaaaase!”

After practically begging, Kaideetay finally, reluctantly gave in.

Kaideetay tapped one of the now-dry channels with his paw, and the pebbles lining the bottom of the channel all sunk into the ground, leaving nothing but bare dirt. I stood up straighter as the sight inspired a *wonderful* thought in my head.

Mud! With dirt and water, we can play in the mud! I experimentally touched the dirt and found it contained a bit more moisture than your average sandbox sand. When I squeezed it together, it held its shape. *This is perfect for making sandcastles!*

“Let’s use this dirt to make a castle!”

I forced Marie, who was reluctant to get her pristine hands dirty, to touch the dirt. When her fingers made contact with the damp soil, she seemed surprised, as if she'd never felt it before.

"You can really make a castle with this?" she asked.

"Sure! First, you have to pile it up like this, and then..."

While the two of us were elbow-deep in the dirt, piling it up into a big mound, little Daux timidly joined us of his own accord!

"What kind of castle would you like to make, Daux?" I asked.

"I bet he wants to make a replica of Azurite Palace!" Marie guessed.

"Hmm, that's a good idea too, but I kind of want to see what the castle from Neema's country looks like, too..." Daux admitted shyly.

Debating hotly amongst the three of us as we worked, we finally finished our castle just as the sun was beginning to set.

"It's done!"

In the end, we'd fashioned our sandcastle after Azurite Palace. It had won out simply because we could easily see the model around us. Whenever we ran across an area we weren't sure how it should look, we got Sache to let us ride on her back so we could do aerial surveillance.

Daux had proven surprisingly good at working with his hands, so we'd put him in charge of all the fine details.

"I think that's enough for today," the maid called out, putting a stop to our play once we'd completed the sandcastle.

I would've liked to play a little longer, but I *was* starting to get pretty hungry.

"Let's play together again tomorrow!" I declared.

"I suppose we'll have to!" Marie loftily agreed, but I could see right through her arrogant air now.

Daux was smiling, too, so I got the feeling that we would indeed all be able to enjoy playing together again tomorrow.

6 - Apparently, a Lot Is Going on Below the Surface

“I’M back.”

Paul had returned from the errand I’d sent him on.

“Welcome back. ...How did it go?”

“He *honored me* with a flat-out refusal.”

O-Oh, I see... But, Paul... He’s of a much higher status, so we’re in no position to be angry with him. Put your anger away! Down, boy!

I’d sent Paul to invite Daux to play with me, but apparently, he’d slammed the door in Paul’s face without even listening to what he had to say.

Up to this point, the only way I’d successfully gotten him to come out of his room was by passing the invitation through the emperor.

I’ve finally found a playmate, but I still can’t play with him as much as I’d like! But Daux also has his own things going on, so I wanted to compare our schedules to find some time to play...

Currently, I couldn’t get anywhere near Daux on my own.

Marie was a total loss as well.

Seeing no other option, I decided to spend the day exploring the imperial palace. Shinki would be my bodyguard, and Seigo and Rikusei would be my guides.

As we walked down the halls, the excited kobolds kept pointing out things like “*There’s a concealed door here!*” and “*There’s a hidden room behind this wall!*”

Is this important information that I need to make a point of committing to memory?

...Nah, I’m sure Paul is reviewing all the information they collect, so there’s no need for me to remember everything.

It was unexpected that, unlike in my own country, the walls and pillars in the

imperial palace were sparsely decorated. However, I was curious about the mysterious pattern engraved in multiple places along our route.

Is it some kind of written magic?

As we wandered the halls, the servants we encountered were very polite, but all the nobles seemed wary of us.

If what Karna had said the other day was true, this was probably because many people believed Karna would likely marry into a high-ranking family here in the Linus Empire.

In short, none of the aristocrats with daughters of marriageable age could relax as long as we were around.

I wanted to tell them they were wrong. I was fairly certain Papa would never allow such a thing to happen. He was so doting on Karna that he seemed not to want to allow her to get married at *all*, but even if he did, her husband would probably have to be from our own country at the very least.

I'd heard she was a potential candidate for the role of Will's fiancée, but based on how vehemently opposed to the idea she was, I wasn't sure what would happen with that.

I was sure about one thing, though—if Karna and Louis continued getting closer and she married him, I would cry my eyes out.

I don't want to live so far away from Karna! Well, I suppose there's no use worrying about the future when no one knows how things will turn out.

But the world of women certainly is tricky to navigate, huh?

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Today, only those close to His Imperial Highness Prince Aisent were invited, don't you know?"

Just then, I happened upon a scene of three young noblewomen berating another young noblewoman with her back pressed up against a wall.

Why are they doing such a thing in a place like this? It's unseemly to have a confrontation where anyone might wander by!

“I’m simply accompanying my older brother...”

“Your older brother may be on good terms with the prince, but *you* should be a bit more aware of your place!”

What should I do?

Back in my own country, just saying, “*Excuse me, please let me by*” would be enough to stop it, but this is a foreign country.

This is also a type of internal power struggle, so I’m not sure if it’s appropriate for me to get involved... Hmm...

While I was worrying about what to do, Seigo and Rikusei cluelessly bounded ahead.

When the antagonistic young noblewomen caught sight of the adorable “dogs” barking energetically, their expressions softened.

“Oh, are these the adorable guests I’ve been hearing about?”

“They really are cute!”

The two of them were more popular than I would’ve imagined. They obediently stopped and let the young women pet them.

In any case, the young noblewomen were successfully diverted from their bullying, so I considered it a job well done on Seigo and Rikusei’s part!

Now, it’s probably safe for me to make an appearance.

“Seigo, Rikusei, where are you?” I called, pretending to be looking for them as I stepped out where the young ladies could see me.

The kobolds barked back at me.

“Seigo and Rikusei, you know I worry when you run off like that!”

I *actually* wanted to praise them for what they’d done and planned to do just that later when we were alone. I was doubly impressed by how quickly they caught on to my act and immediately played along.

“Please allow me to apologize for any inconvenience my pets have caused you,” I said to the young ladies. They seemed to know who I was because their smiles transformed instantly from the genuine broad smiles they’d been giving

Seigo and Rikusei to brittle fake smiles when they looked at me.

“It was no trouble at all. It soothes the heart to see such sweet animals.”

“If you will excuse us...”

In a move that would've made the proverbial hare in the saying “quick as a hare” proud, the young ladies made to dash off somewhere, but their plans were foiled by someone who appeared on the other side of them, sandwiching the girls between himself and me.

“Arianna, Shawn was looking for you.”

“Huh? Oh... Excuse me. I'll return immediately.”

The young lady, who'd been the object of the other three's ire and whose name was apparently Arianna, seemed flustered by the fact that the imperial prince had come to look for her in person.

“Why don't you ladies all head back now, too? Everyone's feeling sad and lonely that the most beautiful flowers have disappeared, you know.”

Huuuuh? Was the playboy always this kind of person? I mean, he still sounds like a stereotypical playboy, but I could've sworn everything he's said up to this point just sounded sleazy.

Whereas normally, he seems to spout whatever cheap pickup lines come to mind, right now, he's practically reciting poetry!

I was examining the playboy closely when suddenly our eyes met.

“Oh, it's the adorable little lady! Are you alone today?” he asked.

Eek, I've got goosebumps! But I'm a duke's daughter. I have to be able to tolerate things like this!

Feeling like I was heading out onto the battlefield, I faced off against the playboy.

“Good day, Prince Aisent. I was just in the middle of exploring the imperial palace.”

“I heard you and Daux have been playing together a lot lately, so I figured you would be together today, too.”

On the surface, it was a perfectly appropriate response for a prince, but I sensed thorns attached to his words. Perhaps the playboy didn't have a high opinion of Daux.

"While it's true that Daux and I have become friends, it seems he wasn't available to play today..."

"You've become such good friends that you now call him by his nickname, I see. ...Hm, then why don't you join my social? I'd be happy to have you."

A social was an event similar to a small, intimate tea party with one's closest friends. Their purpose was to deepen the bonds of friendship regardless of gender and social rank, and here in the Linus Empire, they were all the rage among teenagers.

Socials were an event based on the history and traditions of the Linus Empire, so we didn't have them in my country.

It sounded interesting, but I wasn't particularly interested in attending a social hosted by someone I wasn't close with. And yet, I also couldn't very well reject an invitation from the imperial prince of the country currently hosting us so generously.

And so, I was forced to reluctantly accept.

"Wouldn't it be a terrible imposition for me to join without warning?"

"Not at all. I'm certain everyone is dying for the chance to make friends with an adorable little princess."

When did I level up from a lady to a princess?! But you know, if he's like this at around the same age as Karna, just imagine how intolerable he'll be when he's an adult!

And so, that's how I ended up unexpectedly attending a social!

We were led to a room in one corner of the imperial palace that looked out over a beautiful garden. An assortment of young men and women around the playboy's age occupied the room, all chatting happily amongst themselves.

Just like the banquet, this social also had separate rooms for socializing and eating.

“Welcome back, Your Highness. Hm? Isn’t that...?”

“Yes, I ran into her while I was looking for Arianna. This is one of our guests from the Kingdom of Gaché, Lady Nefertima.”

I bowed in the manner of the Linus Empire and politely introduced myself, and before I knew it, I was surrounded by people.

“You’re the daughter of His Grace, the famously astute and capable prime minister?”

“The system of occupational tax he implemented to great success in such a sparsely populated region was genius. We’re attempting to replicate it in my province.”

“The Original Technology Law was a stroke of genius as well. I’d love to see a similar law passed here in the Linus Empire!”

For some reason, it seemed Papa was extremely popular here.

If people wanted to know about my home country, I could answer to a certain extent. But when it came to national politics and the governance of a province, I would be hard-pressed to answer any questions beyond my own meager level of understanding.

How do they all know so much about the governance of another country, anyway?!

Even I didn’t know much about our province’s system of occupational tax beyond the fact that there *was* one.

“I’m afraid I’m not terribly familiar with all the details, but our country features a large diversity of climates and natural resources depending on the region, so I believe it was the best solution to suit the citizens living in each area,” I responded.

It was a fitting strategy for a country like ours, where each province boasted wildly different climates and resources. It also didn’t hurt that the system left the provincial lords a considerable amount of leeway to exercise their own judgment within the territory under their jurisdiction.

That was because if a provincial lord wanted to implement something within

their province, they could easily present it to the king and other cabinet ministers, who make up the crux of our national government, for consideration.

From what I'd learned in my studies, the Linus Empire's system of government was more similar to that of feudal Japan.

In this metaphor, the imperial family were the shogunate, and they assigned territories to the titled nobles to be ruled like domains.

Of course, each domain was required to offer taxes in the form of an annual tribute to the central government, but the method of taxation within each domain was left up to the noble families.

However, the nobles were prohibited from setting tax rates over the limit determined by the central government and from lining their own pockets with the citizens' taxes. That would be viewed as treason and would result in a swift execution, making it a very severe crime indeed.

In conclusion, it was probably accurate to say that the nobles in the Linus Empire had a higher degree of freedom when it came to ruling their provinces. The lesser nobles serving as proxy lords in the Kingdom of Gaché didn't have much, if any, decision-making rights.

On the other hand, the Linus Empire might've been stricter in terms of government monitoring. I'd heard the Linus Empire had special investigators for that exact purpose.

The investigators in our country were government officials of a sort, so I pictured them as undercover magistrates traveling around in secret dealing out justice, but here, they were more like a combination of spies and agents of the central government. They answered directly to the emperor and were in charge of monitoring the nobles. When wrongdoings were discovered, the investigators were authorized to mete out justice at their own discretion.

A special crest was bestowed upon the emperor's private investigators along with a stamped imperial edict in his own handwriting.

With all this going on, anyone with a brain in their head would pray they never had any reason to cross paths with any of the investigators!

"I was wondering... Do the Armanos really exist?"

Armanos was a word in Celestian that meant something like “bring secrets into the light.” It had been adopted to refer to the Linus Empire’s investigators. I was so overcome with curiosity that I couldn’t help but ask.

“Why would you bring up such a frightening topic...?”

“Lady Nefertima, that is a forbidden word amongst the nobility.”

And so, no one would tell me anything.

But I can’t help but be even more curious now! If you’re not doing anything bad, you shouldn’t have any reason to fear the investigators. If it’s just that they’re worried about being falsely accused due to the investigators’ considerable authority, I suppose that’s understandable, but...

If it really is a case of false accusation, they can always request that another investigator look into the matter.

While I was puzzling over that, I heard girlish shrieks. I turned to see what was going on and spotted a group of young ladies gathered around something...

That “something” was Shinki.

I was a little concerned, so I quickly excused myself and headed over to the cluster of young ladies.

“Has my servant done something to give offense?” I asked.

I thought that as Shinki’s “master,” I would have to apologize if he’d done something rude.

“Not at all! He was just telling us the most wonderful story!”

The young ladies all had red cheeks and were gazing at Shinki with stars in their eyes.

“This gentleman was telling us about how he met you, Lady Nefertima.”

“It’s just like the story of a heroic knight from some epic tale...!”

The young ladies jumped in one after another, adding to the explanation, but I was having trouble following.

Our first meeting? A heroic knight?

Ohhh, they must be referring to the cover story Mama came up with! I'd totally forgotten about that. Thank goodness Shinki has a better memory than me!

"I've never heard of the Beak Tribe before..." one of the girls commented, and I hurried to assure her that wasn't something to be ashamed of.

"They're a very rare tribe. I also hadn't heard of them until Shinki told me about them."

In reality, Mama, not Shinki, told me about the Beak Tribe, but it is true I'd never heard of them before that.

"I think that's all the better. If he were a commonplace beastperson, it would make him less remarkable," another of the ladies argued, but her argument didn't sit quite right with me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it almost felt like I had something caught in my throat.

"This gentleman is dignified and cool, but I also wouldn't mind being saved by a beautiful man like the feliance beastperson in the imperial army, Mr. Fouge!"

I suppose girls this age love pretty boys. In that case, they should visit my country. There's an absurdly high rate of handsome men there!

The girls began an animated discussion about which gentlemen of their acquaintance were the coolest, the most beautiful, *etc.* I didn't know any of the people they were talking about, so the only contribution I could make to the conversation was nodding and smiling.

However, there was one topic that particularly drew my interest.

One of the types of beastperson the girls mentioned finding decidedly unattractive was the Lizard Tribe! That's right; there was apparently a tribe of beastpeople similar to the dragonewts from RPGs!

A lizard beastperson?! Heck yeah!

Maybe "lizard" doesn't sound very strong, but if you phrase it as a "sub-species of dragon," that sounds a bit cooler.

In any case, that's what they were.

They weren't dragons but lizards who were at least as strong as giant worms

—another distant relative of dragons.

I guess you could say their closest Earth counterpart is the Komodo dragon?

With that kind of evolutionary background, the Lizard Tribe was known for being some of the most highly skilled fighters among the beastperson tribes.

I'm looking forward to seeing what they can do!

To my surprise, I ended up enjoying the social very much.

Seigo and Rikusei were doted on and played with by all the attendees who loved animals, and Shinki consumed a frankly astounding amount of food.

After the social concluded, the playboy announced he would escort me back to my room. I tried to decline his offer since Seigo and Rikusei knew the way, and we could easily make it back on our own, but Aisent just smiled and ignored my protests.

“Lady Nefertima, you mustn't forget: all those people are enemies.”

“...Enemies? ...Whose?”

Despite his shocking statement, Aisent refused to say another word.

You can't just say something like that and then refuse to elaborate! Now I'm super curious what you mean!

“Are you saying that they're your enemies, Prince Aisent?” I needled in an attempt to wear him down, but Aisent only narrowed his eyes and scoffed at me.

That expression reminds me of Mama.

It was the same undefeatable expression Mama wore when trying to corner someone.

I was still befuddled when we arrived at my room, where the playboy waved casually and said, “See ya!” before walking off.

Paul opened the door, and Karna called out, “Welcome back!”

Without thinking, I ran straight up to Karna and hugged her tightly around the middle.

“It’s rare for you to be the one to hug me first. Are you tired from all your exploring?” Karna asked, stroking the top of my head gently.

“...Well, you see...”

I spilled everything to Karna—all that had occurred and that I’d heard. Of course, that included what the playboy had said to me at the end.

“I see, Prince Aisent said something like that...”

“Whose ‘enemy’ do you think he was referring to?”

“Hmm, well, I can only guess, but I think he probably meant the enemies of both us and the imperial family.”

“Huh?!”

It would be understandable if they were enemies of Karna and I, but the imperial family as well?

Does that mean the playboy intentionally spends time with people he knows are his enemies?

“It’s also possible that Prince Aisent himself is also an enemy,” Paul interjected as he busied himself preparing the tea.

“He said ‘all of those people,’ so it’s possible he was including himself in that warning. I don’t know what motive he might have for saying such a thing to you, though.”

Paul speculated that maybe Prince Aisent was reluctant to get me involved.

“If that’s true, then it means that Prince Aisent hasn’t abandoned all of his good sense after all,” Karna mused.

“Why do you say that?”

He might be our enemy, but he has good sense? Those two statements seem to be directly contradictory to one another...

“He doesn’t want an outside party like you to be dragged into the Linus Empire’s internal power struggles. As he shouldn’t; you’re still a little child, after all!” Karna looked a little sad as she admitted she felt the same way.

I see... So Karna doesn’t want me to be involved in these kinds of things,

either...? But she's helping out because it's what I want. She really is a kind older sister, prioritizing my feelings over her own.

"I love you, Karna!" I hugged Karna again impulsively, and she told me she loved me, too, as she hugged me back.

"I've definitely thought about wanting to hide you away somewhere so you'll never get hurt. But I know that would be painful for you, too. The fact that both the God of the Creation and the Goddess love you so much is all the more reason why you should have all the experiences you can to learn from them."

"Karna..."

"That's also why you mustn't baby Lady Neema, Lady Karna," Paul said, pushing the issue home. Karna laughed lightly in agreement.

No, no, Karna, it's absolutely fine with me if you continue to baby me! Paul's already strict enough for the both of you!

"Furthermore, Lady Neema, please tell me the names of all the young nobles at the social you and Shinki attended. I will have them all looked into," Paul said somewhat cryptically.

Um, I don't remember most of their names, but...

Yeah, Arianna is the only one I remember!

Apparently, Paul could read that from the look on my face because before I could answer, he helpfully announced that he would prepare a list of all the nobles around Prince Aisent's age for me to reference. That would probably help jog my memory.

"Paul, until we figure out what Prince Aisent's objective is, please help me keep him from getting too close to Neema," Karna said.

"Yes, my lady. I will get right to work discretely investigating Prince Aisent and his associates."

I know our family's servants are super-multitalented, but are they really capable of uncovering information even in a foreign country?

"You're going to investigate them yourself?" I asked Paul.

“...Not personally, no. We’ve had someone undercover in the Linus Empire for some time now, and several of the staff from the Osphe family’s manor are now working in the imperial palace to be near the two of you.”

Seriously?!

I was shocked when Paul explained that His Imperial Majesty was well aware of the Osphe family servants working in the imperial palace and had given his permission.

Is the emperor really okay in the head?! Normally, you wouldn’t so easily allow agents of a foreign nation free rein in your palace, right?

This just proves that he either doesn’t have any secrets he would mind having revealed, or he’s just that confident in his ability to “take care of it” should those secrets be discovered...

Seigo and Rikusei are allowed to wander around freely, too. I don’t know what the emperor is thinking...

Small Talk: Don't You Think I'm Being Abused Just a Tad?! (POV: Director of the Intelligence Department)

WE steadily gathered information and ultimately put together a decent picture of what was going on inside the Cleet Mine ruins.

That was mostly thanks to Serafi.

Serafi had highlighted all the differences between the map from before the mine officially closed and the portion that was currently in use.

It would be impossible to take down the Runohark hideout inside Cleet Mine with just the members of the Intelligence Department, so the Kingdom of Gaché would send backup.

I knew that there were dangers inside, so we had to be ready for anything when we attacked.

If we successfully destroyed this hideout, we would change our strategy going forward, and many of the Intelligence Department's agents could return home.

Although, it's already been decided that those who've infiltrated the highest levels of the national government will have to stick it out a while longer.

"But, you know, it seems like everyone's returned... All of your old friends, I mean," Sawa said offhandedly, reporting the information she'd obtained under the guise of a normal conversation between husband and wife.

"If things weren't such shit, I'd love to go out drinking with them..."

By my "friends," she was referring to my subordinates. Apparently, all of those I'd called in to help had arrived. I really would've liked to have a strategy meeting with them at least once before we attacked, but it would ruin everything if anyone figured out we were up to something.

What should I do...?

I gazed at the maps in front of me—one of Icoux and the other of Cleet Mine

—as I thought it over.

It would have to be somewhere we're unlikely to be noticed but also where we wouldn't be considered suspicious even if someone did spot us all gathered together...

It would be out of the way, but I guess it would be safe enough somewhere close to the national border? But wait, wasn't there an abandoned village somewhere near here?

What did I do with that report from when we investigated this area?!

Documents were scattered all over the house, intentionally stuffed haphazardly here and there to avoid standing out or being easily accessible to anyone who might come snooping. However, the disorganization meant that even I often couldn't find what I was looking for. Still, if an enemy ever snuck into the house, they surely wouldn't imagine the papers strewn all over the floor were anything important.

The information was all encoded anyway, with the most important, top-secret intelligence stored only in my head. The country kept the original copies of all top-secret reports under close guard, with copies sent to us. However, those copies were enchanted with written magic that would make them burn to ash in exactly one color. If you failed to read the document and memorize its content within one color, that precious information would literally go up in flames.

No idiot would send something like that in the midst of a dangerous situation, but in the unlikely event the recipient *somehow* failed to read the message before it self-destructed, the only other option was to rendezvous with another agent and get them to convey the information by word of mouth. That was because it was forbidden to copy down information designated as “top-secret” in writing anywhere but within the confines of the royal palace.

I skimmed over the report that I had *finally* located and confirmed the existence of an abandoned village not far from this town.

It was a distance from the mine ruins and would be a plausible location to spin the cover story of “meeting up to flee together to the Kingdom of Gaché as refugees.” We could pretend to be merchants banding together to travel to a

country where we could do business safely. No one would doubt this story, given the current situation.

We should probably scope it out before getting everyone together.

Of course, *I* was the one who went to do the “scoping out.”

Looters and the elements had ravaged the abandoned village, and most of the houses were destroyed. The communal well was dry, and the fields were barren.

Sadly, that was a common sight in this country.

There was no sign of so much as an animal, never mind any humans. That meant we would immediately know if anyone tried to sneak up on us here. Using Serafi’s power, we could secure a pretty large area.

By the time I’d made a round of the entire village, I’d made up my mind.

Once I returned to my safe house, I quickly dispatched encrypted letters to my subordinates stating the meetup location, date and time, and what to wear. Of course, I enchanted all the letters to self-destruct.



“DIRECTOR, everyone is here.”

“All right, let’s get started then.”

Once it was confirmed that all my subordinates had arrived, dressed up like merchants per my instructions, I began the strategy meeting.

I briefed the others on the location that was our objective for this mission—Runohark’s base inside the Cleet Mine ruins—and also shared the number of enemies we’d estimated we’d be facing, outlined our plan of action, and touched on the backup we were anticipating would arrive to assist in our mission.

“The elemental is a thin man with hair the color of dead leaves and eyes a yellowish-brown color. It’s imperative that we capture him alive,” I stressed. “If he dies, the elemental spirit will be freed, and its power will stop reinforcing the mine. If that happens, it’s only a matter of time until the entire place collapses.”

I didn't care one way or the other if the rest of the Runohark agents lived or died, but there were also innocent people in the mines who'd been captured and enslaved.

Then there was the most dangerous part of this mission: the monsters who'd been forced into cages.

"If they release the monsters on us, do your best to herd them outside. The dragon knights and the special forces coming to back us up will deal with them."

A commotion broke out amongst my subordinates when the name "special forces" came up.

I couldn't blame them.

Anyone connected to the royal knighthood was familiar with that name. And yet, no one knew anything concrete about the mysterious squadron of elite fighters: not how many members there were or even who their leader was.

All that was known about them was that each and every member of the special forces was so strong that they almost couldn't be considered human.

That said, I knew everything about them, of course.

The members of the special forces had all been hand-picked from among the ranks of the royal knighthood, after all. I was sure many people dreamed of being selected for such an honor.

"As I'm sure you've deduced, this means that the monsters in that mine, the ogres, are so dangerous that it warranted calling in the special forces," I said. "Don't let your guard down for even a minute, got it?"

If it were just one or two, we probably could've handled them on our own. But with seven ogres, we had little chance of defeating them without help. Even *with* help, it was highly likely that more than one person would journey home to be with the Goddess.

"More details and any updates will be dispatched by letter from headquarters back home. Make sure you don't do anything to draw attention to yourselves between now and the day of the operation."

After looking around and confirming the determination burning in the eyes of

all of my subordinates, I disbanded the meeting.

After that, I communicated with the agents back at headquarters by letter, fleshing out our plan of attack, and before long, I received a letter from General Zelnan that His Majesty the King had endorsed the operation to go ahead.

I also had to do a lot to prepare to move out of my safe house on the day of the operation.

I sent all my paperwork to the Intelligence Department headquarters to be dealt with later, so that was easy enough, but the smooth dissolution of human relations took a bit more work.

I released the pawns I'd procured locally, giving each of them a coin for their efforts.

"Head to the Linus Empire," I said.

The coins could only be redeemed with the army or knighthood of countries allied with ours. They were also a way to identify people who were to be offered protection because their work on behalf of our country had made it difficult for them to remain in their own country.

We didn't give them refuge in our country because they'd been our country's pawns. On the other hand, we did offer refuge to the Linus Empire and Milma's pawns in our country.

The purpose behind entrusting our pawns to another country was to make it seem like they had no value to us. Although, to be brutally honest, they *did* have little value on a large scale.

After all, if they were truly useful, they would've likely been recruited for a permanent position.

The men always easily accepted the coins I offered them, but some women would argue with me. It wasn't an attempt at seduction, per se, but they would sometimes say annoying things like "I want to stay with *you*" and "I can be of help," trying to persuade me to keep them around.

Am I just a huge chump or something? I have never heard about pawns attempting to persuade any really skilled agents... Yeah, I must be a sucky agent

after all...

It was a hard pill to swallow, being confronted with my own weak points at this age.

“Oh no, did you fail again?” Sawa laughed when she saw the distinct red outline of a hand on my cheek.

“...I didn’t fail.”

In the end, she *had* accepted the coin.

For some reason, the room I’d cleared of all the scattered documents and meticulously cleaned was now full of various magical items. I assumed Sawa was going through them, making sure they all worked properly in preparation for the date of the operation.

“I guess things are coming along...”



IN the dead of night, several hours before the sun would start its ascent, my subordinates and I convened. We would go over our plans one last time and make contact with the troops who’d come to provide backup.

However, the special forces still hadn’t arrived.

At this point, only the Dragon Knights Legion were here.

“Hey, Dan. Long time no see, eh?”

Dan was the youngest member of the legion commanders’ group, but somehow, the weirdo had climbed his way up to the position of commander using just his borderline-freakish love of dragons.

I suppose that’s a bit unfair; he’s also a pretty skilled fighter.

“Long time no see, Director Seerio.”

“Where do you have the dragons waiting?”

Only about half of the agreed-upon number of dragon knights were in attendance. However, since it would’ve been impossible to bring their massive dragon partners to this meeting without blowing our cover, I assumed the remaining knights were waiting with the dragons elsewhere.

“Close to the national border. They will move in just before the appointed time to meet up with us just as we commence the operation.”

I pulled out a map and told him to point out the exact location. He pointed out one of the fortresses in Mieuxga province.

Even if the dragons were spotted, it could easily be played off as “training” since they were close to the fortress, and the location was also relatively close to Cleet Mine. It would take the winged dragons less than one color to cover that distance, and even the flightless dragons could cover the distance in two colors at most.

“In that case, three segments before the appointed commencement time, have one aerial unit patrol from the sky. The places I want them to especially pay attention to are here and here.”

I pointed to the spots where people had been seen entering and exiting the mine.

The map of the mine had been duplicated, and the leader of each unit had a copy.

We’d determined it would be safer for everyone to be able to consult with the map to avoid making mistakes rather than trying to memorize the entire thing. Not everyone had undergone the same intense training to memorize things as those of us from the Intelligence Department, after all.

“Very well. What would you like me to do with the other aerial unit? If you don’t have a purpose in mind for them, I’ll have them assist the aerial assault units as originally planned.”

The forces from the Dragon Knights Legion that had come as our backup included two aerial units, who typically focused on reconnaissance and support; two aerial assault units, who would launch magical attacks from the air; two physical combat units, who would attack on the ground using weapons, and two magical combat units, who would attack on the ground using magic. When you considered that each unit consisted of only five knights, it might not seem like much, but the dragons took up a considerable amount of space, so it was in our best interests to keep the numbers low enough that we didn’t need to worry about our movements being impeded.

Only the artillery combat units would infiltrate the mine.

There was a high likelihood that any use of magic inside the mine would bring the entire thing crumbling down on top of us, so we'd decided to have the magical combat units deal with any Runohark agents who fled outside.

"That's fine. And remember: absolutely no magic inside the mine. Don't get us all killed, got it?"

"I already know that!"

We discussed a few more details, and then I ordered my subordinates who'd finished their preparations to get some sleep while they could.

Just as silence descended over our camp, *they* arrived.

"Thank you for your hard work." I paid homage to the person in front of me.

"Be at ease, Seerio. You've certainly gotten scruffy since the last time I saw you."

"Well, yeah, I've been playing the part of a merchant for half a cycle now."

He barked out a silent laugh, apparently enjoying bantering with me. Personally, I would've been more comfortable if he'd just laughed out loud like any normal person, but...

"Good work, Mr. Merchant. More importantly, there are several changes. We have time, right?"

They're changing the plans at the last minute? Either the people on top made some kind of demands, or else foreign affairs screwed something up. I just hope this doesn't take a bad turn...

"Very well. Please follow me."

The changes relayed to me left me clutching my head in exasperation, but honestly, I had no choice but to dig down deep and find some way to make it work. I was not about to lose a single one of my talented subordinates, so I would need to pull out all the stops and give it all I had.

"But with this new plan, it won't succeed unless I go in person, right?" I asked.

"Obviously. Is there anyone else besides you who can communicate with

elemental spirits?”

“...No.”

I'm already getting up there in my years, you know! Don't you think you should cut me some slack and not feature me in such a prominent role in your plan?! It really is time to start thinking about retiring.

Not that he'll ever let me retire so easily... I really am a pitiable soul.

It was almost time for the operation to commence, but first, I needed to get everyone to take a vow upon their name.

“It's about the special forces that have come as our backup. Before I can introduce them, I am ordering you all to vow upon your names never to reveal their identities to anyone.”

Normally, the special forces would never work in cooperation with other units; it was their style to carry out their work covertly, behind the scenes. It was crucial for them to be able to continue doing their jobs without their identities being revealed.

So I ordered everyone who was going to be involved in this operation to vow upon their name, but anyone who didn't want to take the vow was free to drop out now. This mission was not for the faint of heart.

I explained all that, and once every knight had willingly vowed upon their name, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“The honorable knights of our country's royal knighthood are truly loyal to the core. I am standing before you now as the commander of the special forces, so you needn't bow.”

When *he* appeared, all my subordinates stood up a little straighter, clearly nervous.



Naturally. Your average knight could go their entire life without ever seeing a member of the royal family up close. And when you added in the fact that a revered holy beast accompanied him, it was enough to leave the loyal knights itching to fall to their knees. And yet they couldn't, as they'd been specifically instructed not to right now.

The dragon knights had done the same thing, so I felt confident that the men's morale had been lifted.

"I can't reveal the others' identities, but let's fight together for the sake of our country."

Just then, a group of lindblooms appeared, dancing gracefully across the sky. It was the aerial unit assigned to patrol duty.

"It's almost time. Everyone, get into position. Don't forget the signal."

The agents bowed respectfully and scattered to take up their assigned positions.

I would be entering Cleet Mine, so I would have to leave the task of issuing orders outside up to the special forces.

"I'll leave the rest out here to you, then."

"Okay. This entire plan is resting on your shoulders, Director Seerio. ...Don't you dare die without my permission, you hear me?"

Good grief, he's not able to be upfront with his feelings at all, is he? Our future king...

With a gruff, "Of course," I headed off to my position.

All right, let's do this.



THE spell that was our predetermined signal made its way up into the sky.

As the spell exploded into a blinding flash of red light, I led my subordinates into the mine. Without hardly even pausing our charge, we swiftly neutralized the men on lookout duty and left them where they fell.

The artillery combat units followed close behind us.

A bit further ahead, we came to split in the path. Here, we would be dividing into two groups. I had to follow the path that led further and further underground. That's why I'd told my subordinates I was counting on them to capture every last Runohark agent.

Based on the far-off shouting and sounds of combat, it appeared that the group who'd infiltrated the mine from the other entrance was already engaged in battle.

We separated from the artillery combat units at the split in the path, and my subordinates headed for where the captured people were being held.

I pressed on to my destination alone, all the while telling myself I could do this.

When I reached my destination, several heavily armed Runohark agents were there. I assumed they were lookouts.

I guess we'll see if I can neutralize them without anyone noticing.

I picked up a rock from the ground and threw it towards the cage closest to me. The rock didn't collide with the cage—it hit the thing *inside*.

The prickling on the edge of my senses told me that wind spirits had probably helped the rock reach its intended target.

I made a note to express my gratitude to the elemental spirits later. Just as I'd hoped, the creature trapped inside the cage began raging. While the Runohark agents were distracted by the creature's sudden outburst, I darted forward, knocking them unconscious one by one.

One, two...

That was as far as I got before the others finally noticed me.

But the large and cumbersome swords they swung around clumsily were no match for my secret weapon. I used my short sword, which was coated with two kinds of poison—one that induced sleep and one that induced paralysis—to slice into my enemies' legs.

It was a special blend of poison only permitted for use for this operation. It was so effective that even I was a bit alarmed when I saw it in action.

They did tell me it would kick in almost instantaneously, but this is something... I can see why they wouldn't want this to get into the hands of the general public.

“Wind spirits, thank you for your assistance. Could I also ask you to please convey the message that I’ve taken out all the enemies at this location?” I said to the wind spirits in the vicinity, and in response, I heard tinkling laughter like the sound of cheerful bells that faded into the distance as they hurried off to do as I’d asked. “Serafi, I’m counting on you when the signal comes.”

“Leave it to me! I’m so excited to work together with Sir Lars!”

I pointedly reminded Serafi not to overdo it as I bustled around tying up the unconscious Runohark agents. Then I dragged them off to the side and left them in an unceremonious pile where they wouldn’t be in the way.

“Here I go!”

Just as I registered Serafi’s frankly *delighted*-sounding cry, a tremendous rumble, just like thunder, sounded, and then the ceiling collapsed.

“Wow. I can see straight through to the sky.”

Only an earth spirit and a wind holy beast working perfectly in tandem could’ve pulled off such a feat. We were far underground and had been fortunate that nothing in the layers above us would’ve gotten in the way.

All the creatures locked in the cages began simultaneously freaking out. Between their furious shrieks and the metallic clanking as they beat furiously against the bars of their cages, I thought my eardrums might burst.

The sound alone is enough to make a person break out in a cold sweat! I’ll just have to pray the cages hold a little longer.

With one task completed, I was about to move on to the next when someone ran into the cavern. My eyes immediately focused on the distinctive runes decorating his white robes.

This matches with a certain piece of information we received from the Osphe family.

“What in the world...?!” The man stopped in his tracks and cried in shock at

the sight of the sky, where it clearly should not be visible.

“You lot have been *very* naughty. So naughty, in fact, that it seems you’ve incurred the wrath of God,” I said.

The Church of Divine Creation had loudly and publicly refuted all involvement with Runohark, but here in front of me was clear proof that *that* had been a lie.

“Who the hell are you?! No, more importantly, what country are you working for?!”

Yuck. Say it, don’t spray it, man! Besides, do you seriously think I’m going to tell you just because you asked?

“I can’t tell you about myself, but I know who *you* are,” I replied. “A bunch of rejects misusing the name of God.”

“Hmph! We aren’t misusing anything! We have been given a divine mission directly from the God of Creation!”

Fanatical believers are really terrifying. It’s hard to believe how anyone can become this blinded to the truth.

“Then let me ask you this: are there any healers in your organization?”

“What kind of question is that?! Of course there...” The man instinctively began refuting my question before the truth of the matter caught up with him, and he trailed off.

It had been bothering me the whole time—not a single Runohark agent we’d detained had been able to use healing magic. Furthermore, even in the midst of battle, no one had ever reported spotting healers at the rear of our opponents’ ranks healing the wounded.

There was a great disparity in the strength and abilities of healers, but one thing they all had in common was that they had the Goddess Cresiollé’s blessing.

That meant that either the Goddess was protecting the healers upon whom she’d bestowed her blessing so that they wouldn’t ever come into contact with Runohark in the first place, or else she’d withdrawn her blessing from those who’d thrown in their lot with Runohark.

That logically meant that Runohark's existence, in and of itself, was in direct opposition to the will of God.

"Normally, the larger an organization grows, the more members there will be who can use healing magic," I said. "And yet, no matter how many of you scumbags we capture, not a single one of them is a healer. Unlike soldiers, most healers aren't accustomed to combat, so if they'd been present, we would've captured them. The only logical conclusion is that your organization has earned God's wrath, and he's intentionally keeping the blessed and favored far away from you."

"Then what about our elemental, hm? His elemental spirit was the one who told us about God's 'beloved child,' you know! It's clear the God of Creation is telling us to protect his beloved child!"

The elemental in question had most likely joined Runohark around the time his elemental spirit partner stopped following God's will. At that point, the other elemental spirits would have stopped lending the elemental their power.

Defiled power would only continue to defile the elemental spirit that used it.

The more the elemental relied on his bonded elemental spirit, the closer the two of them drew to becoming "obliterated" and "fallen."

Those were beings that had been forsaken by both God and the elemental spirits.

"Protect her? *You* lot? ...Yeah, right." I couldn't help but scoff at the twisted logic the man was spouting like gospel truth. "The beloved child is protected by *the world*. No matter what you fools who've been cast aside by God do or don't do, the world will continue to protect her. The only thing awaiting *you* is your destruction."

A beloved child was the closest living being to God.

Holy beasts, elemental spirits, and the natural world would all work together to protect them. Regardless of what petty attempts we humans might make to protect her, that, too, was just a manifestation of God's will being invoked to protect his beloved child.

“Let’s discuss this more later, shall we?” I pulled out a needle coated with a sleeping potion, and before he even knew what was happening, the man was deep asleep.

Who knows? Maybe we’ll get lucky, and he’ll have some information on the so-called “holy master.”

“Seerio! He’s going to be ‘obliterated’!”

I glanced up at Serafi and saw her wearing a grief-stricken expression. A kindred being was about to disappear forever. I could only imagine how conflicted she must feel about it.

“Is the bedrock stable here?” I asked.

“Yes. This is the far edge of the mine, and the ground isn’t particularly weak here...”

In that case, the danger of the monsters being released was low. The rest would depend on how the operation was progressing deeper in the mine.

This mine’s collapse was a natural occurrence. In other words, it was determined by the divine balance of nature. Preventing the mine from collapsing all this time had to violate the divine balance and had, therefore, hastened the elemental spirit’s “obliteration.”

If we can’t prevent the mine’s collapse entirely, perhaps we could at least soften the blow? We won’t know until we try it whether it violates the divine balance, but...

“Serafi, this is an order. Make it so that the collapse begins in the uninhabited areas of the mine first.”

“...Seerio, are you in your right mind!? I can do what you ask, but your power might not last!”

If Serafi says she can do it, then that means it doesn’t go against the divine balance.

The problem then became that in compensation for such a large-scale use of elemental power, the amount of power I would have to give her would also be large. That wouldn’t have been too big of a deal for the elementalists of old.

They had possessed vast amounts of power. But it was a very big deal for the few-and-far-between elementalists of today. We had much less power than our predecessors.

An elementalist's abilities consisted of being able to trade the power they'd been endowed with by the God of Creation to elemental spirits in exchange for favors. The elemental spirits stored up God's power until they could advance, becoming a higher level of elemental spirit.

I'd used much of my power in the line of duty.

If I had Serafi do this now, it would probably require *all* the remaining power I'd received from the God of Creation.

But what choice did I have? My companions and the innocent victims were all still deep in the mine.

"I know, but it doesn't change anything. Even if I were to lose the ability to see you, it *still* wouldn't change anything: you're my precious partner for life."

"...That's true. You really are the person I thought you were. Just keep praying to the God of Creation, okay?"

Okay, here goes nothing...

God,

I want to see Serafi never be "obliterated" and instead go on to become an exceptional, advanced-level elemental spirit who continues to serve you and is always smiling.

I'm so very grateful for this power that you entrusted to me.

Please take good care of Serafi.

I took out the magical item and activated it.

A brilliant flash of white light lit up the sky far overhead, and alarms began going off, coming from seemingly everywhere and nowhere all at once.

It was the signal for an "emergency retreat."

The aerial team patrolling the skies was using wind magic to deliver the sound of the alarms deep into the mine.

I'd better hurry, too. Time to catch up with my subordinates!

7 - An Outing With the Emperor!

I was being forcefully carted off somewhere in a luxurious carriage.

Don't get the wrong idea. I was informed in advance, of course. But it still *felt*, for all intents and purposes, like I was a runaway who'd been tracked down and thrown into a police car. Not that I'd ever personally experienced such a thing.

The emperor was taking me to the Helios Province to view the intended site of Project Roslan.

I wasn't well-versed in the geography of the Linus Empire, but we'd used teleportation magic for the first leg of the journey, so I was fairly certain that it was a considerable distance from the Imperial City.

All I knew about the Helios Province was that that crossdressing beauty—Earl Frantina Helios—ruled it, and it suffered considerable damages due to the appearance of ogres.

I'd also heard that the ogres in question had been completely wiped out.

I get it. Even with a protection order in place, if the monsters are harming humans, they have to prioritize protecting the citizens. What I'm more concerned about right now, though, is the fact that although the emperor declared this a secret mission, he hasn't disguised himself at all!

With the emperor, Louis, and Theo all in one place, a small army of people was accompanying us as their protection detail.

At this very moment, soldiers surrounded the carriage the members of the imperial family were riding in.

According to Paul, they were a group of the imperial army's most highly skilled, elite soldiers: the imperial family's private guard. They were security guards, similar to the royal guard in our country. There was a unit dedicated to each member of the imperial family, with names like Emperor's Private Guard, First Imperial Prince's Private Guard, and so on.

With three units of the private guard as well as my and Karna's security detail accompanying us, we made for a huge caravan.

It would be impossible not to draw attention like this!

However, perhaps thanks to the alarming number of armed soldiers accompanying us, our journey *had* been peaceful thus far.

For the time being, I would enjoy watching the scenery go by outside the carriage window.

Apparently, we'd already crossed into the Helios Province. I could tell that it was a place blessed with undisturbed natural beauty. The mountains and greenery I'd been looking at for our entire ride told me that much.

All of a sudden, the situation outside the carriage changed. The guards began bustling about, and I could hear them firing orders back and forth.

Just as Paul was about to get out of our carriage and go investigate, Louis appeared.

"Neema, come see. This is a rare sight!" he exclaimed.

Hm? Something rare?

I figured that, whatever it was, it must not be dangerous if he invited me to go look at it, so I agreed.

Louis carried me in his arms, making his way to the head of our procession.

I was bristling with excitement when suddenly I spotted something. Something fluffy!

The fluffy creature, which had its fangs bared in a clear attempt at intimidation, was a strange sight to behold. The creature itself was familiar... Well, I'd never seen one in *this* world, but I'd seen them in my past life plenty of times.

However, instead of nine tails, those on Earth had just one.

"That's a monster called a *kyubi*; have you ever heard of it before?" Louis asked.

Wait, what? A kyubi?! Literally a "nine-tailed fox" in Japanese?!

“...It’s a monster?” I asked.

“That’s right. This one isn’t fully grown yet, though. You can tell because it’s only got four tails out of the nine.”

...Hey, God! Come over here and park your butt down for a scolding, please! What on not-Earth were you thinking, making the servant of the Gods from Japanese folklore into a monster in this world?!

While I was mentally giving God what-for, the screeching kyubi’s eyes met mine. Its guarded but somehow pleading gaze drilled into me.

Stop that! Don’t ask me for help! If you have that much free time on your hands, just run away now while you can!

Despite my best attempt to convey those thoughts to the kyubi, apparently, it didn’t get the message. Before I could make any further attempt, another creature appeared.

This one had a round, green, and brown body. It extended a slithering appendage in the kyubi’s direction.

“*Kyun!*” the terrified kyubi screeched as the appendage wrapped around its body.

“...Is that an *alraune*?!” Louis gasped.

No, no, no! Alraunes are cute little plant sprites always depicted in the form of a beautiful young woman! Don’t use that name to refer to this devourer of hopes and dreams! That thing is one of those generic monsters you have to kill in RPGs to collect materials!

I was having a hard time keeping up with this sudden and shocking series of developments, but the struggling kyubi had no such qualms, as it produced a flame that burnt off the appendage wrapped around its body.

The moment it was free, the kyubi turned and ran straight in our direction.

Of course, another appendage shot out after it, undeterred.

The private guard drew their swords and took up fighting stances. At the same time, they raised their non-dominant hands as if prepared to release a spell at any moment.

I was mentally biting my nails and think-shouting, *You're gonna get pulverized if you come in this direction, too!* but the kyubi's movements were surprisingly swift and agile. It deftly zig-zagged between the row of bodyguards, and when it was just about to reach me...

Shinki snatched the kyubi up by the scruff of its neck.



“Kyuuuun!” The kyubi struggled mightily and let out a desperate screech that seemed to be saying, “Lemme goooo!”

Shinki casually tossed the kyubi... Straight towards the appendage.

“Kyuuu!” The kyubi’s screech became more and more shrill.

Without hesitating, the appendage snatched the kyubi out of midair.

U-Um... What should I do...?!

As we all watched uncomfortably, the undulating appendage wrapped itself around the kyubi's body.

Are alraunes carnivorous? Is that poor little kyubi about to be eaten?! But... This is also the way of nature. I guess I have no choice but to remind myself that the struggle for survival is brutal and force myself not to intervene.

The private guard began using magic to drive the alraune away from us. Perhaps because it was a plant of sorts, they were using exclusively fire magic. It showed no sign of intending to attack us next, but we couldn't afford to let our guard down.

"I never thought I'd ever see an alraune in person. You really are something, Neema!" Louis gushed.

It seems I really am being regarded as a monster-whisperer. Sure, I encountered plenty of monsters in the Kingdom of Gaché—but that was when we visited the places where the monsters already lived. It wasn't like my presence called to them or anything!

The alraune gradually began backing off.

Just when it looked like the creature was about to scamper off into the mountains...

It suddenly exploded.

Did it get hit with magic?!

A commotion broke out, with everyone incredulously yelling over which of the Linus Empire's finest had been responsible for such a blunder. However, the kyubi leapt out from inside the exploded alraune, letting out a victorious "Kyuuu!" that effectively answered the question of who had caused the explosion.

I was having a hard time deciding whether to feel glad that the kyubi hadn't been eaten or to mourn the alraune's untimely passing.

However, however! The surprises didn't end there!

You see, the blown-up alraune was amazingly *still alive!*

And it produced *another* appendage, brown this time instead of green like the others, that slithered towards the kyubi again.

The battle was *on!* Neither of them was retreating so much as a single step.

There seemed to be no end in sight for their fierce battle. By my reckoning, at least ten minutes passed like that, with us standing by watching with increasing incredulity...

Finally, I got Louis to put me down on the ground so I could walk over to the two battling monsters.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, and both monsters froze in their tracks midbattle.

“Let’s call it a tie for today! Hurry up and return to your homes in the forest already!”

These two don’t seem to have enough healthy fear of humans if they are ignoring us like this to focus on their stupid fight. If possible, I want them to return to the forest on their own before anyone in our group gets the idea to kill both of them so that we can continue on our way!

“Kyun!”

The kyubi let out a beguiling cry, but I was not about to be swayed!

“Go home!” I pointed empathically toward the forest.

Just then, the emperor—who at some point must’ve climbed out of his carriage without my noticing—said something shocking.

“Lady Nefertima, why don’t you try giving that monster a name?”

“Me? What about you?”

Didn’t he say the other day that he wanted to try it for himself to confirm whether it’s possible for anyone bonded with a holy beast to name a monster?

“I could probably handle the alraune, but not the kyubi. Something tells me our compatibility isn’t very high...”

I tilted my head in confusion, unable to follow what the emperor was saying.

He's got a feeling? Like intuition or something?

“Have you never felt that way, Lady Nefertima? Among the monsters you've met, were there any you just didn't quite click with?” he asked.

In response to his question, I mentally catalogued all the monsters I'd met so far.

First were the goblins. They were very friendly.

Frost spiders came next, I think?

Gratia's mother was fighting desperately against starvation for the sake of her children. I know she considered us food, but even so, I didn't sense any innate enmity from her. And Gratia wasn't even the slightest bit wary of me.

The slimes were a given; all the slimes I've met so far were Shizuku's offspring and seemed inclined to get along with me.

As for the kobolds, putting the kids aside for a moment, the adults all had different personalities, but I didn't feel that any of them were innately incompatible with me.

And although I was initially a little afraid of the sirens, they all turned out to be very interesting ladies. Well, and Kai.

“I've met goblins, frost spiders, slimes, kobolds, and sirens, but they were all nice...”

Come to think of it, I've named at least one of every species of monster I've encountered so far.

“Hm, I suppose there were no attribute-related compatibility issues at work, then. What about the alraune? Do you get any kind of feeling about it?” he asked.

I looked at the alraune speculatively, but try as I might, I didn't find I felt any sort of way about it. However, when the emperor asked the same question about the kyubi, I answered honestly that I sensed more of a connection with the kyubi.

“That's likely due to your bond with the fire dragon. Fire-attribute creatures tend to be naturally compatible with one another.”

I was initially surprised to hear that even monsters had elemental attributes, but then I remembered that the Philosopher Family of kobolds could use magic.

Does that mean that kyubis can use fire magic?

“But some of the monsters seemed afraid of holy beasts...” I muttered.

Many goblins and kobolds had been too afraid of Lars to get close to him. Interestingly enough, none of the monsters I’d named were afraid of him.

“I’m sure that weaker monsters would be unable to approach a holy beast, but if they have a high compatibility, I bet even many weak monsters would be able to.”

I really don’t understand this “compatibility” thing... Is it something intangible, like auras and all that?

“It might not be possible for you to understand this, Lady Nefertima, because as a beloved child, all monsters seem to love you.”

The compatibility of different elemental attributes, huh? I wonder what that feels like to the emperor? Is it similar to how you sometimes get an itching feeling under your skin when you’re forced to be around someone you can’t stand no matter how hard you try?

“So, have you decided on a name?”

Huh?! Wait, when did we decide we were actually going to name them?!

“Weren’t you going to name the alraune, Your Imperial Majesty?” I asked.

“...Even if it worked and the alraune became my vassal, I don’t have much use for it.”

And I do?! I already have Shinki, Spica, Seigo, and Rikusei as my bodyguards—I don’t need any more!

“What about as a bodyguard for Her Imperial Majesty?” I suggested almost desperately.

Oh, but maybe the alraune’s not very suited for guard duty... It is pretty tiny. Not to mention how difficult it would be to take care of a carnivorous monster... It’s not like the slimes who can eat whatever you give them.

“Oh, that might work. My lady wife loves cute little things like that.”

Huh? If she loves cute things, then the alraune definitely won't be a good fit. The way its appendages undulate is certainly... interesting... but I don't think anyone would describe it as "cute."

“Very well then, I will name the alraune, and you will name the kyubi,” he decided. “If you don't mind, Lady Nefertima, please go first so I can see how it's done.”

In the end, I'm unable to wiggle out of naming another monster, huh? Personally, I'd rather just give it a quick cuddle and then let it run off home into the forest, but...

The emperor's gaze was heavy with anticipation.

Louis and Theo seemed eager to see what would happen, too, as neither of them came to my rescue.

I guess this is a case of nobody daring to go against the emperor's wishes?

I turned to face the kyubi head-on, and even it was gazing at me with eager, almost sparkling eyes.

Its four tails wagged eagerly back and forth in perfect tandem.

When I think of nine-tailed fox spirits, the first thing that comes to mind is the legendary figure of Tamamo-no-Mae... Oh, and, of course, the fox deity Inari. Inari is the god of bountiful harvest, right? And for Japanese people, "harvest" is synonymous with rice!

Rice, huh? I could name it "white rice," which would be a very tasty-sounding name...

But no, "rice" really doesn't sound like a name.

Rice... harvest... Oh!

That's it! Inaho—an ear of rice so heavy with ready-to-harvest grains that it starts to sag under its own weight!

But, first...

“Do you want a name? If I name you, you'll end up bound to me,” I told it.

“Kyu!”

I suppose if it's what the kyubi wants...

“My name is Nefertima. And your name is ‘Inaho.’”

“Kyuuuu-ee!”

The kyubi named Inaho seemed overjoyed. It was so excited that it charged right up to me and rubbed its little head against my body.

“Inaho, calm down a little!”

I stroked Inaho's back, trying to calm it down, and was surprised by the unexpected texture of its fur. While, at first glance, the kyubi's fur looked like it would be soft and fluffy, it was surprisingly stiff. Each individual hair was incredibly thick. I could feel the thickness distinctly just by petting Inaho's back, so it was obvious that its hair was significantly thicker than a human's. But it didn't scratch my hand either; the fur was smooth.

The closest thing I can compare it to is a horse's tail.

On the other hand, the fur on Inaho's tails was every bit as fluffy as it looked!

What was surprising, though, was how warm it was. It wasn't from body heat; the tails themselves seemed to produce heat.

These tails might even rival Hanley's fur for the title of “most incredible fur ever!” I am going to get seriously addicted to petting them!

“Kyu!”

Inaho let out a sudden yelp of surprise. Just as I was wondering what had happened, I felt Haku and Gratia land on my shoulders and realized that their sudden appearance must've startled the kyubi.

The two seemed to recognize somehow that the kyubi had joined our group because they appeared to be trying to appeal to it, acting very friendly.

Gratia was being his usual flamboyant self, but for some reason I couldn't quite determine, he'd added a sound effect that sounded a bit like “hee-hee!”

Haku was hopping in happy circles around Inaho, its body making a bouncy *PLOP!* sound as it jumped.

...Does this mean they're happy to have gotten another little brother or sister?

The youngest litter of baby slimes had already reached maturity, whereas Gratia was still a juvenile, and Haku still had one more evolution to go before it became a parent slime.

Seigo and Rikusei were both on the small side, but they'd already evolved into high kobolds, so in a sense, they were full-grown as well.

Come to think of it, is Inaho a boy or a girl?

I took a quick peek and confirmed she was a girl.

"Mew! Mew-meeew!"

"Kyun!"

It sounded like they were having some kind of conversation... Maybe they were introducing themselves?

"This is Haku, and that's Gratia. Please be nice to them!"

"Kyuun!"

Inaho let out a little cry of agreement, and then Haku and Gratia jumped up on her back. Once they were safely settled, Inaho jumped straight up into the air, so high that I had to tilt my head back to watch.

I knew that foxes could jump, but I thought it was an evolutionary trait to allow them to search for prey... What possible need could there be for them to jump that high?

"You can play later!"

Inaho landed on the ground without making so much as a whisper of noise.

I quickly retrieved Haku and Gratia before introducing everyone.

"This is my older sister, and this is your 'older brother,' Shinki, and 'older sister,' Spica."

Letting out a series of earnest *"Kyuun!"*s, Inaho rubbed up against Karna and Spica.

"She's so cute! I was a bit worried when I heard they'd spotted a kyubi, but I

suppose I shouldn't have been with you here, Neema!" Karna said cheerfully.

"Hey, Inaho! I'm your 'big sister,' Spica!"

Inaho seemed to be loving all the attention she was getting from Karna and Spica, but she made no move to approach Shinki.

Either she's afraid of Shinki, or their "compatibility" isn't good.

"And this is Seigo and Rikusei."

"Woof!"

"Woof!"

The two barked energetically, then sniffed Inaho.

SNIFF, SNIFF!

SNIFF, SNIFF!

They circled around and around Inaho, sniffing *very* thoroughly.

Inaho was sniffing the two of them right back, so I figured this was some kind of unique form of greeting.

I guess it's not that weird; after all, dogs sniff each other's butts as a form of greeting!

"Inaho, come here!" I called Inaho over so I could check to see if the usual symbol had appeared on her forehead, but due to how dense her fur was, I couldn't see her skin. Seeing no other option, I picked up Gratia and held him out for the emperor to examine. "When you name a monster, a symbol like this appears on their forehead."

"I see... So that's how you know for sure if the monster has accepted their name or not."

Next, it was the emperor's turn.

As for the alraune, it still stood a short distance away, watching us warily.

"Why don't you try calling out to it?" I suggested.

It seems like it would be scared off if he tried to approach it, but maybe it will come to him if he calls it?

“Okay, I’ll try,” the emperor said, crouching down on the ground.

At this, Louis and the others all seemed highly alarmed.

I know you guys have your imperial protocols and all, but this is different! To befriend a monster, you have to put yourself at eye level with them. Although, I’m pretty sure if you tried this with a wild animal, they’d take it as a challenge and attack...

“Come here, little one. I’d like to be friends with you if you’ll allow it.”

The alraune continued staring unblinkingly at us, but the undulating of its appendages stopped.

“It’s okay. I won’t do anything to harm you.”

The emperor patiently gestured, “Come here,” as he spoke in a soft, soothing tone.

I got the feeling that if I interrupted now, the alraune would never allow the emperor to name it, so I kept my mouth firmly shut despite my overwhelming animal-lover instincts screaming at me.

Finally, the alraune began to move.

It extended its green appendage towards the emperor as if trying to confirm something. His bodyguards tried to step protectively in front of him, but the emperor stopped them with a raised hand.

“That’s it, come over here.”

Then the appendages completely retracted, closing in around the alraune’s body, and it slowly inched towards the emperor.

Seeing this, the emperor murmured gentle praises to the alraune, such as, “That’s right” and “Good job,” and patiently waited until it was close enough that he could’ve reached out and touched it.

His Imperial Majesty is surprisingly good with creatures. Maybe this is due to Euche’s influence?

“My name is Celiunos Raux Linus. I would like to give you a name if that’s all right with you?”

As if in response to the emperor's question, I heard a twittering "*Cheep, cheep!*" that reminded me of a chirping bird.

I'm assuming that's the alraune's voice? It's much cuter than I would've expected based on its appearance!

"Very well, then. I give you the name 'Weedy.'"

"Cheep! Cheep-cheep!"

The alraune let out a louder cry than before, and right in front of our eyes, its appendages grew smaller and smaller. I watched intently, trying to figure out what was happening, and in moments, the mass of vine-like appendages had disappeared entirely, revealing a small creature.

"Lady Nefertima, this is the alraune's true form."

It had a protruding nose with a brown head and limbs. Its eyes were small and round. There was something green and...spikey?... on its back in place of fur.

Its true form is a porcupine?!

There was a symbol on Weedy's forehead, but it was different from the one on Gratia's forehead. Where Gratia's symbol was white and boxy in shape, Weedy's symbol was blue and rounded.

"Nice to meet you, Weedy! I'm Neema!" I held out a hand towards Weedy, and of her own volition, Weedy climbed onto my hand. I carefully stroked the spikes on her back and found them softer than they looked.

"The spines on an alraune's back are said to be made of leaves that can change form," the emperor told me, prompting me to look at them more closely.

Now that he mentions it, they do kind of look like leaves...

Or, rather, they're more like pine needles. I bet they'd still hurt if you pricked your finger on the end of one of them, though.

"These turn into those appendages from earlier?"

They seemed kind of like tentacles to me originally, but apparently, they're not vines, but leaves?

In response, Weedy kindly demonstrated how it worked.

The leaves extended, and several wound together, spiraling around each other to form one long appendage.

It looks like the alraune can probably control how thick it wants its appendages to be.

Next, Weedy produced a brown appendage from lower on her body. But it wasn't a leg. If you looked *very* closely, it seemed to be a root. This appendage was hard and rough and looked very strong.

I understand now that she uses these different types of appendages for different purposes, but what I'd really like to know is what she eats! She was attacking Inaho, so I figured she was a carnivore, but now that I realize how much her biology resembles that of a plant, I wonder if I was wrong.

Either way, though, she is a monster...

I tried asking the emperor, but he didn't know either. I decided to go to the source and ask Weedy directly, so I called Shinki over to act as a translator.

"Weedy, what do you usually eat?"

"Cheep? Che-che-cheep!"

"She says her favorite thing to eat is irae berries."

Interesting. She likes those berries that are like miniature grapes? I guess that means she's not a carnivore, but maybe an omnivore?

But Weedy still had more to say.

"...That's convenient." Shinki seemed uncharacteristically surprised at first, but then he nodded, seeming convinced by whatever Weedy had said.

According to Shinki, alraunes could absorb energy from food, but they could also gather it from the leaves on their backs and their root appendages as well. However, the energy gathered by the appendages was used exclusively to transform the leaves and roots into appendages and move them around, so the alraune needed to eat food to obtain the energy to keep it alive.

Their preferred foods were berries and nuts, but they also ate insects.

I asked why she had attacked Inaho if not to eat her, and Weedy explained via Shinki-translate that Inaho had disturbed Weedy when she was sunbathing. I then turned to Inaho, who confirmed she had run over to investigate the strange creature she'd never seen before.

"Inaho, please apologize to Weedy for bothering her." At my urging, Inaho obediently bowed her head in an apologetic gesture.

Just as I thought that would be the end of that, Inaho's tongue flicked out and began licking Weedy's little face. The leaves on Weedy's back stood straight up like a porcupine, then formed into appendages and began attacking Inaho again.

"Inaho! Why did you have to go and antagonize Weedy again?!"

Wrapped up in Weedy's tentacles, Inaho struggled weakly. She looked like she was genuinely in pain.

"Weedy, wait! Stop!"

Hold on! You're strangling Inaho! She's going to die if you keep it up! Enough already! Does anyone have a white towel we can throw down to signal the end of the match?!

Glancing at me as I panicked, the emperor chuckled and called out, "Weedy, let her go."

Weedy immediately obeyed his command, transforming her appendages back into leaves.

Some people might say these two are like close siblings who can't help but fight all the time, but I would have to disagree...

"This isn't just a case of their species being incompatible..." the emperor began, seemingly following my same train of thought. "I believe their personalities don't mesh well," he concluded.

That's it exactly. They're like oil and water; they just don't mix. Come to think of it, most of the monsters I've named have very unique personalities, with many being especially mischievous...

Does that mean that because we've got good compatibility, they have the

same type of personality as me? I know I'm a bit clingy at times, but I don't think I'm especially mischievous!

Oh, I've got it! It's not me they're compatible with—God must've gathered creatures that are on his wavelength around me! Now that I believe!

In any case, I'd better calm Inaho down. She's still crying "Kyu!" pathetically after being beaten up by Weedy.

8 - The Helios Province and Maidells

THE episode with Inaho and Weedy ended up causing us to fall behind schedule a bit, but somehow or other, we arrived at our destination before sunset.

This destination was the manor of the provincial lord of the Helios Province, Earl Helios.

A prosperous town had developed all around the provincial lord's manor. The town was in full-on celebration mode when we arrived, with citizens gathered on both sides of the main road leading through the center of town, hoping to catch a glimpse of our procession.

What part of this is "traveling incognito"?!

"Thank you very much for traveling all this way," said the beautiful Earl Helios, dressed again in her customary male attire. Behind her, all the manor's servants were lined up in prim lines.

"We'll be intruding on your hospitality for a short time."

The manor was majestic and grand, as one might expect from the home of not only an earl but also a provincial lord.

Earl Helios led us through the halls to a grand reception room.

Theo explained that we would go over our plans for the following day and then have dinner together.

Not all of us sat; those of high social status took seats at the table while our attendants took up places along the walls. The only non-titled individuals seated at the table were the leaders of each unit of the private guard. I supposed that made sense since they would play a large part in our movements the following day and needed to be kept up to speed with our plans.

All the other non-ranking members of the private guard were split among

different tasks, including guard duty outside the entrance to the reception room, patrols of the manor, and break time.

“The plan for tomorrow is a review of the areas impacted by the ogre attacks.”

Come to think of it, I heard that there was damage from ogre attacks, but I haven't heard any more details about exactly what kind of damage.

“The terrain is mountainous, so we will travel on horseback. As for Your Imperial Majesty, it would be safest if you rode on Lord Euche.”

Horseback, huh? Shinki can't ride a horse... What should we do? It's not an issue when we're riding in a carriage, but the horses become frightened if Shinki gets any closer than that. Is no one going on foot?

“Will there be anyone walking?” I asked.

“We don't have enough mounts for all of the private guard, so we're planning to divide them into mounted and foot soldiers...”

That makes sense; I wouldn't expect them to have enough horses for this many people. That's a relief!

“Lady Karnadia and Lady Nefertima, you two will ride double with someone else. Would you prefer to ride with one of your attendants, or shall I assign female soldiers to ride with you?”

Shinki's out of the question, but I've got a feeling Paul can do just about anything, including riding a horse. What about Spica and Shell?

Karna turned to Paul for confirmation.

“Both Shell and Spica are capable of riding and fighting on horseback by themselves, but I don't believe they're quite at the skill level required to keep you ladies from falling and protect you at the same time,” Paul assessed.

Wow, so Spica can ride a horse now? That's pretty cool. Even I can't ride by myself yet! I've only ever ridden on Uwaz and Hugh at the beast stables. They're both highly trained and would never buck me off or get scared and run away with me.

“I see. In that case, please arrange for female soldiers to ride with us,” Karna

requested.

“Certainly.”

On the second day, we would be going to view the potential site of Project Roslan.

We were told it was a very dense forest.

If they're going to set it up the same as Project Shiana, they'll need to have enough land nearby to build the essential facilities for the adventurers, but we won't be able to tell if the location is suitable until we see it for ourselves.

As for the third day, our plans were still up in the air until a certain bit of information arrived. I tried asking what this “certain bit of information” was, but the emperor told me it was a secret.

Hmm, does that mean it's a state secret? In any case, it seems like we'll know one way or another by the day before, so I guess I'll have to wait patiently.

More importantly, now it's the time I've been waiting for: dinner time!

An impressive feast of the Helios Province's local delicacies had been prepared in our honor. These were primarily stewed and grilled dishes, so most of the food was various shades of brown, but the amazing aroma made up for anything the presentation may have lacked.

I was surprised by a whole-roasted animal being wheeled in on a cart.

The private guard also doubled as poison testers for the members of the imperial family, who began eating from the dishes their guards had sampled and deemed safe.

On our end, Paul was serving as Karna's poison tester.

I had Koku inside of me, so I didn't require a poison tester.

Will had previously scolded me about the impropriety of a duke's daughter serving as a poison tester, but based on the results of Mama's experiments, it was safest just to let Koku neutralize any poison that might be present.

As a result, I was free to eat anything I wanted and as much as I could handle!

Thank you, Koku!

At bedtime, Paul and I got into a bit of a scuffle because I wanted to snuggle up with Inaho like a stuffed animal, but Paul wouldn't let me.

His reasoning? That she was "dirty!"

I'd already taken a bath, so while I was preparing for bed, Paul washed Inaho for me. It seemed Inaho was afraid of water because she screeched loudly the entire time.

But, as a result, her fur became even fluffier than before!

Once Paul finally deemed Inaho sufficiently clean, I climbed into bed and cuddled with Inaho's fluffy tails.

Between my Hanley stuffed animal and Inaho's tails, this is the ideal environment for a good night's sleep!

Together with Karna, I fell asleep enveloped in the double-whammy fluffiness of the Hanley stuffed animal and Inaho's tails. The next thing I knew, it was already morning.

I whined that I was still sleepy and tried to pull the blanket back over my head, but Paul mercilessly forced me to get up and get ready for the day, then hurried me through a quick breakfast with Karna.

By the time I was truly awake, preparations were already underway for our departure.

Horses were lined up almost as far as the eye could see in front of the manor.

It's an impressive sight, so many horses gathered in one place! Euche looked particularly out of place among the non-winged horses. The fact that he's flying probably has something to do with that, as well.

I couldn't help being a little distracted by how he kept flitting in and out of view at the corner of my eye.

"Good morning, Lady Karnadia and Lady Nefertima. Did you sleep well?" Earl Helios asked.

"Very well. Thank you for preparing such a lovely room for us." Karna wasn't merely being polite by referring to the room as lovely, either.

The fine furnishings and warm wood tones in the room were not opulent by any means, but the obvious quality of the workmanship and quiet elegance of the room were exactly to Karna's taste. If her home furnishings reflected her personal tastes, then Earl Helios received the highest of marks.

"I'm so glad to hear that. I was worried the room might be a bit plain, but since you are such a vibrant gem, Lady Karnadia, the simplicity of the room is a perfect backdrop for accenting your beauty." Earl Helios winked at Karna, whose cheeks blazed bright red.

Karna, you do remember that she's a woman, right?!

"Now then, I'd like to introduce the soldiers who will be guarding you ladies."

Standing a short distance behind Earl Helios were two female soldiers. She explained that these two were not members of the imperial family's private guard; they were soldiers stationed in the Helios Province.

As Earl Helios explained, due to the large number of monster attacks recently, many of the Linus Imperial Army's strongest troops had been reassigned here. These two female soldiers were particularly strong, distinguished even among men and beastpeople.

They really must be incredible if they can hold their own amongst beastpeople!

Apparently, they were especially talented magic users, a fact that Karna was delighted to hear.

I'm sure she's going to hit them with a barrage of questions! Karna can be very persistent when it comes to anything related to magic and magical items.

I was easily lifted off my feet and set atop the horse's back. Then, the female soldier who'd picked me up gracefully mounted the horse behind me.

I want to learn to mount that smoothly too. Just as I thought that, Euche approached with the emperor riding on his back. I was just about to call out to Euche and ask what was up when the holy beast bit down on the hem of my dress and used it to heft me up into the air.

My vision blurred for a moment, and by the time I caught my bearings again, I

found myself clutched in the emperor's arms.

...What just happened?!

"*Harumph!*" After snorting out a magnificent gust of air, Euche marched off in seemingly high spirits.

"Euche! No matter how much you dislike seeing Lady Nefertima riding on another horse, that was dangerous. You need to treat ladies gently."

I was still trying to process my sudden and unexpected relocation when the emperor gently scolded his holy beast.

"Please forgive Euche's poor manners, Lady Nefertima. Would you allow me to play the role of 'the princess's valiant knight' for you instead?"

Umm... What does he mean? Is he suggesting that he, the emperor, will guard me?

"Won't that cause trouble for the private guard?" I asked bluntly.

"What are you saying? You're perfectly safe with Euche; he'll protect you."

Euche emphatically neighed as if agreeing with the emperor's claim.

The unit leader of the emperor's private guard riding beside us agreed that might be the safest plan of action.

Maybe so, but I still can't relax! The emperor is so close! I'm too worried I'll end up doing something to embarrass myself!

"Let's get going, then," the emperor ordered.

Each unit of the private guard loudly responded, "Yes, sir!"

The head of the procession began moving, with Louis taking the lead, surrounded by guards. After him came the emperor and me, then Karna, and finally Theo. The entire procession adjusted their speed to match the slower pace of those traveling on foot, so Euche was moving at a leisurely stroll.

But Euche is incredible—I can't even feel him walking! When I rode Uwaz and Hugh, I always bounced a bit from their gait even when they were just walking. Maybe the impact of his footfalls is somehow absorbed by the water-like makeup of his body?

Euche wore a special super-thin saddle. It was thicker than cloth, but I didn't think it was leather.

I wasn't sure if it was the saddle or Euche's body, but the seat beneath me seemed to mold to fit my butt just right. Euche's body wasn't as soft as Shizuku's, which I always seemed to almost sink into; it was more like sitting on top of a yoga ball... Although, come to think of it, I'd never actually sat on a yoga ball before. But in any case, my butt felt perfectly cushioned. I got the feeling that I could ride for hours without it hurting my butt at all.

We left the town and followed the road into the mountains, crossing over a river, and the next thing I knew, there was a cliff. It wasn't a sheer cliff, and there was a traversable path, but it looked as if the path had sprung straight out of the side of the cliff.

Did they make this using magic?

If you stepped foot off the path, you'd tumble straight to the bottom with no hope of breaking your fall, so it was more than a little intimidating. I pressed the top half of my body flat against Euche's neck so I didn't have to see the sharp drop-off on the other side.

I wonder why this cliff is so scary when I didn't feel the least bit scared about flying through the sky on Ghizel's back.

"Lady Nefertima, are you frightened?" His Majesty asked.

"...If I fall, I'll tumble all the way to the bottom, right?"

In response to my timid reply, I felt the emperor's shoulders shake as he suppressed a little laugh, probably imagining the sight of me tumbling head over heels down the cliff.

"In that case, let's do this," the emperor said, pulling Weedy out from inside his clothes.

So that's where she was hiding!

"Weedy, will you please support Lady Nefertima so she doesn't fall?"

"Cheep!"

Weedy let out a little chirp as if saying, *"Piece of cake!"* then produced two

appendages that she wrapped around my waist. Then, she produced another appendage that she wrapped around the emperor, connecting us like a lifesaving rope.

Not again! It's so embarrassing always getting a lifesaving rope tied around me! Even if it was just until we passed the cliff, it felt like I was being forced to use a lifesaving rope far too often. Come to think of it, is Inaho keeping up okay?

Although she was still a juvenile, she was a powerful monster in her own right and would frighten the horses if she tried to run beside me, so I'd ordered her to stay with Shinki.

Haku and Gratia are monsters, but the horses aren't afraid of them... Maybe because they're so small?

Nox was free to move about on his own, but I assumed he was following us somewhere in the sky. He'd been flying long distances since the previous day but didn't seem tired, so I assumed he was enjoying the opportunity to be in the sky as much as he liked. Rain hawks had great eyesight, so he could still see me clearly from far above, even when I could no longer see him.

I'd ordered Nox to stay close enough to be able to see me, so even if I couldn't see him, Shinki probably could.

Thank goodness Nox kept up with his long-distance flight training while I was sleeping!

We finally made it past the cliff, which opened up into grassy plains. It was technically the mountains, so there was a distinct slope, and in some places, rocky protrusions shrouded in mist poked up out of the ground.

I bet it would be fun to go grass-sledding here, like in that famous work about the Swiss Alps! It would definitely be more fun than tumbling down that cliff just now, that's for sure!

As we made our way across the field, I spotted yellow *things* here and there. When I looked closely, I could see they were moving, so I concluded they must be alive.

"Those are maidells, a famous product of the Helios Province," the emperor explained.

Maidell sounds familiar; where have I heard that word before? Oh, right! It's a type of meat!

"I've eaten maidell before!" I exclaimed.

The main dish we'd eaten for dinner in the city where we'd stopped before going to Mount Reitimo had been maidell.

It was difficult to eat, but pretty tasty!

"The maidells from the Helios Province are a bit unique." He explained that, perhaps due to the topography and climate of the area, the meat from maidells raised here was of superior quality compared to that of maidells from other regions. As such, it was a luxury product.

The dairy products made of maidell milk were also reputed to be very delicious. Furthermore, clothing made of woven maidell wool was heat-retaining and water-repellent, so it was popular among adventurers.

According to the emperor, the maidells from the village we were heading to were so valuable that they were referred to as "living gold."

With their yellow wool, I can see why they compare them to gold! I really want to pet them, but I'll resist for now. I'm sure I'll have a chance to ask permission to pet them later.

When we arrived at the village, it seemed as if every man, woman, and child who lived there had turned up to welcome us.

Normal people might go their entire lives without ever seeing the emperor in person, so this is a rare chance for them. The grandmas are looking at him like he's a living God or something!

I got the impression this village was a bit larger than Zigg Village. There was a lot of land, and the buildings were fairly spread out, so maybe it just seemed that way. Without wasting a moment, the village chief and Earl Helios immediately began showing us around the village.

They explained that the maidells who made up the village's primary industry were communally owned property. For that reason, the villagers all shared the work evenly amongst themselves. The children were in charge of feeding and

watering the maidells, while the adults each specialized in different tasks such as sheering the wool and spinning it into thread, weaving the thread into cloth and making clothing from the fabric, and milking the maidells and processing the milk into other products.

Apparently, the most difficult task was butchering the maidells.

They would use the skin to make leather products, so the butchers needed to be careful to slaughter each maidell as painlessly as possible while also avoiding damaging any part of their body. Then, to preserve the freshness of the meat, it needed to be expertly butchered as quickly as possible. All of this required a high degree of training.

So there were strict standards for choosing a successor, and in villages involved in the maidell industry, successors were always chosen from people who'd experienced each task before undergoing a rigorous apprenticeship in one area of specialization.

While explaining all that to us, they also showed us each of the workspaces.

They were kept meticulously clean and well-organized.

It also struck me as particularly noteworthy that all of the workspaces displayed statues of the Goddess.

“Why are there so many Goddess statues everywhere?” I asked the village chief.

“The maidells give their lives for the sake of our livelihood, so we try to show our gratitude by doing what we can to ensure that they are able to journey home to the Goddess unimpeded.”

“It also serves as a warning to us all. The statues remind us not to behave in such a way as to incur the Goddess's anger. No one would dare to do anything untoward in a place where the Goddess's image is prominently displayed, after all.”

I see, so that's why...

The Goddess is on guard duty to make sure everyone's behaving properly! The Goddess loves animals, so I'm sure she'll keep a close eye on everyone involved

in the maidell industry!

“Neema, this isn’t too much for you, is it?” Louis asked, his face pinched with genuine concern. He seemed worried that hearing the gritty details of the slaughtering process would be too much of a shock for a young child like me.

But for me, what was most impactful was seeing for myself how respectfully the villagers treated the maidells.

I think it’s wonderful that they put such a focus on being grateful for the maidell’s sacrifice.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I can see how much respect everyone in this village holds for the maidells. So I’m sure the Goddess hears everyone’s prayers and is gathering all the maidells’ souls to her!”

“...You really are an unusual child, Neema.”

Huh? Is he saying I’m a weirdo?

I tilted my head in confusion, not understanding what Louis was getting at.

“Everything you show interest in seems to be things that normally the daughters of noble families would turn their noses up at. And yet, at all the workplaces we’ve toured today, you already seemed to know the basic process for each task.”

I panicked a bit when he pointed that out. Of course, I had basic knowledge about how wool was spun, how animals were milked and slaughtered, and so on—from my previous life!

I pasted a smile on my face and did my best to talk my way out of this tricky situation. “Do other people not care about what kind of animals provide the food they eat, and how that food is made? They aren’t concerned about eating things without even knowing what they are?”

I was playing it off as having learned about it out of idle curiosity. However, I got the feeling that it would seem suspicious if I just came out and *said* I’d gone out of my way to learn about such things.

The truth, of course, was that I knew from my basic education in my previous life the general processes by which food ended up on our tables.

Surely, even aristocrats understand the basic distribution model of “producer, distributor, and consumer,” right? If so, it would make sense to want to know what animal the meat they’re eating comes from, which part of the animal they’re eating, and how it was processed, wouldn’t it?

I know I could only get up the nerve to try plenty of foods after being urged by others that it’s safe to eat.

In terms of Japanese cuisine, some of the meat we eat, such as yakiniku, is actually offal. And sea urchins are actually reproductive cells, the same as sperm and eggs. That knowledge would probably be enough to put anyone off eating those things, yet people eat them because they know they’ve been processed to make them edible.

Well, either that or we Japanese just have very strange eating habits! A lot of things we Japanese eat may look and sound a bit strange, but they taste good...

Come to think of it, we even eat poisonous creatures like puffer fish! I mean, we remove the poison before eating it, but still...

But it’s not just the Japanese who eat questionable foods. There are countries where people intentionally eat foods like blue cheese that have mold growing on them.

Hmm, the differences in culinary culture across countries really are interesting!

“Are you afraid, Lady Nefertima?” the emperor asked, butting into my conversation with Louis.

“Even when it comes to maidell meat, if you know for certain it’s a product of the Helios Province, you can feel confident eating it, but when you don’t know the source, how can you be certain it’s even maidell?” I asked.

If you can purchase directly from the producer, there’s no need to worry about being deceived. Actually, no, that’s not necessarily true. The producers could just as easily sell you a fake, claiming it’s something else.

So, in the end, it’s all a matter of trust.

“That’s certainly true... I’d never stopped to wonder before if what we were

eating was actually what we were told it was.”

I doubt even the most shameless scammers would dare to sell a fake to the imperial family!

“I’m sure there’s no need to worry about that at the imperial palace since the kitchen staff take great care sourcing their ingredients...” I said.

Or maybe they even have someone whose entire job is sourcing food supplies.

In our household, we had trusted people hunt our meat for us.

They weren’t household servants but vassals of the Osphe family who went out hunting as part of their training. They brought back their catch and sold it to our head chef.

The head chef had remarked that it had been a big help to him when Haku joined the family because Haku would happily eat all the inedible parts of the animal that would’ve otherwise gone to waste.

Haku was just as fond of the head chef, who it had identified as “the nice guy who is always feeding me.”

Haku is unexpectedly good at making friends!

“She does make a good point, Your Majesty. With the damages that the Helios Province’s maidells have suffered recently, it’s quite possible someone might take advantage of the opportunity to try and fraudulently pass off maidell from other sources as Helios Maidell.”

The maidells suffered damages? Does that mean that “the damages suffered in the Helios Province” refers to a loss of maidells?

“The maidells suffered losses?” I asked.

“That’s right. The ogres attacked the maidell flocks.”

That would be a big hit to a village like this one that earns a living from raising maidells. And on top of that, if inferior-quality fakes start appearing on the market, it will damage the reputation of the real Helios Maidell. Those scammers better hope I never get my hands on them; I won’t forgive them for trampling all over these hard-working people’s livelihood!

“For the time being, the villagers are getting by thanks to financial assistance from the government, but it’s going to become a serious issue if counterfeit products do begin to appear on the market.”

Even in Japan I’d heard of cases of production-region misrepresentation reported in the news, despite the fact that there were strict rules about that sort of thing.

Take beef, for example. To be labeled as “wagyu,” the meat needed to be from a cow of the correct breed and raised to exacting standards, whereas to be labeled as “domestic,” it could be a foreign breed of cow as long as it was raised in Japan. Any beef sourced from cows raised and butchered in other countries had to be labeled “imported.”

When it came to wagyu, most types were branded by region.

I wish I’d gotten the chance to try matsuzaka-gyuu at least once before I died! Come to think of it, I haven’t heard of brand names used like that in this world...

Well, that’s not entirely true—some products are geared almost exclusively towards the aristocracy that are brand name, but they’re mostly clothing and sweets. Besides that, people will often say things like “the fruit from such-and-such place is delicious!” but regional products don’t seem to be branded like in Japan.

“Then what if the country took over regulating it?” I suggested.

“Regulating it? The maidells, you mean?”

“Not the maidells themselves, but the title of ‘Helios Maidell.’ Similar to our country’s Original Technology Law.”

The Original Technology Law in the Kingdom of Gaché was instituted to protect the rights of inventors to their newly developed spells, magical items, and techniques. It allowed producers to pay a fair fee to the inventor to be able to use the protected technologies and also gave the inventors the option to sell their rights to the invention to someone else.

“But that law only applies to magical formulation, doesn’t it?”

“In this case, the ‘magical formulation’ in question is the Helios Province’s

maidell industry. The country would take charge of protecting it.”

I can see I'm not getting it across to them...

How should I explain it?

“Forgive the interruption, but I believe what Neema is trying to suggest is that, as a country, the Linus Empire come forward and formally recognize the maidell produced here in the Helios Province as the highest quality product in the country and afford it special treatment.”

I nodded emphatically and mouthed T-H-A-N-K Y-O-U! to Karna, grateful beyond measure that she'd come to my rescue.

How well Karna knows me and can deduce what I'm thinking is amazing.

“But wouldn't that be unfair?”

“I think it would be acceptable for the country to at least lay down certain industry regulation standards,” Karna said. “For example, if experts in the field were to conduct random inspections of the conditions the maidells are being raised in and the butchering process, it would all but eliminate the possibility of fake products.”

YES! That's exactly what I was trying to say! Now I'm burningly curious what it's like inside Karna's head...

It couldn't be that she can actually read my mind or anything, right?!

“Experts in the field...?”

Oh, right. I suppose that part wasn't very specific.

“For example, people who know a lot about raising animals, as well as professional chefs and doctors...”

I knew there were people in this world who dedicated their lives to researching monsters, so it stood to reason that there were also people who researched animals. It was common knowledge that professional chefs could easily spot the difference between high-quality and low-quality meat at a glance.

And I'd heard some healers specialized primarily in caring for animals.

If they gathered professionals with each niche skill and formed a team, I was certain they could carry out inspections to determine genuine products from fakes.

“You don’t need to find one person who knows everything. It shouldn’t be too hard to find people with specialized knowledge of each area and have them work together, right?”

“I see... If we added someone who knows all about apparel and an experienced hunter, I think that would round out the team nicely.”

A hunter would know all about the butchering process and be able to spot a shoddy job from a mile away. And someone who specialized in the kind of profession we’d refer to as a “fashion designer” on Earth would have expert knowledge of clothing and other goods made of leather.

“Louis, what do you think of all this?”

“I think it’s an interesting idea. And perhaps more importantly, I can see this system being applied to other industries as well. Things like riryu tea and peches, for example.”

“If we introduced a system where the government bestowed an exclusive title on regional products, it would invigorate the local economy in those regions and likely have the added benefit of prompting the competing producers to strive to improve the quality of their products even further...”

The emperor and Louis continued on like that for a short while, proceeding into a highly technical political discussion that, try as I might, I couldn’t follow. But from what I could tell, they’d decided to move forward with the proposal. Louis would be in charge of the project to brand-ify the Linus Empire’s regional specialty products.

Louis turned to me at one point and said, “I’ll be counting on you to teach me all about this!” but I was not confident there would be much I could teach him. Regardless, I promised I would help as much as I was able.

“Now that that’s settled, shall we go see the maidells?”

“Can I pet them?!”

My excitement spiked sharply after hearing that we would finally see the maidells up close.

Louis glanced over at the village chief, using his eyes to inquire whether it was okay for me to touch the maidells.

“Maidells generally have a peaceful temperament, but the males will charge if they feel threatened, so please be careful not to surprise them.”

Well, duh! That's pretty much the first rule of interacting with animals!

Unfortunately, Shinki, Inaho, Seigo, and Rikusei had to stay behind. It was likely the maidells would be frightened by the sight of monsters.

The emperor instructed Weedy to stay behind as well.

When I asked Inaho to wait for me at a distance close enough to still see me but far enough away that the maidells wouldn't be spooked, she let out a pathetic cry of “*Kyuu!*”

Hearing that, Haku and Gratia leapt off of my shoulders, landing on Inaho's back. It seemed they intended to keep Inaho company so she wouldn't be lonely.

Then, Seigo and Rikusei tried to entice Inaho to play with them.

Almost before I'd finished registering the loud cry that Haku let out, Nox came dipping out of the sky.

All right, everyone's assembled!

Although, I'm curious how this motley assortment of creatures of vastly differing sizes and abilities will play together... If their normal antics are any indication, I'm sure it'll be something ridiculous.

“Paul, could I borrow Spica?” I asked.

“To keep an eye on Haku and the others, you mean?”

Paul had seen straight through me. I was uneasy about how the unknown element of Inaho's presence would affect the other monsters, so to be safe, I thought it might be best to assign Spica to keep an eye on them.

“That's right. We aren't at home, and now Inaho's here too... I'm a little

worried they might get up to something dangerous.”

Not to mention, Weedy's also here. It wouldn't be good if they got into another fight already! That would scare the maidells off for sure!

“Very well. Spica, do as Lady Neema asks.”

“Please keep an eye on these guys for me, Spica! Make sure they don't get too carried away.”

“Okay!”

Spica accepted the assignment with an eager smile, her tails wagging cheerfully behind her.



Then, I turned to Haku and the others, determined to drive my point home. “Don’t make too much noise or wander off, okay? And Inaho, you mustn’t use any magic, got it?”

“*Kyuu!*” Inaho yipped in response.

The others all agreed with each of their distinctive cries. I hoped that meant they really would behave while I was gone.

“You can play with them too, Spica.”

Ever since our reunion, I hadn’t seen Spica playing with the others even once. Knowing her, I was certain that her skin was practically crawling to run all around the spacious town square.

“Is it really okay?!” Spica’s tails wagged even more energetically.

She has such a straightforward personality!

“Yeah! Have fun!”

But this puts Haku and Gratia at a disadvantage. If all the large, canine-type monsters are running around, they’ll have no choice but to cling to the others’ backs...

Apparently, they’d already hashed this problem out among themselves because Spica immediately picked Haku up and threw it with all her might.

Haku does love being thrown...

Seigo, Rikusei, and Inaho took off, chasing after Haku. As if not wanting to lose to the others, Nox landed on the ground momentarily to let Gratia climb onto his back.

I see, they’re using Haku in place of a ball... I should’ve thought to bring along some toys for them, huh?

Once the monsters were deeply involved in their strange game, Karna chuckled, “When you give them orders, you sound just like Father!”

Whaaat?!

I turned to Paul and asked incredulously, “Do I sound like Father? Really?” to which he responded, “Somewhat.”

Which is it?!

I asked for further clarification, and after a long pause, Paul finally answered, “I believe your tone resembles the tone your father uses when scolding you, Lady Neema.”

Agggh, so we do sound the same? If I had to resemble anybody, I would've preferred it to be Mama...

But they say that when girls take after their Father, they're sure to grow up to be great beauties, so I guess not all's lost!

I shook myself off and focused on the next order of business: petting fluffies!

Here I come, cuddly cuties!!



I'M so happy I could die!

The maidells looked just like sheep at first glance, but their “degree of fluffiness” was on a whole other level. Their hair was highly dense just like Princess’s, but the maidells had two different and distinct types of hair: long curly hairs and shorter springy hairs growing between the longer ones, almost padding them out.

The curled hairs created uneven waves and kinks, which made the surface of the maidells’ coats look like they were wearing thick sweaters with a popcorn-like pattern.

The village chief explained that this hair functioned almost like a shield to protect the maidells’ bodies from predators. I supposed it made sense—a predator would have a hard time getting their teeth past all that wool to actually bite into any meat.

The male maidells had horns. Or rather, each maidell had one singular horn protruding from the center of its forehead like a unicorn.

If they charge at you, you'll be skewered on that horn for sure!

I reached out and touched the horn of one of the males—after asking his permission, of course—and I suppose it goes without saying, but it was hard.

But, despite their solid hardness, the horns made a light, clinky sound when the males knocked them together. Unlike the rhinoceroses, the maidells' horns seemed more like their Earth counterparts' horns.

The time seemed to pass in the blink of an eye while I was lost in my near-worship of the maidells' fluffy wool, and before I knew it, the time had come for us to return to Earl Helios's manor.

We made a quick detour on the way back to the spot a short distance away where my monster friends were waiting. An unbelievable sight met our eyes.

"Haku!"

To my complete and utter astonishment, Weedy was flailing about *inside* Haku's body. She seemed to be trying to escape because she was whipping her appendages around wildly, causing Haku's body to poke out grotesquely each time one of the appendages thrust outward.

That is seriously disturbing to witness!

"Haku, you let Weedy out right this minute!" I demanded.

If we don't get Weedy out quickly, she might melt!

Haku let out a dissatisfied "Mew!" but obediently spat Weedy out with probably more force than necessary.

"Weedy, are you okay?! You didn't get melted at all, did you?"

"Cheeeep..." Weedy's weak cry only made me more uneasy.

I'm so sorry, Weedy! Please don't die!

I clutched Weedy to my chest, frozen in panic and unsure what to do next, when the emperor stepped forward and picked me up, still holding Weedy.

"Don't worry. She just exhausted herself from flailing around too much inside the slime."

"Really? Weedy's not going to die?"

"No, she's not going to die."

Thank goodness! I didn't know what events led up to Weedy being inside Haku, but I was glad she didn't get melted.

“Lady Neema, I’m so sorry,” Spica apologized profusely, her ears pressed flat against her head.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I asked.

I doubt Haku would do something like that for no reason...

“Yes... Inaho approached Weedy, and Weedy got angry and tried to lash out with an appendage, so Haku stopped her.”

I see, so that’s what happened! They really did get into it again!

I got the emperor to put me down, then called out to Inaho.

“Inaho, I know you want to make friends with Weedy, but you can’t do things she doesn’t like!”

Inaho let out a pathetic, wavering little cry in response to my scolding.

I think she’s apologizing, but I’m not the one she should be apologizing to.

“It’s Weedy you should be apologizing to, not me, right?”

After a moment, Inaho reluctantly scuttled over to stand by the emperor’s feet and cried, “*Kyuu, kyuu!*”

As for Weedy... She turned her face away petulantly, refusing to so much as look at the little kyubi.

“Kyuuuuu!”

With a wry grin of what looked like begrudging sympathy in the face of Inaho’s pitiable state, the emperor stepped in to plead her case to Weedy.

“Weedy, this young and immature creature seems to truly regret her actions. In such a case, a strong person would meet repentance with benevolent forgiveness,” he explained in a calming tone, stroking Weedy’s back gently with his hand.

Weedy still seemed grumpy, but eventually, she relented, looking over at Inaho and letting out a brief “*Cheep!*”

The instant she heard that, Inaho eagerly cried out, “*Kyun!*” and her tails started wagging energetically.

Looks like she's really happy that Weedy forgave her, huh? But just because she forgave her still doesn't mean she likes her...

For now, try not to invade Weedy's personal space any more than necessary, okay, Inaho? If she'd only give her a little time and space to get used to her, I bet she'd accept her as a friend eventually.

...If not, Inaho's going to be living in constant danger of being strangled by Weedy's appendages until she grows up and finally calms down a bit!

"Thanks, Haku. You handled the situation swiftly and decisively, preventing the maidells from being frightened by those two fighting."

"Mew! Meeew!"

Haku seemed embarrassed about being praised so highly because it began elongating and contracting its body vertically and horizontally, almost like a nervous tick of some kind.

I couldn't help but giggle at the slime's strange behavior.

My monster friends sure are cute!

"All right, guys! Time to head back!" I announced, and immediately Haku leapt out of my hands, landing on Spica's shoulder.

I was still puzzling over that when Gratia climbed up on Inaho's back, and Nox came over to me.

Did you guys plan this out while I was gone or something?

"Are you tired, Nox?"

Nox rubbed his body affectionately against my cheek, and I reciprocated by fondly stroking his back.



Something tells me it wasn't the flying so much as the ordeal of trying to keep up with these troublemakers that wiped him out!

I balanced Nox on my arm, figuring it was dangerous on my shoulder, and climbed up on Euche's back.

A moment later, I noticed that Nox was trembling slightly as if he were afraid of Euche.

"It's okay, Nox. Euche isn't scary!"

I continued to stroke Nox's back reassuringly and told him that he could go ride on Shinki's shoulder if he was afraid, but Nox seemed to have no intention of going anywhere.

Maybe he's feeling lonely because I've been spending so much time playing with the holy beasts lately?

I gave Nox a tight hug—but not *too* tight; I didn't want to crush him, after all!

"Thanks for everything, Nox. I love you!"

"Screech!"

My antics of love-bombing Nox were determined to be "dangerous," and I again ended up being secured in place with a lifesaving rope by Weedy...

I'm just going to go with it this time. At least this way, both of my hands will be free to hug Nox!

Oh, crap! I forgot to go grass-sledding! Darn it! It totally slipped my mind... Ha-ha...

It was the perfect location, with plenty of room, a gentle slope, and no large obstacles. What a wasted opportunity! I'm definitely not going to forget next time!

9 - You Can Really Feel How Far We've Come!

LIKE the previous day, I was riding on Euche's back as we headed into the vast forest known as Wildwood. The sight of the massive trees towering over us was more than a little intimidating in its majesty. The trunks were wider across than I could reach with both my arms outstretched, and the forest canopy was so far above that I couldn't even see where it ended.

I wonder if these trees might be even taller than the tallest trees on Earth, the giant sequoias. I'm curious what the canopy looks like.

Really, really curious! Thankfully, my mount has wings!

"Your Majesty, I have a small request..." I began hesitantly, trying not to get my hopes up.

If he turns me down, I'll have to ask someone else who can fly... Which leaves only Sol.

"What is it?"

"...I'd like to see these trees from above!"

There, I said it! Paul will probably have something to say about the impropriety of making requests of the emperor, but I can't take it back now that I've said it!

"From above, hm? That's perfect. There's something I'd like to show you as well, Lady Nefertima."

The emperor informed the unit leader of his private guard of our plans while Weedy wrapped me up in an even more secure lifesaving rope than the one she'd created the day before.

"Euche, please ascend slowly and gently into the sky."

Following the emperor's order, Euche began flapping his powerful wings.

We slowly rose into the air, passing by the seemingly endless tree trunks until

we finally reached the canopy far above and broke through to rise above the forest entirely.

A gorgeous sight spread out above, below, and all around us: the wide-open, strikingly blue sky and the fresh, vivaciously green sea of leaves that almost seemed to reflect the cheerful rays of bright sunshine.

They said it was a massive forest, but I can't see any end in sight!

We slowly drifted even higher until, finally, I saw something other than trees. Far off in the distance, a mountain range towered over everything, even the forest, and there was also a large river. It looked like a city might be beyond the river, but it was so small that I couldn't quite make it out.

"Lady Nefertima, look over there." The emperor pointed to where the trees were even taller and more densely packed than everywhere else.

I thought at first that it was a small mountain, but I was wrong. It almost looked like the trees were covering and protecting something...

"That's the elemental palace where the elemental kings live," the emperor explained.

Huh?! Whaaaat?! That's the elemental palace?! That makes this the most important place in the entire continent of Larshia!

"The elemental palace itself is housed within a massive tree. Wildwood grew up around it to hide and protect the elemental palace."

"Have you met the elemental kings, Your Majesty?" I asked.

Will had told me that he usually met with the elemental kings once every year or so. But when I asked him what they were like, he'd refused to tell me. He simply replied that I'd find out when I met them. Jerk!

"Yes. Here in the Linus Empire, we have an important ceremony once every two cycles to give offerings to the elemental kings."

Although he referred to it as a "ceremony," it was carried out by the emperor on his own. However, it was customary for any other imperial family members who also happened to be bonded with holy beasts to accompany him. That's why the current emperor had never carried out the ceremony alone, since the

retired emperor and retired empress always accompanied him.

“I’m very fortunate,” he said. “Not only do I have my father and mother still living to serve as mentors for me, but it’s likely that my successor will also be determined during my lifetime. In short, during my reign, there are more holy beasts in our country than during the reign of any other emperor in history.”

He has a point. Right now, Sache, Kaideetay, and Euche are all living here in the Linus Empire, and if one of his children bonds with a holy beast, that will make four of them. There might not be a single case in history where so many holy beasts concurrently lived in a single country.

“Not to mention I was fortunate enough to meet a beloved child of the God of Creation. Don’t you think that’s truly incredible?” he asked with a smile.

Based on the pattern up to this point, I think it’s safe to say that God is very fond of the emperor. With all this evidence, I’d be willing to bet on it. But I wonder why God saw fit to gather so many humans in one place that he’s fond of to the extent of bestowing them with a holy beast?

From what I understand, the emperor bonded with Euche more than twenty years ago. Does that mean it has nothing to do with what God told me before I was reincarnated?

Hmm... HmMMMMM... Maybe I’m overthinking it?

“You’re similar to a beloved child, don’t you think, Your Majesty?” I asked.

He grew up surrounded by holy beasts, after all. Maybe he’s even more suited for the “beloved child” title than me!

The emperor laughed out loud as if that was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. “I think not. It’s said that the God of Creation’s power lives inside of his beloved children. Have you never felt it inside of you, Lady Nefertima?”

God’s power? Does that refer to my special ability to be adored by living creatures?

“I make friends easily with all kinds of living creatures!” I answered truthfully.

“That’s not quite it... Hmm, how should I explain it?”

After a moment of contemplation, the emperor announced that it would be a

bit long-winded, but he would tell me an old story.

The old story that the emperor told involved my home country, the Kingdom of Gaché.

It was four hundred years ago, before the founding of the Kingdom of Gaché, when the entire continent of Larshia was embroiled in what would later be dubbed the Age of Turmoil.

The monsters' population had decreased, famine was widespread, and the various countries were attacking one another.

At that time, the Linus Empire had been much smaller than it was now, and at one point, they received intel that a larger country was planning to invade.

After receiving this ominous news, the Linus Empire braced for war when Gee, the first king of the Kingdom of Gaché, stepped up and began defeating the warring countries one after another. Because of that, the large country changed its focus away from the Linus Empire to the newborn Kingdom of Gaché.

Although, at the time, they hadn't yet started using the name "Kingdom of Gaché" and were instead calling their country Ganshea. While my ancestor and the other "founding heroes" were frantically cobbling their newfound country together, Gee was constantly dodging assassins.

Amidst all of this, Gee was traveling around with his beast mount Roy. They had first met in the forest protected by the elemental spirits known as the Dwelling of Elemental Spirits.

"Apparently, the elemental spirits requested the holy beast bonded with the then-emperor of the Linus Empire to assist the beloved child," His Imperial Majesty explained. "The holy beast's words were recorded in that emperor's journal."

"I know little of the affairs of the human world, but what I do know is that you must not allow the child of man bearing the name of Gee to die.

This person is a beloved child of the God of Creation.

Someone like you, who has risen to a position of leadership over the people of

this country, should be able to serve as a formidable shield for the beloved child.”

I was sure the then-emperor must've been quite shocked to hear this. The holy beast was essentially prioritizing someone else's life even over that of their bonded master.

“As the holy beast instructed, the emperor searched for a person named Gee, and as soon as he learned that this was the same man who'd worked his way up from being a simple knight to becoming the king of his own newly founded country, the emperor positioned himself as Gee's rear shield.”

In conclusion, the Kingdom of Gaché only solidified its foundation thanks to the Linus Empire's support.

“The emperor also wrote in his journal about the first time he met Gee. Before ever laying eyes on this young man with a fearless face, he sensed that he was something special. Meeting him only confirmed that.”

“This person is an incarnation of the creator. Within his body, he carries a nearly overflowing well of the creator's power. Holy beasts and elemental spirits are drawn to it, but it fills me with a sense of awe that borders on fear.

A beloved child may be the God of Creation himself.”

I was duly impressed by Emperor Celiunos's ability to recite his ancestor's journal verbatim, but honestly, I wished he would've just summarized it into a sentence.

I don't know if I trust this guy's judgment! Isn't he putting Gee up on a pedestal a bit too much? I know I don't have that kind of power! But now I feel a huge amount of pressure to live up to his legacy or something...

Could this mean that maybe I'm not a beloved child after all?

...No, that's not possible.

Lars already confirmed that I am one, without a doubt.

“If you haven't sensed anything, Lady Nefertima, it may mean that your power just hasn't awakened yet.”

“How did your ancestor know that it was God's power that he was sensing?” I

asked.

There's no proof that it was God's power, right?

"Oh, that's easy—he was an elementalist."

Huh? Elementarists can recognize God's power? Why?

Seeing me tilt my head in confusion, the emperor flashed a sad-looking smile before explaining, "When elementalists give orders to an elemental spirit, they hand over a portion of the God of Creation's power that dwells within their body as payment for the spirits doing their bidding. The elemental spirits absorb that power and use it to advance to a higher level of being."

I knew that elementalists used to be much more common in the past than they are today, but I had no idea that was how it worked.

According to the emperor, the power of the God of Creation that elementalists carried within them was a blessing. However, it was widely believed that God had stopped granting this blessing due to the many cases of a lust for power overcoming elementalists, leading to their elemental spirit partners becoming defiled and eventually being obliterated.

But the Goddess told me that God can't directly interfere in matters in the mortal realm, didn't she? If that's true, then the elementalists' power can't have been bestowed by him...

But then, where does it come from?

The only thing I could think of was that he'd bestowed it upon them at the very beginning. Before the Divine Balance was struck, when he first created humans, perhaps he'd bestowed his power on some of them at that point?

And then those souls traveled through the cycle of reincarnation over and over again...

If they had any power left, they would be an elementalist again in their next reincarnation, but if they used it all up, they would be reborn as a normal person. That would explain why the number of elementalists had declined drastically over time.

So elementalists only have a finite amount of power, and once it's gone, that's

it. They're not an elementalists anymore? Could it be that the purpose of the elementalists' existence is to serve as a way for elemental spirits to be able to interact with humans?

But why...? And, in the first place, what kind of beings are elemental spirits, anyway?

...Agh, it's too confusing! There's so much I don't understand...

"What kind of beings are elemental spirits?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I wonder what their function is in the workings of this world..."

"I can't say for sure. Personally, I think it's to restore."

I quizzically repeated, "Restore?" and the emperor clarified, "The flow of nature."

Oh, I see. He's saying that the elemental spirits are like this world's self-repair function.

"I doubt anyone other than maybe the elemental kings truly knows why the elemental spirits were created. They are the only ones who can hear the creator's voice, after all."

So, the elemental kings can communicate with God? If that's true, I would very much like to meet them! I have so much I want to ask them.

What power—if any—I might possess, and what it truly means to be a beloved child...

What God's true objective for me is...

I find it hard to believe it's just to determine whether or not humans will be wiped out.

"Can I meet with the elemental kings?" I asked.

"It's only possible to enter the elemental palace together with a holy beast. ...I promise to arrange it as soon as possible, so can you please wait patiently for just a little longer?"

Is the emperor suggesting he'll bring me personally, despite how incredibly

busy he must be running his empire?! I'd be better off asking Sol to take me!

“I don't want to create any trouble for you, Your Majesty! I know you are very busy...”

“Oh, no, no, no, dear child. I wouldn't miss it for anything! I can't wait to see how those stuffy elemental kings will react to the presence of a real, live beloved child!”

Exactly what kind of people are the elemental kings, for the emperor to talk about them like that?! Will didn't want to tell me anything about them either... Are they really scary or something? On second thought, I'm starting to get a bit nervous about the idea of actually meeting them...

“Now then, let's head back, shall we?”

I would've loved to admire the scenery longer, but we couldn't afford to waste any more time. We were scheduled to tour the potential site of Project Roslan, after all.

Once we landed, the emperor briefly apologized for keeping everyone waiting, and I added a “Thank you” of my own to everyone for waiting for us.

After that, a signal was called out, and the entire procession moved forward again.

As I watched the scenery roll past, I replayed the story the emperor had told me in my head.

Oh, that's it! Maybe I should dig into the history further...

If I learn more about the first king of the Kingdom of Gaché and his “rear shield,” the then-emperor of the Linus Empire, and the relationship between them, I might be able to figure something out...

“Lady Nefertima, we've arrived.”

I instantly snapped back to my senses and looked around, discovering that we were in a clearing surrounded by several small wooden shacks.

Earl Helios explained that this was where the people carrying out the survey had set up their base of operations.

“Older sister!” A young woman dressed in the traditional clothing of this region dashed over to us and threw her arms around Earl Helios.

“The emperor is present,” Earl Helios chided, and the young woman immediately apologized.

Then she turned to the emperor and, with the perfectly polished manners of an aristocrat, said, “Please forgive my egregious lack of propriety. I am Frantina Helios’s younger brother, Zelutierre.”

“Oh, ho, ho. So you’re the infamous younger brother, eh?”

“Please feel free to call me Lutie.”

Oh! I get it now! I thought something felt off about their entire exchange, but now I see—despite presenting as a woman, he’s actually her brother!

...Huh?

Don’t tell me this is a case of parents who desperately wanted another daughter dressing their son up as a girl?? There’s no way that’s it, right? He’s way too old for that! In that case, I suppose he’s a... gentleman in ladies’ clothing?

No, no, no—that phrasing just sounds creepy.

Let’s just call him a beautiful young man who prefers to wear stereotypically female clothing and leave it at that. More importantly, why do these siblings seem to have exchanged genders?!

“Oh! So you’re actually a gentleman?!” Karna exclaimed, seeming shocked to hear that he was a man.

I know how she feels!

Earl Helios had a very feminine figure, so even in men’s clothing, it was obvious that she was a woman.

But her younger brother had a slight, delicate frame that didn’t register at first glance as male. The high lace collar of his dress and the large ribbon he wore in his hair only served to further distract from telltale male characteristics such as his Adam’s apple.

But that style of traditional pinafore dress is really cute!

The male version of the traditional clothing, which Lutie's attendant was wearing, resembled a three-piece suit. Both versions, male and female, were simultaneously elegant and attractive, and I couldn't definitively say which version I liked better.

This clothing would look great on my friends, the twins Pino and Nino! They'd look good in the standard male-female set, but Nino could totally pull off the male version. Identical outfits would really drive home the "twin" factor for them...

Maybe I'll buy two sets of the male version and one set of the female version as a souvenir and let them sort out for themselves which they'd like?

"I was born in the body of a man, but I have the heart of a girl. I hope we can become good friends!"

"I'd like that!"

It's so typical of Karna to accept that explanation without judgment. She doesn't care about things like gender or appearance; she sees people for who they are on the inside. So long as they're not a bad person, it doesn't matter what they look like.

But I think it's probably because she's a member of the upper nobility that she developed the ability to immediately see straight through a person and deduce whether they're a good person or not.

Although, in this case, I suspect Karna's practical side may have come into play, leading her to calculate that it's in her best interest to make Lutie an ally rather than an enemy.

"Aren't you well past the age of girlhood?" Earl Helios observed wryly, causing Lutie to puff out her cheeks indignantly.

"There's no age limit on the heart of a girl!"

Based on how this is going, I get the feeling it would be a bad idea to ask how old she is. She appears to be somewhere in her mid-twenties, if I had to guess...

It's actually pretty impressive, though, how she makes puffing out her cheeks

while pouting like that look so cute!

“Aren’t you going to praise me, sister? I got the approval of all the villages surrounding the proposed site, just like you asked.”

“...Well done.”

“I couldn’t very well come back and report that I’d failed, not after being entrusted with His Imperial Majesty’s crest.”

She used the authority that comes with bearing an item inscribed with the emperor’s crest to persuade the villagers? Looks are certainly deceiving; it seems this delicate maiden is made of sterner stuff than I originally thought.

“In that case, please inform us of the progress you’ve made thus far,” the emperor commanded, effectively commencing a strategy meeting right then and there under the cloudless blue sky.

I suppose that much is unavoidable—there’s no way all of us could fit into any of those shacks!

First things first, they planned to use our current location as the base of operations for Project Roslan and slowly expand out from there.

When I asked what this clearing was for, they explained it was a rest stop.

It wasn’t entirely unheard of for travelers to pass through Wildwood along the path we’d traveled. However, the closest village with a lodging establishment was a good distance away, so most travelers stopped here to rest. Allegedly, there was a good place to camp out a few hours’ walk further ahead.

On the opposite end of Wildwood, the terrain opened into a large grassy field dotted with occasional smaller trees. The further you went into the field, the denser the trees became until the environment was forest again, just on a different, more normal, scale than Wildwood. It had also been observed that there was a distinct difference in the types of plants growing in the normal forest compared to those found in Wildwood.

To make Project Roslan function like Project Shiana, we would need some kind of tourism element, but there was no sign of a conveniently placed natural hot spring anywhere.

Of course, creating an entirely man-made bathhouse with a single large pool could remedy that. The tradition of public bathing in “ludan” bathhouses was deeply entrenched in the culture of the Linus Empire, after all.

When I asked what else there was, the disheartening answer was “not much worth mentioning.”

“Even if we set everything up to receive adventurers, no one will come if there isn’t something to draw them in...”

Not to mention the guilds. They wouldn’t be willing to participate without a degree of certainty that the project would turn a profit.

After all, when we were creating Project Shiana, it took quite a bit of effort to talk the guilds into it, and that was with Mama working all of her contacts hard. I mentioned that to the others, but was surprised to hear that the guilds had all already agreed to participate!

They’d been eager to join after hearing that Project Shiana was being recreated here in the Linus Empire with the assistance of the Osphe family.

The guild masters who’d agreed to join Project Roslan were not the same people I’d previously met in the Kingdom of Gaché. Each country had its own guild master, kind of like a regional manager. Although, the countries in the Alliance of Nations were lumped together into a single “region” with one guild master for each guild presiding over the entire Alliance of Nations.

With all of the guilds participating, the tourism aspect might work itself out, but that still leaves the biggest problem—the monsters!

We’d only been able to put Project Shiana into motion because the monsters were friendly and willing to work with us. I had named many of them personally. It also helped that they were relatively highly intelligent species and could communicate with humans.

“What will you do about the monsters?” I asked.

“We’ve identified a large number of different species of monsters already living here. It seems that many of them took refuge here because humans rarely enter the forest,” Earl Helios’s younger brother replied.

She probably wouldn't like being referred to that way, so I'm going to do my best to think of her as "Lutie" from now on!

The monster species that had been confirmed thus far included some familiar varieties: kobolds and goblins, a clan of orcs, and some slimes.

Those were no problem.

However, the beholders—monsters that looked like a giant eyeball—and the lizard-like basilisks both possessed the very dangerous ability to turn people to stone. There were also apparently wood spiders—close relatives of frost spiders—living here.

Based on what I'm hearing, this location seems significantly more dangerous than Mount Reitimo. Novice adventurers are likely to be killed before they can flee...

While I was pondering this problem, Paul helpfully spoke up, explaining that there was a confirmed method for circumventing both beholders' and basilisks' ability to turn people to stone. He claimed that if you gave a beholder or a basilisk a magical stone charged with earth magic, it would swallow the stone and run away.

Maybe magical stones charged with earth magic are their favorite food? But this method is far from foolproof! If you don't time it perfectly, there's still a high possibility of being turned to stone!

"Maybe we should designate this site as being geared towards higher-level adventurers than the Shiana Special Region," I suggested.

I couldn't say for sure until I made contact with the monsters in question, but based on past experience, I felt fairly certain we'd be able to work things out with the kobolds and goblins one way or another.

And if the orc clan was organized with an established hierarchy, we should be able to work with them, too, so long as we could win over their leader.

If possible, I'd prefer if there were one more species of strong monster in the mix. It would be ideal if these monsters could fill the role of "overlord of the forest," but real life rarely goes so smoothly.

“In regards to the monsters, we have an idea. However, we won’t know if it will be possible or not until tomorrow,” the emperor said vaguely.

Oh, right! I almost forgot—our plans for tomorrow depend on a certain piece of information arriving!

“Have our plans for tomorrow been decided, then?”

“That’s still a secret.” The emperor wore an elegant smile that left no room for me to needle him for more information.

I wonder what’s going to happen tomorrow...

The rest of the conversation either had nothing to do with me or was too complicated for me to follow. They discussed things such as “So-and-so from the blah-blah-blah guild has been appointed as site manager” and “When should we meet to discuss the timeline?” It seemed that all the important meetings would be at the imperial palace, so I figured they could easily summon me if they needed me for anything.

After the open-air strategy meeting concluded, we explored the area to familiarize ourselves with the lay of the land.

When we got closer to the ordinary forest at the far end of the field, I noticed several varieties of trees were growing there.

Wildwood was composed almost entirely of just those massive trees, but this forest contained a variety of distinctively different trees, some with wide-reaching branches and others with twisted trunks, just to name a few. It was interesting to see such remarkable differences between the two forests despite their close proximity.

When I noticed a certain type of tree that looked *perfect* for climbing, it was all I could do to resist the temptation to do just that. In the end, I only restrained myself because I could imagine the fierce scolding I would receive from Paul if I did.

Next, we returned to the road, and after following it a bit further, we were confronted with a sudden cliff that towered over us, blocking the road.

I could faintly make out a striped pattern from what seemed to be distinct

layers of earth, but I found it hard to believe that this was a random fault uplift. I'd never heard the word "earthquake" used in this world, so I figured they probably didn't occur here. Perhaps the ground had rent and lifted like this due to someone using magic to manipulate the surface?

"It's rare to see a prank of this scale..."

"Perhaps it was the work of an advanced-level elemental spirit?"

Theo and Louis's conversation only served to confuse me more.

Based on what they were saying, I gathered that they thought this had been caused by an elemental spirit playing pranks as they were known to do, but I'd always assumed the elemental spirits' pranks were small, minorly inconvenient things. Changing the entire topography of the earth was a little excessive for a mere "prank!"

I was curious to see how far the cliff extended, so I followed it and found that it formed a perfect circle.

Now I'm convinced—it's definitely a prank.

To be able to force such a large, perfectly cylindrical chunk of earth up like this, the perpetrator would've had to be either an elite-level earth magic user or an elemental spirit.

I was standing in front of the cliff, nodding to myself, when Inaho wandered over to me. Haku and Gratia had appointed themselves as Inaho's companions so she wouldn't become lonely because they'd taken to following her everywhere.

Haku and Gratia leapt off Inaho's back where they'd been hitching a ride and pressed themselves flat against the base of the cliff.

...Don't tell me you're planning on doing what I think you're planning on doing?!

Before I could tell them to stop, Inaho cried out, "Kyuu!"

Apparently, that was the signal they'd been waiting for because Haku and Gratia began moving in tandem.

Haku rolled its body straight up the vertical cliff wall.

I was sure that Haku was climbing *up* the cliff, but perhaps due to an optical illusion, the slime looked just like an orange rolling down a hill.

In the first place, I had a feeling the physics-defying feat of rolling straight up a wall was a special trick only Haku could pull off.

At Haku's side, Gratia took off, moving his legs at such a high speed that my eyes could barely follow it. The little frost spider looked like the infamous "scourge of mankind" as he scurried up the cliff.

Yuck, I want to scrub that comparison from my mind!

The fact that Gratia's body was all black only made him look even more like one of *those things*.

In the blink of an eye, they both reached the top, and Haku announced its victory.

"That's enough, you two! Come back down here this instant!" I shouted.

I regretted my words the next moment when they obediently swan-dived off the top of the cliff.

I worried for a moment that Gratia was going to be carried away on the breeze, but he saved himself by latching onto a nearby tree with his spider thread. He used the thread to lower himself down into my waiting hands.

Thank goodness, he seems to be unharmed.

"When you're playing, safety is always the first priority! You can't do such dangerous things!" I scolded fiercely.

In response, Gratia rubbed his front legs together. His body bounced up and down faintly, almost in a hiccupping motion. I'd never seen him make this particular movement before.

Is this his way of saying "I'm sorry"?

...I suppose I have no choice but to forgive him, then. He's lucky he's cute!

I stroked Gratia's head a few times, and he realized that meant he'd been forgiven because he broke out into his usual bizarre dance.

Sigh. They're too cute for their own good sometimes! I'll have to add an

addition to the playground in our garden when we get home.

...Oh! That gives me an idea!

Small Talk: I'm an Exhausted, Cranky Old Man! (POV: Director of the Intelligence Department)

ALONG with the unsettling shaking of the ground, I heard swords crashing together.

They were still fighting.

I picked up my pace even more, rushing in the direction the sounds were coming from, and before long, I came upon my subordinates, engaging with the enemy and protecting the freed captives.

"Everyone retreat! Hurry!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, simultaneously deflecting a sword racing toward one of my subordinates.

There's no time! If you want to blame someone, blame the so-called "holy master," I thought as I swung my poison-covered sword.

I mercilessly cut down Runohark agents one after another.

Just when I thought I'd gotten most of them, another wave of enemies converged around my fleeing subordinates.

"It's not them you want! Face me, you cowards!" I shouted, trying to draw the Runohark agents' attention towards myself, but they were the lowest type of scum: bullies who instinctively targeted the weak. In this case, that meant the newly freed captives.

I clicked my tongue in irritation and scoured my mind for some idea of how to open a path for my subordinates to lead the captives to safety.

"Grrr!"

A low, threatening growl echoed inside the mine shaft.

Is that a lindrake?!

"Leave this to me. You guys get out of here!"

"Dan!"

My subordinates immediately grasped the opportunity he'd provided to lead the freed captives past the lindrake and flee to safety.

After confirming that they'd done as he'd asked, Dan turned his focus to the Runohark agents, working in tandem with his lindrake mount to take them down one after another.

The lindrake's tail sent some Runohark agents flying while Dan's long battle axe hacked apart others. And then there were those who were stomped on... I heard a sickening sound somewhere between a *CRUNCH!* and a *SPLAT!* followed by agonized screams.

Oh, there's a straggler.

It appeared that one of the captives had been in the process of fleeing with the assistance of one of my subordinates, but the unexpected sight of the dragon had been the last straw on top of what had no doubt been a horrifying ordeal and the mental overload had caught up with them all at once, causing them to pass out. My subordinate was carrying the captive's limp body thrown over his shoulder, slipping between the wall and the lindrake, when an enemy spotted him and attacked.

"Behind you...!" I instinctively cried out, trying to warn my subordinate about the danger approaching from behind, but I needn't have bothered. The lindrake moved first, striking out with its tail directly at my subordinate.

The subordinate didn't require any warning of the danger swiftly approaching from the *front* and deftly leapt over the incoming tail. It continued, smashing straight into the Runohark agent, crushing him against the wall.

"Dan, this place isn't going to hold much longer!" I shouted.

"I already know that!"

At the farthest edge of my field of vision, the ceiling had begun caving in. Fine grains of sand flew through the air in our direction.

I'll let Dan cover the rear while I focus on getting everyone out as quickly as possible. We'll just be in the way when it comes time for the lindrake to retreat. It'll be easier for the lindrake to tear out of here like a bat out of hell if it doesn't have to worry about accidentally trampling an ally.

“Get out of the way! It’s not safe here!” I shouted to the people lingering near the entrance to the mine I’d just burst out of.

But even after we exited the mine, enemies flooded out after us.

Where were they hiding?!

In the end, the Runohark agents who’d fled for their lives from the cave-in were nonetheless slaughtered by the members of the special forces.

Once that was taken care of, I began taking account of our troops.

“Each unit report in! Are all members accounted for?!”

I was sure that some of our forces had fled out the other entrance, but for the time being, I wanted to confirm whether there were any casualties.

“My unit is safe and accounted for, aside from Commander Dan.”

“The status of units four and five who infiltrated from the secondary entrance location are unknown, but all others are unharmed.”

So the people who originally entered the mine from this entrance are safe?

Just as I attempted to make contact with the units assigned to the secondary location, the aerial unit patrolling above us sounded a whistle.

The *TWEET-TWEET-TWEEEEET!* pattern of two short whistles followed by one long whistle was the sign for “We’re going to send up a flare, so watch for it!”

That method of communicating relied on using magical items to send up flares in all of the six celebratory colors except for black to convey messages.

The meanings of the various combinations of colored flares differed by country, and even within our own country, some combinations were unique to specific legions. The Intelligence Department was especially guilty of that. We had many combinations unintelligible to anyone outside the Intelligence Department, and we changed them frequently.

I gazed up at the lindbloom hovering above us and saw the first set of flares: short flashes of green, yellow, and green. That signified the Intelligence Department.

The one long flash and three short flashes of white that followed represented

the number 8.

Then there were three long flashes of green: that was a set phrase meaning that everyone was alive and well.

Put together, all of these flares were communicating that the aerial unit had scouted out the situation at the secondary location and confirmed that all members of the Intelligence Department who'd infiltrated from that entrance were safe.

"Give the signal for 'message received.'"

At my order, one of my subordinates blew two short tweets on his whistle.

Auditory signals didn't have a very long reach and could easily be intercepted by the enemy, so we could only use them in certain situations.

There were only about twenty predetermined auditory signals, each a different combination of long and short whistles.

Flares could also be intercepted by the enemy fairly easily. So they were beginning to experiment with implementing remote devices.

"So Dan's the last one, huh..." I stared at the entrance as if I could *will* him to come out.

The unsettling sound of falling rocks came from one entire area. While we were distracted by the rumbling and shaking of the ground, there came a sudden loud crash like thunder, and the mine collapsed.

"Commander Dan!"

The dragon knights frantically dashed towards the mine entrance, but I stopped them. I could hear a dry, rattling sound coming from down below. It was possible the collapse hadn't finished yet.

"It's okay. He has the lindrake with him."

That was our single thread of hope: the fact that the lindrake was with him. The lindrake's durable body could probably, maybe, endure the impact.

"Earth spirits, please tell me where the lindrake is. Just the location is fine," *he* ordered the elemental spirits.

The elemental spirits began dancing around excitedly.

I was still able to see them, at least.

The earth spirits converged in one spot where they claimed Dan was buried.

The holy beast headed for that spot, serving as a marker.

At *his* orders, everyone who could use earth magic began cutting up the largest boulders into smaller rocks that they used to erect a retaining wall around the area.

Apparently, the mine's collapse restored the divine balance, and magic could be used in this area again.

As they worked, I again heard the same dry, rattling sound from before.

"That's enough, pull back!"

At that frantic cry, the earth magic users quickly retreated from the rockpile they'd created.

The rattling sound became gradually deeper until it sounded more like the heavy thumping of a gong.

"ROAR!"

Several men covered their ears and fell to their knees at the heart-stopping roar.

I wasn't sure if it was from fury or pure joy at making it out, but either way, it was the most terrifying roar I'd ever heard in my life.

Dan casually stepped out from underneath the dragon.

When they saw him, the expressions on the dragon knights' faces suddenly transformed into relief.

They really do adore him, huh?

"Thanks, Miles! I wouldn't have made it out of this one without you!"

As I watched Dan heartily praise the lindrake, I finally felt my anxiety ease.

I'm going to give that punk a piece of my mind later!

After that, we joined up with the other group, but because there were so

many freed captives, we decided to relocate everyone back to the Mieuxga Province for the time being so everyone who needed it could be given medical treatment.

The plan was to attach wagons originally for transporting luggage to the lindrakes and have everyone ride in the wagons all in one go.

Other lindrakes were being sent in separately for *another task*.

At the same time, the lindblossoms were used to retrieve the white-robed man and the armed Runohark agents from deep inside the mine.

But that sleeping drug is crazy potent, eh? I thought they were dead for a moment!

These guys would be sent directly to the royal city along with the higher-ups we'd captured, where any and all information they possessed would be extracted one way or another.

I bet His Grace, the prime minister, is on the edge of his seat, eagerly awaiting their arrival. It's clear as day what will happen next.

And once their usefulness has passed, they'll be disposed of. Until then, they'll spend every waking second in mortal terror, wondering if each breath will be their last.

If they don't know already, they will soon, down to the very marrow of their bones, how terrifying it is to have made themselves an enemy of our country and that family in particular.

"Seerio! Can you see me? Can you hear me?"

Just as I was starting to relax, Serafi came barreling towards me.

"I can see and hear you. But I don't know how much power I have left."

"...Yeah. Maybe enough for just one, very simple order."

You might as well just say there's hardly anything left. I guess you could think of my remaining power as "an absolute last resort for a truly desperate situation."

Although, considering how much I rely on the elemental spirits for collecting

information, this situation really is dire.

“Seerio. Unfortunately, I still can’t release you from your position at the moment,” *he* said with a sharp expression that made me think he’d heard what Serafi had said.

“But...”

Remaining as Director without being able to use elemental power would be like inviting unnecessary chaos. People would notice that I could no longer do the things I’d been able to until now.

“I need you to stay right where you are, at least until we capture the so-called ‘holy master’ and wipe Runohark out for good. I will assign wind spirits to assist you as necessary for gathering information.”

He’ll assign wind spirits to help me?! He can do that?

“That’s...”

“I will order them to do as you ask. That way, even when you issue the orders, *my* power will be exchanged for their favors. I’ve already tested this method and proven it works, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Hold on, just a minute! Seerio is bonded to me!”

It was not the man in front of me but the holy beast who responded to Serafi’s sudden protest. He gave a low growl that almost sounded like he was clearing his throat.

“But...”

“Seerio has plenty of experience working with elemental spirits. I could tell just by watching the two of you. There’s no need to worry he’ll do anything that would cause him to become ‘fallen.’”

I was honored by his confidence in me, but there was no guarantee of such a thing. It was entirely possible I might misjudge what would violate the divine balance and become “fallen.”

“...Fine. But I won’t just stand by silently if whoever you assign to work with Seerio does something stupid! We elemental spirits are capable of killing one another, you know!”

“Absolutely not,” I said sharply. “Don’t you dare. If you did something like that, you would be the one harmed in the long run.”

While it *was* technically possible for an elemental spirit to kill one of their own kind, the elemental spirits care deeply about one another. Even if they’d never spoken or met before, an elemental spirit would consider another elemental spirit an extension of themselves.

There was no need for Serafi to be hurt on my account.

“Have some faith in your fellow elemental spirits, little lady. It will be fine,” *he* said with a wry grin.

I didn’t know where his confidence came from but was amazed to find that somehow, hearing him say it, I felt that maybe it would all work out. Serafi, too, seemed convinced on that account. But then she brought forth another concern.

“But we’re talking about wind spirits. Those guys are always getting into mischief!”

She had a point; in general, wind spirits tended to be short-sighted. They were hasty by nature.

Most water and earth spirits were calm and peaceful; it was rarer for one of them to have a personality like Serafi’s. Fire spirits, on the other hand, were easy to anger, so they required careful handling.

“An intermediate-level elemental spirit like yourself should have no problem keeping them in line.”

Try as they might, lower-level elemental spirits couldn’t go against higher-ranked elemental spirits. Serafi was currently intermediate-level, but she had accrued enough power that she only had a little further to go before she leveled up to advanced-level.

Only a teeny, tiny bit further to go.

When I die, I plan to give her all of my remaining power. Although, who knows if I’ll be forced to use my remaining power on a final order before then...

“Looks like we’ll still be working together for the time being then, eh, Serafi?”

When I said, "I'll be counting on you, partner!" Serafi looked exasperated, but then she smiled, and it was a thing of beauty.

"I suppose it can't be helped. No one else but me could keep up with you, anyways!"



IN the end, because there was still a lot to take care of regarding cleaning up after the operation, the *other task* was postponed to the next day.

At the same time, another problem surfaced, and we had to discuss how we would deal with it.

"I'll go," *he* announced.

"Absolutely not. There's no way we can allow you to do something so dangerous!" I shouted, and Dan nodded in emphatic agreement.

"But if it's impossible for the lindblossoms, that only leaves us... Unless you plan on borrowing wyverns from the Linus Empire?"

That wouldn't work. If it's impossible for the lindblossoms, then it's most likely impossible for the wyverns as well.

"You're not suggesting that you'll be fine just because you've got a holy beast, are you? Your bodyguards would lose face if you so blatantly declared their presence unnecessary."

If he acted recklessly simply because he had a holy beast and could get assistance from the elemental spirits, it would invalidate the purpose of the royal guard who served as his protection detail. It would be the same as declaring them unnecessary.

When he was acting as commander of the special forces, it was no problem since they served as his protection detail, but there was no way we could let him get close to something so dangerous.

In the first place, protection detail was outside the scope of the dragon knights' job description.

"That's true. Please forget my careless remark."

I was glad he'd come to his senses, but to be honest, I *did* want to borrow the holy beast's power. However, it was unlikely the holy beast would willingly leave its master's side.

What should we do?

"I guess there's no other way. We'll have to ask *that esteemed person* to help us out."

What person?

From the way he worded it, it was someone of a high rank, possibly someone he deeply respected.

Either way, I got a bad feeling about it.

"I'll go right now to try and persuade them to assist us, so wait for me to return," he said.

"As we've just finished explaining, it's not safe for you to go off on your own!"

"...If you want to tag along, you'll need a winged dragon."

Where exactly is he planning to go?! There aren't many places in this world that can only be reached by riding a winged dragon!

I heaved a long-suffering sigh, then turned to Dan. "Dan, you go with him and select one other person to accompany you."

I think I'm going to have to submit an official petition to His Majesty, saying, "Please train some of the royal guard to be able to ride on winged dragons."

"Very well," Dan replied.

He climbed onto the holy beast's back and announced he was going to make a little stop in the royal city first, then flew off.

Dan rushed to recruit another dragon knight before following after his errant charge.

In the meantime, I was saddled with the temporary duty of issuing orders to the remaining dragon knights and my own agents.

"All right, men! Let's get this done so we can go eat!"

And so I found myself clutching my head in exasperation again as the sun rose over the horizon, setting the sky alight with the colors of a raging fire.

10 - You'll Never Believe What Arrived!

ON the trip back, I explained my idea to the emperor.

If we can make it a reality, I think it will be really interesting!

As soon as we arrived back at Earl Helios's manor, we discussed the matter without even taking a moment to rest.

"Lady Nefertima has proposed an interesting idea."

Wildwood was a perfect habitat for the monsters, but I couldn't get past the fact that there was nothing to draw in adventurers.

But that had given me an idea—if there was nothing there, it was a blank canvas to build whatever we wanted! In particular, it occurred to me to build a tower on top of that cylindrical cliff we'd seen.

But not just any ordinary tower—a massive tower taller than the trees of Wildwood. And with a viewing platform on the roof. People will be drawn by the rare opportunity to glimpse the elemental palace. It's the center of the entire continent of Larshia, after all!

And it wouldn't hurt if we discretely started a rumor that just glimpsing the elemental palace from afar is enough to bring a person good luck. Everyone hoping for good luck and finding love will flock to the tower in droves!

"We can put the adventurers' guild's reception desk on the first floor inside the tower, and then on the other floors, create multiple training areas that become more difficult the higher up you go," I said, laying out my idea.

"You're suggesting we separate the training areas by color rank?" Louis asked, but that wasn't quite what I had in mind.

I was taking inspiration from fantasy roleplaying games where the more levels you progressed, the stronger the monsters became, and your experience points also increased.

"I was thinking that anyone, regardless of color rank, could use whichever

training area they liked, based on their own confidence.”

It's normal to want to challenge yourself by attempting something that seems like it might be just a bit above your perceived ability level, right?

Several factors determined an adventurer's color rank, including the number of jobs completed to build experience, so it took a while to rise to the next rank.

But there must be some people whose fighting ability surpassed their current rank. They, in particular, would probably enjoy the opportunity to see a visual representation of their increasing ability as they worked their way up through the training areas.

“However, won't it be quite difficult to build a tower larger than those trees?”

There's the real problem.

In this world, I'd seen large buildings such as the royal and imperial palaces, but there weren't any tall, solitary towers. The tallest were ten stories max, and still shorter than the trees in Wildwood. By my best guess, those trees were about as tall as a thirty-story skyscraper.

How can we build such a tall tower? I'm an amateur when it comes to architecture and engineering, but not for nothing; I did live in the earthquake epicenter of the world in my past life.

The most important thing is a strong foundation. For that, we can use that cylindrical cliff. As for the pillars and support beams, magic can fortify them, and if we use wood for most of the construction, it will lessen the weight load compared to building everything out of stone or metal.

The only other thing I can think of that we should probably do is add an oscillation suppression system. Tall buildings are especially susceptible to being shaken by the wind.

I think the pendulum principle has something to do with that, but...

Oh man, it's hopeless! The pendulum principle is physics, right? That completely incomprehensible field of study involving equations that might as well be written in an alien language for all I understand them?

I bombed physics in my past life!

If the wind is the problem, maybe we can create holes for the wind to pass through?

No, that sounds scary in its own right. Making holes in the walls would destabilize the structure and reduce the weight-bearing capabilities of the walls, wouldn't it?

That's like cutting off your nose to spite your face... It might solve the wind problem, but that won't be much comfort if the entire tower comes crashing down!

What should we do?!

Oh, that's it! We just need to focus on fortification.

We can strengthen the structure by engraving written magic spells on the walls. But wind is a natural occurrence, so it can't be canceled out using magic...

"Oh, I've got it! An elemental stone!"

I remembered Mama saying that elemental stones could even affect natural occurrences to a certain extent.

But because the only way to obtain them was directly from the elemental kings, even in our country, they were only used for the barrier surrounding the experiment building at the Magical Research Center. If I remember correctly, written magic was used to protect the building itself, but the elemental stone prevented the effects of any magic used within from escaping from the building to cause damage to the rest of the royal palace.

That would be a disaster! But, in any case, this can't be the only possible use for elemental stones, right?

"Is it possible to use an elemental stone to lessen the wind's effect?" I asked.

The emperor probably knows the most out of any of us present about elemental power, and he's received an elemental stone from the elemental kings before, too.

"I think you probably could. Elemental stones are capable of lessening the effects of elemental power and repelling magic," he said.

I see. So the reason why the barrier around the experiment building is able to

prevent damage from reaching the royal palace is because the elemental stone repels the magic, trapping it inside.

What's inside is repelled inward, and what's outside is repelled outward.

*Meaning that the experiment building is also impervious to magical attacks!
Interesting...*

"I think it would be possible to build a tall tower if we used an elemental stone to reduce the wind's impact on it," I explained.

If, by making use of magic, an elemental stone, and the right building materials, we could build the tallest tower on the entire continent, it will become a popular tourist spot for sure!

And that's not all I have in mind!

"I also want to build a secret fort in the treetops!" I exclaimed.

I got this idea when I saw those trees in the forest at the far end of the grassy field that looked perfect for climbing. It would be so much fun to build a treehouse that we could play in, like a secret fort!

Everyone's built a fort at some point during their childhood, right?

"...A secret fort?"

...Everyone's just staring at me blank-faced...

Why aren't they reacting at all?! Maybe gently raised aristocratic young ladies never engaged in such play, but the guys at least should get it!

I looked around the room, searching for an ally who understood what I was trying to say, when my eyes met those of one of the members of the private guard.

"What do you think of when you hear the words 'secret fort'?"

The man's eyes widened in surprise when he realized I was addressing him directly, but after a moment's pause, he responded, "Umm, nostalgic memories of childhood, I suppose?"

"Exactly! Even now, doesn't it fill you with excitement?"

Despite my enthusiasm, the guard's voice remained skeptical as he replied,

“Maybe a little?”

Several people gathered around listening nodded their agreement, however, so I figured they, at least, had built forts of their own as children.

However, the imperial family and those who'd grown up among the nobility never had the opportunity for such frivolous play and couldn't understand its allure.

“The first rule of a fort is that it's a secret from adults!” I said. “You have to come up with a password with your friends and bring all your treasures inside for safekeeping. It sounds like fun, right?!”



The most important requirement is that it has to be kept a secret from adults!

There's just something special about the sense that you're doing something illicit that comes from keeping it a secret from adults and the sense of intimacy that comes from sharing a password with your friends.

No one is immune to that kind of excitement!

"Heh, so those are the kinds of games the common children play?"

"You're very well informed, Neema."

Both Louis and Theo sounded impressed.

I possessed this knowledge from my childhood in my previous life, but I knew for a fact that the children here played the same kinds of games. I'd read about it in a children's book.

"I've been wanting to try it ever since reading about it in a book!" I explained.

Or rather, I've been waiting for a chance to present itself ever since beginning my second childhood! The garden at our house is already dominated by the monsters' playground, but I bet we can find a way to integrate a secret fort into that, too!

"So what you're suggesting is that we build the lodging facility up in the trees, like a secret fort?"

"We can build a regular inn as well."

It would be impossible to put the public baths up in the trees, after all! And there's no way I'm compromising on having public baths, so they'll have to be connected to a normal inn on the ground.

"To start with, I'll discuss the matter of the tower with the carpenters' guild."

Based on what I saw of their work in the Shiana Special Region, they're excellent architects, so if anyone can pull it off, it'll be them.

"If they deem it possible, I'll form a task force to work exclusively on the tower."

This tower will be Project Roslan's equivalent to Project Shiana's hot spring. It makes sense to have a special team dedicated to such a large and important

undertaking.

“Also, tomorrow, we’ll be heading into Wildwood again. Apparently, the Kingdom of Gaché has prepared a splendid gift for us.”

“A gift?”

The emperor smiled mysteriously and declined to elaborate any further.

It looks like he’s not going to tell me until I can see it for myself.

When we got to our room, I tried asking Karna and Paul, but they said they didn’t know either.

I even tried writing a letter to Papa to ask him, but he glossed right over answering that part in his reply.

Grrr. Even though I’ll find out everything tomorrow, I really wanna know now!

Despite my burning curiosity, I still somehow slept peacefully through the night.

Inaho’s tails really must have some kind of magical properties. Maybe they produce some kind of sleeping-drug pheromone or something? Her tails are so warm. But it doesn’t feel unpleasantly hot, and it makes my whole body feel so relaxed; it really is like being under a spell!

When we arrived in Wildwood the following morning, for some reason, a large number of armed soldiers were already there waiting for us. Based on their appearance, they seemed to be members of the Linus Imperial Army.

“...What’s going on?” I asked.

“It’s almost time. Be patient just a little longer. I’m certain you’ll enjoy this surprise, Lady Nefertima,” the emperor answered.

It seemed he *still* wouldn’t tell me anything, so I had no choice but to sit tight in my usual spot on Euche’s back and wait.

I noticed that Inaho, too, seemed to be picking up on the tension in the air because she seemed twitchy, as if she couldn’t calm down.

A short while later, a red spot appeared far off in the sky.

It slowly grew larger as the red *something* drew closer until several other

spots could be seen as well.

“Don’t tell me that’s...”

In an attempt to confirm my suspicion, I opened the telepathic connection with my holy beast partner but was met with only silence. I could feel the connection, strong as ever, so it was clear that he was ignoring me.

Meaning that red thing must be Sol!

What’s he doing here now, after telling me earlier that he wouldn’t be coming to the Linus Empire with me because moving was too much trouble?!

Personally, I suspected his real reason for not joining me was because he didn’t want to come to a country presided over by water holy beasts. Euche and Sache always became grumpy whenever Sol’s name came up, so I figured that water and fire holy beasts naturally didn’t get along.

I suppose that makes sense; they’re opposing elements, after all.

“Sol!”

When I called out Sol’s name, Euche neighed loudly and pawed at the ground with his forelegs.

Looks like somebody’s not happy to see Sol.

“Euche, these are our guests. Don’t start fights with them, please,” the emperor cautioned, patting Euche’s neck.

In response, Euche blew out a distinctly dissatisfied snort, but he did settle down.

When they finally got close enough to see clearly, I could make out what the other things were...

They were lindblossoms!

Large cage-like contraptions were strapped onto harnesses attached to the lindblossoms’ bodies. In total, seven cages were hanging beneath the lindblossoms as they flew.

Could those be the “gift” the emperor mentioned?

Ghizel flew at the head of the group of lindblossoms, not carrying a rider.

Behind him were the seven dragons carrying the cages, and another four dragons flew on each side of them as if protecting their load-bearing companions.

A short distance behind them, two more dragons brought up the rear.

And there seemed to be one more member of the group, but with the glare of the bright sunlight, I couldn't quite make them out...

Unable to wait a moment longer, I attempted to dismount from Euche's back, but the emperor stopped me, saying it was dangerous.

Sol landed first, his large body vibrating the earth as he touched down on the grassy plain. As if they'd been waiting for this signal, the lindblossoms began to land around him.

Those carrying the cages let out cries of delight when the uncomfortable harnesses were removed.

"That was heavy!"

"Let's go home now..."

"I can't stand these guys!"

Heh, they're just as willful as always. The soldiers from the Linus Imperial Army are all frozen in place, though... Are they okay?

Among all the commotion, I picked out the voices of several people saying, "Primordial dragon."

I see... I suppose it makes sense for them to be surprised by the sight of Sol. Multiple holy beasts live in this country, but none of them are primordial dragons.

Primordial dragons were the pinnacle of all other species of dragons, and all primordial dragons were holy beasts, which made them a rare and special breed indeed.

I impatiently glanced up at the emperor, beseeching him with my eyes to "Let me go already!" With a wry chuckle, he finally released me.

The moment my feet touched the ground, I dashed forward, weaving

between the soldiers.

“Sol!”

Apparently, Sol had anticipated I'd do something like this because he slowly lowered his head until I could leap up and wrap my arms around his neck.

Hehe! His scales are so smooth and slightly chilly, just like always! I love the way they feel!

“I see you're as much of a tomboy as ever.”

“You're the same as always, too, Sol! But why are you here? You seemed so against coming when I mentioned it before...”

“I'm simply repaying a debt.”

A debt? Who is he indebted to??

As I was wondering that, the emperor came up behind me, apparently having followed me, albeit at a more dignified pace. Of course, Euche was with him as well, but a frigid chill seemed to be rolling off of Euche in waves.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, lord fire dragon. My name is Celiunos Raux Linus.”

Despite being arguably one of the most highly ranked humans in the entire world due to his position as emperor of the largest country in Larshia, Celiunos showed deference to Sol as a revered holy beast.

“I know of you, bondmate of Euche.”

“I'm honored. If you would be so inclined, we would be delighted to have you remain here in our empire until Lady Nefertima returns to the Kingdom of Gaché?”

After the emperor said that, Euche reached out and tugged on his clothing. Then, he bumped the emperor's back several times with his muzzle. He seemed to be desperately trying to impress upon the emperor how *not* delighted he was about that idea.



“Relax, water holy beast. I have no intention of intruding upon you and your territory.”

Holy beasts care about things like territory? Or maybe Euche equates “messing with this country” with “messing with Celiunos?”

Just then, a familiar voice came from somewhere behind Sol.

“Growl!”

“Lars!”

I threw myself without an ounce of restraint at the white and black striped sky tiger. It felt like it had been much longer since I'd last seen him than it actually had been. His fluffy fur easily cushioned the impact of my unrestrained glomp.

It feels different than Kaideetay's fur, somehow. I really missed this fur!

I rubbed my face against the soft ring of mane-like fur around Lars's neck.

“Emperor Celiunos, as promised, I've come to deliver the goods.”

“Ohh! Is that you, Will?! You've sure grown since I last saw you,” His Majesty said. *“Now I see why Relena's always bragging about you in her letters.”*

“...Forgive my mother. I've still got a lot to learn.”

The emperor answered Will not as the ruler of another country but as a doting uncle, saying things like *“Don't sell yourself short!”* and *“I wish my sons would learn a thing or two from you!”*

Meanwhile, I was more concerned with other things...

Ahhhh, Lars is so soft and fluffy!

“Hmm, it's rare to see such a young kyubi. ...Have you increased your band of vassals again, little one?” Sol asked.

Stop saying it like that, Sol! You make it sound like I'm some samurai lord or something, and they're my servants! We're all friends here, got it?! Friends!

More importantly! I can't get enough of the springiness of this tail! Sigh.

“Shinki, I think you said your name was? You must have your hands full with this one, eh?” Sol said.

“...It’s not so bad...”

Hey, Shinki! I think you could’ve disagreed a bit more, don’t you think?!

And, in any case, what’s up with this atmosphere of everyone breaking off into little groups to renew their acquaintances like we’re at a high school reunion or something?!

Inaho happily trotted up to Sol.

Wagh, I always forget how powerful Lars’s tongue is until he almost knocks me over by licking my face!

“Neema, how long do you plan on playing with Lars?” Will drawled.

“Forever and ever!”

If it were up to me, I’d gladly spend the rest of eternity petting Lars’s incredible fur!

“Lars.” Will called Lars over to him, and the holy beast obediently went—but not before picking me up by biting onto the back of my clothes and carrying me along with him.

Tch! Lars, you traitor!

“Neema, do you know what those are?” Will asked, pointing to the seven cages.

Inside each of the cages was a large creature.

I’d only ever seen creatures like those in my illustrated encyclopedia. Their skin was an almost metallic steel-gray color but harder and more durable than the metal armor worn by knights. As they bellowed angrily from within the cages, tusk-like teeth protruded from their mouths like blades.

Beside Sol and the lindblooms these creatures appeared almost small, but even the smallest among them was *significantly* larger than Shinki. If I had to guess, I would say they were at least twice as large as him in both height and width.

They also had wild-looking hair and long, sharp talons.

They looked so much like my stereotypical image of a “demon” that it almost

seemed strange that they didn't have horns.

"Ogres?" I guessed.

They were known to be one of the most aggressive species of monsters, and once they started on a rampage, it was all but impossible to stop them from leaving destruction in their wake.

"That's right. Runohark was holding them captive in a large hideout in Icoux."

What was Runohark planning to do with ogres? And if these ogres are supposedly a "gift," that begs the question what the emperor is planning to do with them.

"Now then, Lady Nefertima. Can you tell which of these ogres is the strongest?" the emperor asked.

Huh? Is this some kind of quiz? Okay, fine. I'll give it a try...

The strongest ogre, hm? Well, I can say for certain it's neither of the two at the far back. I'm pretty sure those are females, anyway.

It's hard to say, though, since all of them have beefy chests covered in bulging muscles; none of them have anything resembling the typical soft curve of breasts you'd expect to find on a female.

Those two are just a bit smaller than the others, that's all. There's nothing definitive to go by. But my intuition is telling me those two are female.

I examined the remaining five ogres, who were all bellowing impressively, staring at Sol and Lars, and, in general, showing no sign of calming down any time soon.

All but one of them, that was.

The last ogre was sitting cross-legged inside his cage with his cheek propped up in one hand, staring off into the distance. It was clear from his posture that he wasn't particularly concerned about his current situation.

"That one," I said definitively.

"All right, let's go then."

Um, okay, sure. But is it really okay for the emperor to get close to an ogre?

In any case, I followed after the emperor. Will, Louis, and the others also gathered around, seemingly interested in what would happen.

What's he dragging me into now?

"Can you speak Larshian?" the emperor began.

There were plenty of monsters who possessed advanced linguistic abilities, so it was entirely possible this ogre might also be able to communicate with us in Larshian.

The ogre turned his far-off gaze from whatever he'd been looking at and focused it squarely on the emperor.

"All of you can live here in Wildwood, but there's one condition," the emperor continued.

The ogre fixed us with a searching gaze. I still couldn't tell if he understood what the emperor was saying or not.

"You will accept me as your ruler. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

In an instant, I broke out in goosebumps all over my body.

What is this?! It's really scary!

I frantically tried to regain control of my body, which had suddenly started trembling uncontrollably. The emperor was smiling, but he was wrapped in a frigid aura so sharp it seemed as if it could physically cut through me if I got too close.

He's giving off waves of something even more terrifying than "murderous intent!"

Noticing my discomfort, Will picked me up and told me, "It's okay."

For some reason, just this alone was enough to ease the strange sensation that had felt like it was stabbing into my body.

"The emperor is scaring me..." I said in a shaky voice.

"Don't worry. What you're sensing right now is a combination of his magic and his holy beast's power. It won't harm you."

Despite Will's reassurance, I couldn't help but worry. That power was

terrifying. It should never be used lightly.

“Could it be that you’re afraid of holy beasts’ power?” Will asked.

I suppose that could be it, but I’ve seen holy beasts use their power plenty of times before and never felt frightened by it...

“Perhaps, because of the incident where you lost control of the fire dragon’s power, you’ve begun to unconsciously reject large amounts of power...”

Huh?! Is he talking about what I think he’s talking about? Trauma, or PTSD, or something? It wouldn’t be unusual for me to be traumatized by that incident, but for it to extend as far as fearing holy beasts’ power as a result...

I mean, if that really is the case, I have no one to blame but myself since I was the one who accidentally unleashed Sol’s power, but...

What should I do?

“However, using *this* much of a holy beast’s power is extremely rare. Besides, a holy beast’s power can’t harm you, Neema. What you need to be careful of is that you don’t unintentionally use the fire dragon’s power,” Will stressed.

I lost control of Sol’s power partially because I didn’t possess my own magic.

I’d been told that bonded masters like Will and the emperor, who possessed strong magic, could take the holy beast’s power into their body and use it like fuel to strengthen their own spells.

On the other hand, for bonded masters who didn’t possess much magic of their own, taking a holy beast’s magic into their body burdened it too much, so they were better off wrapping the holy beast’s magic around the outside of their body.

Perhaps that trauma-like fear was my body’s way of reminding me not to take such power into my body after pushing past its limit the last time I inadvertently did so.

“Are you okay, Neema? He seems to be getting a little over-excited because it’s such a rare opportunity to put his full powers to the test.”

What do you mean by “the emperor’s getting over-excited,” Louis?

I wanted to question him further, but Louis announced it was dangerous, so we'd better move out of the way, then led us to the far end of the field, leaving just the emperor behind.

Sol and Lars were with me, so I knew I was in the safest place possible, but even so...

"All right then, let's do this. We'll determine once and for all which of us is stronger," the emperor announced, taking a sword from one of the soldiers and ordering several others to open the ogre's cage.

The ogre seemed to understand, at the very least, that the man standing before him wanted to fight because he abandoned his indifferent attitude in favor of fixing the emperor with a stare and pointedly licked his lips in anticipation.

"And don't worry, I won't use my holy beast's power. But if you don't think you can defeat me on your own, I don't mind if you call your friends to back you up?" The emperor smiled as he said that, challenging the ogre. With a loud bellow, the enraged monster charged straight at him.

I half expected to see the emperor go flying across the field, but he actually used a massive sword, almost as long as he was tall, to stop the ogre's fist mid-flight.

In an instant, he'd pushed the fist aside and swung his sword again.

The sword made a high-pitched metallic *SHING!*, and the emperor leapt back, putting distance between himself and the ogre and bracing himself for the ogre's next move.

He didn't have to wait long. The ogre reached out, trying to grab the emperor in his massive hand, but the emperor easily dodged.

The ogre got some kind of sudden inspiration because he turned and picked up the cage he'd been trapped in just minutes before, lifting it over his head as if it weighed nothing.

The ogre used the cage like a club, first swinging it towards the emperor in a wide arch, and when that failed, brought it down to try to crush him into the ground, but because his movements were so large, they were easy to follow

and avoid.

The emperor leapt deftly on top of the cage, then used it as a springboard to jump high into the air and swing his sword straight down towards the ogre's head.

At the last moment, the ogre brought up his arm to block the sword, so although it didn't connect with his head, blood began dripping from the ogre's arm.

The emperor's smile, which hadn't faltered once during the fight, only deepened.

He seems to be enjoying fighting with the ogre!

And he was only getting started. Without pausing to catch his breath, the emperor moved again, his sword dancing through the air. Despite its size, he handled it like an extension of his own body, and in moments, nicks and cuts appeared all over the ogre's body.

Although he hadn't sustained any potentially fatal blows, it didn't look like the ogre, who was forced to take the defensive, had any hope of winning.

Just then, the ogre let out a thunderous roar that shook the very air around us.

The emperor froze as if the roar had physically barreled into him, stunning him at such a close distance.

Then, to my shock, the ogre seemed to transform right before our very eyes, growing even larger and more heavily muscled than before. It was an absurd amount of muscle beyond anything a human could achieve. He looked even more muscular than a gorilla.

One of those ridiculously muscular arms shot out, heading straight for the emperor.

Even at this distance, I heard the *CRASH!* as the ogre's fist made contact. In his temporarily stunned state, the emperor was a sitting duck—the ogre's fist barreled right into Celiunos's stomach, sending him flying through the air and slamming hard to the ground a short distance away.

Killing intent rose off of the private guard and imperial army soldiers in waves.

“Don’t interfere,” Louis called out, ordering those who’d stepped forward with the intention of rushing to the emperor’s aid to halt.

When he slowly rose to his feet, I saw that, incredibly, the emperor was *still* smiling.

He really is terrifying!

I unconsciously clung to Will as fear rushed over me at the sight of the emperor’s almost deranged smile. I may have been a tad too forceful and accidentally strangled Will a little bit in the process... oops.

A white mist began to form all around the emperor.

That looks familiar...

Mama creates the same kind of mist when she’s very, very angry.

The mist grew thicker and darker and curled around the emperor’s sword. The sword appeared to grow in size as something translucent and shimmering affixed itself to the length of the blade.

When the emperor again swung his sword, each time it made contact with the ogre’s skin, the blade left behind white marks that stood out starkly against the ogre’s naturally gray skin tone.

When the blade touched the ogre’s skin in the same place for a second time, the discolored area fractured into pieces as if it were made of stone.

Is the sword freezing anything it touches? For such a durable body to crumble to pieces like this, the sword must be freezing him at a temperature equivalent to liquid nitrogen...

Eek, that’s terrifying to think about!

A moment later, the ogre fell to his knees.

The emperor touched his blade to the ogre’s neck and asked, “Do you accept me as your ruler?”

“...We recognize you as our master.”

So he really could speak all along!

“In that case, I, Celiunos Raux Linus, bestow upon you the name of ‘Dalgard.’”

A round blue mark appeared on the forehead of the ogre named Dalgard.

After taming Dalgard, the emperor proceeded to name the remaining ogres as well. Perhaps because they’d just watched him defeat the strongest among them, the rest of the ogres meekly accepted him as their master.

“This was a very nice present, indeed,” the emperor remarked to Will with a genuine smile that in no way resembled the terrifying smile he had during the battle.

“I’m glad you like it,” Will replied with an artificial smile.

Yikes, I’m getting goosebumps again, this time from Will...

“You just about scared the life out of poor Neema. If you insist on doing such reckless things, I’ll be forced to tell Mother,” Louis chided his older brother.

It did little to ease my fear when the emperor turned to me and apologized.

He doesn’t have to apologize to me! I don’t think he did anything wrong, I was just frightened.

“You’re not allowed to leave Wildwood, but other than that, you’re free to do as you like,” the emperor said to the ogres.

“Very well,” Dalgard acknowledged the order, then disappeared into the forest, taking the other ogres with him.

“Now that that’s taken care of, I’d like to invite you and the others to dine with us, Will. What do you say?”

“All of these people? Are you sure?”

“You *can* fly, can’t you?”

And so it was decided that we would skip returning to Earl Helios’s manor entirely and fly straight back to the imperial palace.

However, the unit leader of the emperor’s private guard flat-out refused to allow him to fly back unaccompanied, so we had to wait for the dragon corps to meet us.

While we were waiting, I took advantage of the chance to chat with Ghizel.

“Hey, Ghizel! How have you been?”

“Those guys have been using the promise of getting to see you to manipulate us into doing whatever they want.”

I don't really understand what he means; he sounds seriously ticked off! What was Dan thinking?!

I quickly searched around for Dan and saw him standing near Sol. He stood still, not moving a single muscle, just staring up at the giant red dragon.

Is it just my imagination, or does it look like he's gazing adoringly at Sol like he's the most amazing thing he's ever seen?

“Dan!” I shouted loudly, finally shaking him out of his stupor. “Ghizel and the others are very unhappy. What kind of orders did you give them?”

“...Huh? Wait, what?!” He seemed surprised, but I found it strange that Dan, who was normally so attentive to the smallest changes in the dragons' moods, hadn't noticed.

“What's wrong? Is there something on your mind?” I asked.

“Oh, um, no... Nothing like that...” Dan prevaricated, glancing discretely over at Sol again.

“Why do you keep looking at Sol, then?”

“He's just nervous because someone he idolizes so much is right here in front of him.” This answer came from an older man who I'd never met before.

“Someone he idolizes?” I asked.

“Pfft, this guy clawed his way up to the position of legion commander with nothing but his borderline-excessive love of dragons. So there's no way he could act normal when a primordial dragon is so close that he could practically reach out and touch him.”

Oh, so that's it. I suppose that's true; Dan really does love dragons. So much so, in fact, that I've heard not only Lestin but also many other people tease him about it.

“By the way, who are you, mister?” I asked.

“Forgive me for the late introduction. I’m the Director of the Intelligence Department, Seerio Yugee,” the man said, executing the formal bow that the knighthood used when speaking to a member of the nobility.

“I am Dayland Osphe’s youngest daughter, Nefertima,” I introduced myself in return, choosing an appropriately respectful curtsy in light of his position of authority.

“Dan, everyone is planning to head back to the Imperial City, but I think you’d better placate Ghizel and the others first...”

“To the Imperial City?”

Dan was confused about why we were traveling to the Imperial City, so I explained that His Majesty, the emperor, had invited Will to dinner. When he heard this, for some reason, Dan’s shoulders sagged in dejection.

What exactly did he say to the dragons to get them to come here?

“Lady Nefertima, if you wouldn’t mind, could you please help Dan out? The dragons were complaining, so to get them to carry the ogres, he told them they could see you if they did.”

I thought so! I guess I’ll have to help him out, then.

“Come on, Dan. Let’s go!” I said, all but dragging Dan over to where Ghizel and the others were waiting.

The dragons let loose a barrage of complaints against Dan, but in the end, I calmed them down, and once that was out of the way, we used the wide-open field to play to our hearts’ content.

With seven of them and only one of me, I was a bit outnumbered, so I roped Shinki into playing with us, too.

For some reason, they were *still* into the strange game where Shinki dragged them around by their tails. Their bodies left trenches of overturned earth in the grassy field as they were dragged back and forth.

Just when the dragons’ moods had finally improved, the wyverns arrived, and for a tense moment, I thought they were going to go at each other tooth and nail. Thankfully, all it took was a single word from Sol to settle everyone down.

Way to go, Sol!

“Have a safe journey!” Earl Helios called out as she and Lutie saw off the small army of flying dragons that leapt into the sky one after another.

Louis and Theo were riding wyverns.

Karna, Paul, and the others were riding lindblossoms. I’d given strict instructions to the lindblossoms before we took off to make sure not to let them fall, so I was pretty sure they’d be okay.

As for Shinki, he was riding on Sol, carrying Seigo and Rikusei in his arms. He looked like he was carrying two little stuffed animals, which was adorable all on its own. Plus, the fact that they could be so easily mistaken for stuffed animals just went to show how cute Seigo and Rikusei were.

Inaho and Haku were riding on top of Sol’s head. Inaho and Sol had immediately hit it off, maybe because they were both fire-affiliated?

Gratia was with me, riding on Lars’s back. He’d missed Lars’s fluffy fur just as much as I had because he was enjoying it with his entire body.

I’m jealous! I wish I could sink into Lars’s fur until my body disappears, too! I bet it would make an amazing mattress...

Due to Sol’s striking appearance, a rumor began to spread like wildfire through all the countries...

“The primordial dragon of the north brought an army of dragons and razed the southern country to the ground.”



POV: Director of the Intelligence Department

“SEERIO! *The beloved child is here!*” Serafi excitedly flew in circles around me the moment she laid eyes on Lady Nefertima. *“This is incredible! I never thought I would see the fire dragon, a blue pegasus, and Lars all in one place...”*

It wasn’t just Serafi; all of the elemental spirits in the area were excited.

Not only was the beloved child here, but a veritable army of holy beasts accompanied her.

When we arrive in the imperial city there will be another blue pegasus and an earth tiger in the imperial palace, as well. I hope the elemental spirits don't get too excited and accidentally cause minor natural disasters!

"Hey, Seerio... Let's go talk to the beloved child!"

"Okay, fine. But you behave yourself, got it?"

Serafi and I made our way over to Lady Nefertima, who was speaking with a besotted-looking Dan.

Yeesh, is he still staring at the fire dragon?

I explained Dan's situation to Lady Nefertima, and all was going well until it came time to introduce ourselves.

After that, Serafi began clinging to Lady Nefertima, repeatedly exclaiming how "*Cuuuute!*" she was. She wasn't doing anything too bad, just patting Lady Nefertima's hair and poking her cheeks, but she should've known the hell this would unleash...

Just as I'd feared, the other elemental spirits all began clinging to Lady Nefertima as well.

Gradually, I lost sight of the tiny noblewoman among the crowd of eager elemental spirits gathered around her. There were several intermediate-level elemental spirits and an uncountable number of low-level elemental spirits jostling to get close to her.

You have no *idea* how hard it was to keep from laughing at that moment.

His Highness, who could also see the elemental spirits, surprised me by laughing out loud, something I'd never heard him do before.

Following the young prince's lead, His Imperial Majesty also began laughing.

If Lars hadn't stepped in, the elemental spirits probably would've never let her go.

Side Story: Together Is Best!

I'M going to be completely honest: the flight back to the imperial city was *freaking awesome!*

I understood now why Karna said the Linus Empire is a beautiful country.

The scenery was breathtaking, especially when viewed from above.

There was a massive waterfall that looked remarkably similar to the Iguazu Falls. Due to the high elevation, the amount of water was relatively small, and it mostly dispersed into mist by the time it reached the ground at the bottom of the falls. That created a very beautiful perpetual rainbow.

We also passed over lakes of various colors, as well as several seemingly bottomless deep lakes. When I remarked that I wanted to swim in them, I was told that was inadvisable as the lakes were home to carnivorous fish. Maybe those were this world's equivalent to piranhas?

There was also a massive field of flowers that I wished we could've landed in so I could see them up close.

These flowers, called saze, were a light pink that reminded me nostalgically of cherry blossoms. Saze were used to produce cooking oil, so in reality, they were probably more similar to safflowers than cherry blossoms.

The imperial family owned a retreat in the same province where the saze farm was, and the castle there was just as gorgeous as Azurite Palace.

At times like this, I wish they had cameras in this world!

I got so excited that Will scolded me for distracting Lars while he was flying, but I couldn't help it. I definitely wanted to go sightseeing in the sky again sometime.

When we arrived in the imperial city, the wyverns landed in a large courtyard on the south side of the imperial palace. I was told that this courtyard, which contained nothing but bare grass, was intended for wyverns to land in during

ceremonies and in case of emergencies.

We also had a spot designated for lindblossoms to land at the royal palace in the Kingdom of Gaché when delivering emergency messages and so on, so this was fairly common in countries with winged dragons.

Once everyone had dismounted, the lieutenant of the Dragon Corps announced that they would be returning to the barracks, but for some reason, the wyverns seemed opposed to that plan.

I asked them what the problem was, and the wyverns said it would be unforgivably rude to leave without first paying their respects to Sol. However, because the lieutenant couldn't understand what the wyverns were saying, he had no way of figuring out what they were so upset about.

In that case, I'll lend him a hand!

"Sol, don't go anywhere just yet, okay?!"

Sol responded to my request by not responding at all, simply lying down in the grass to wait.

I hurried over to the lieutenant and explained the wyverns' wishes to him.

"They said they want to pay their respects to Sol, so please wait just a little longer."

"They want to greet the fire dragon?"

I explained that the wyverns viewed primordial dragons as special beings. In the same way that holy beasts were revered by beastpeople, all the different species of dragons likewise revered primordial dragons.

To compare it to humans, it was more like the respect we felt for persons of authority, such as a king or emperor, rather than the worshipful light in which we viewed holy beasts.

When you put it that way, no one with any manners would dare to leave without first paying their respects to His Majesty.

Everyone who worked with dragons had a special fondness for them because once I explained the situation to the lieutenant, he immediately agreed to the dragons' request.

“I’m sorry for not realizing on my own. Go on and pay your respects.”

The lieutenant gave a light pat to the closest wyvern’s flank and urged them to head over to speak to Sol. But before the wyvern made its way to speak with Sol, it first turned to me.

“Thank you, dragon’s maiden.”

“You’re welcome.”

I’ve gotten used to playing the role of a translator since the dragon knights are always struggling to communicate with the lindblooms and lindrakes without being able to understand their language. But it’s interesting to see the distinct difference in the wyverns’ serious personalities compared to the more playful lindblooms and lindrakes.

The lindblooms and lindrakes were free-willed and only really cared about having fun, whereas the wyverns were more focused on their work, making their mental age seem a bit higher.

As if to prove that point, the lindblooms were frolicking boisterously around in the grassy courtyard, playing just as they always did at home.

One of the lindblooms had even grabbed Shinki and was forcing him to play with them.

Go ahead and indulge them, Shinki!

As for the wyverns, they approached Sol and made a show of lowering their heads in deference to him.

Sol maintained his silence, merely flapping his wings once in acknowledgment.

I wasn’t quite sure what all that signified, but the wyverns seemed satisfied because afterward, they returned to where their riders were waiting and, this time, allowed themselves to be herded back to the barracks without a fuss.

“Now that that’s taken care of, shall we relax and enjoy a nice cup of tea?” the emperor suggested, effectively urging everyone to head inside. But I still wanted to play some more.

Maybe I can convince Will to leave Lars with me. He doesn’t need him for

anything right now.

“Is it okay if I stay and play with Sol and the others a bit longer?” I asked hopefully.

“That’s fine.”

All right! The emperor gave his permission, so no one would dare try to stop me from playing as much as I want!

“Lars, you come too!”

Lars glanced at Will, confirming that was okay with him, then used his huge head to bump the small of my back gently as if saying, “*All right, let’s go.*”

With Lars urging me forward, I quickly turned and called out to Euche as well.

“Euche, come play with us!”

I’d been a bit worried he might refuse since it meant being around Sol, but in the end, he relented, apparently deciding that playing with me was more important than avoiding Sol.

Besides, even if I call it “playing together,” I’m sure Sol and Lars will just watch from the sidelines as usual.

Ultimately, Euche and the lindblossoms ended up playing together. The sight of it was enough to make me aware of the age difference between them.

I feel like I’ve seen this game somewhere before...

Euche was producing balls of water, and the lindblossoms were catching them in their mouths.

Oh, I’ve got it! It’s like when our family’s pet dog in my past life used to use his mouth to try and “catch” the spray of water from a water gun!

In any case, I was determined to get my revenge on the lot of them for misfiring and soaking me. I got Shinki to help me, and together we dumped an entire bucket’s worth of water on Euche and each of the lindblossoms.

Well, technically, the elemental spirits produced the water at Shinki’s request...

We *may* have overdone it a bit, though, because before I knew it, the grassy

clearing was flooded. It felt interesting to walk across the boggy grass, but once the lindblossoms started rolling around in it, the lawn was ruined.

This isn't good. I won't be able to avoid a thorough scolding for this...

"The earth spirits say they can fix this easily," Shinki said, relaying a message from the earth spirits nearby.

Thank you, earth spirits!

I eagerly took the earth spirits up on their offer and had them fix the ruined grass.

Just as they'd finished removing the last traces of our exuberant and slightly destructive playtime, Spica came to get me, saying it was time to change for dinner.

There was still one more thing I wanted to do, so I begged Sol not to leave yet.

"That's fine with me; if the water holy beast doesn't have a problem with it..."

It took a bit of convincing on my part, but I persuaded Euche to agree to allow Sol to stay.

Euche leapt into a lingering puddle, using the water to transport himself back to the emperor's side. Meanwhile, I rode back to my room on Lars's back.

"Welcome back. I see I made the right decision in having Spica go get you early," Paul said with more than a hint of sarcasm, but I was grateful for his accurate foresight.

He knows me so well. After playing with those guys, there's no way I'd make it back clean!

"It can't be helped, Paul. That's just how Neema is," Karna said in my defense.

Karna knew just as well as Paul how much of a tomboy I could be, but she was saying that if it made me happy, that was what mattered. I was so moved that I wanted to hug her, but I resisted the urge so I wouldn't get mud all over her.

Instead, I settled for squealing, "I love you, Karna!"

A short while later, Karna and I were dressed in differently colored evening

gowns, awaiting our escort, when Louis and Theo arrived at our suite of rooms.

I was a bit surprised since I'd figured we'd be partnered with Will, but it turned out Will had been assigned to escort Princess Eliza.

Even if this was an informal visit, Will was still the guest of honor. Fortunately, however, this "formal dinner" turned out to be a small, intimate gathering of just family.

Now that you mention it, I guess Will is technically the emperor's nephew, isn't he?

When we arrived in the grand dining room, the retired emperor, retired empress, emperor, and empress were already seated.

After paying our respects, we were given permission to sit, so I let Theo escort me to my assigned seat.

A moment later, Clay arrived, bringing the playboy and Daux with him, and they were followed shortly after by Eliza and Will. They all took turns politely greeting the retired and current emperors and empresses.

Looking at them side by side, I could see that Will had the blood of the imperial family in his veins. In particular, he looked quite a bit like the retired emperor.

When they caught sight of him, both Sache and Kaideetay seemed to perk up with interest.

"It's been a long time, Sache and Kaideetay."

Sache and Kaideetay returned Will's greeting with a neigh and a growl, respectively, before returning to their original positions.

Perhaps the two saw Will as someone of importance. If I had to guess, I'd say it probably had more to do with being the descendant, or rather grandson, of their bonded masters than the fact that he was bonded with Lars.

Come to think of it, Will has an impressive lineage, doesn't he?

Not only does he have the blood of the royal family of the Kingdom of Gaché, but he also has the blood of the imperial family of the Linus Empire. That makes him a real thoroughbred! People probably have very high expectations for him,

that he'll become a truly amazing king one day.

At that moment, I felt a touch of pride and respect for how hard I knew Will was always working, refusing to cave under the weight of all that pressure he must be feeling.

Normally, he's a black-hearted, wily demon prince, though. Was that the entire title, or did I forget an adjective somewhere?

"Neema, you're thinking something horrible right now, aren't you?"

Gasp! How did he know?!

"It's written all over your face."

Crap! I let my guard down at the worst possible moment!

"Let her be, Will. She's much cuter this way than if she became a smooth-talker like you," the retired empress said, casually cutting Will down as she came to my defense.

"If Neema doesn't learn this lesson now, while she'll still be forgiven for it due to her young age, it will only cause her more difficulties in the future."

Ouch! Direct shot to the heart! He's got a point, though; I'm terrible at concealing my emotions and wearing a fake smile, even though it's an essential skill for a duke's daughter.

"It's just family here today, so it's fine to be a bit less formal, don't you think?" the emperor said, trying valiantly to defend me, but Will wasn't backing down.

"Since when are Neema and Karna considered 'family'?"

"Hm? Well, we're hoping one or both of them will marry into the Linus Empire in the future, so why not start treating them as family now?"

Huh? I don't know about Karna, but I don't have any plans to "marry into the family!"

"Ho, ho, ho, so you're planning to steal the Osphe family's greatest treasure? Are you prepared to make an enemy of the Osphe family?"

That sounds dangerously close to a threat...

Is our family really strong enough to be considered a threat to a country as large and powerful as the Linus Empire? If so, Papa is scarier than I thought!

“Your Majesty, if you fail to consider these sweet young ladies’ thoughts on the matter, they’re going to come to hate you, you know,” the retired empress scolded gently, and the emperor replied with a light chuckle that he certainly couldn’t have that.

He must’ve just been joking about the whole marriage thing...

After that, the conversation flowed easily, with the adults discussing politics and Karna and Eliza gossiping about the latest fads at the Hall of Advanced Studies.

As they say, time flies when you’re having fun, and before I knew it, we were finished with our after-dinner tea and dispersing for the night.



I knew before I even asked what the answer would be, but even so, I propositioned Paul while he was helping me prepare for bed.

“I want to sleep with Sol tonight!”

“Absolutely not.”

As expected, Paul turned me down flat.

But I wasn’t about to give up so easily! If I let this chance slip through my fingers, I might never get another one!

“Please, Paul! It will be perfectly safe—Sol will be right there with me, and I’ll even have Shinki and the others come too!”

“There’s no way I could allow a high-ranking noble lady like yourself sleep *outdoors* without so much as a bed.”

What is he saying?! I can use Sol as a bed! There’s no finer bed in the entire continent, maybe even the world!

And when you add in Seigo, Rikusei, and Inaho, my fluffy paradise is complete!

“Pleeeeeease!”

You’re leaving me no choice, Paul; I’m going to have to use my ultimate secret

weapon—the glistening tears attack!

“I think it’s time to admit defeat, Paul. If not, Neema’s going to start crying, and nobody wants that...” Karna chuckled.

That’s right! Just you try me—I really will start crying, don’t think I won’t!

With even Karna taking my side, Paul had no choice but to give in.

“I will make the preparations, so please wait here for a moment.”

“Woo-hoo! Thanks, Paul!”

Paul had several conditions for letting me sleep outside with Sol: first, he insisted on assigning Shinki, Spica, and Kai to be my bodyguards, and second, all of the monsters had to come, too. Paul made me promise to abide by these rules, but I was more than happy to agree.

Once all the preparations were complete, Spica returned from changing out of her uniform and into her own clothing.

“Sleeping all together like this reminds me of when I used to live with the pack!” Based on how her tails happily wagged as she said that, I got the sense that Spica had been lonelier than she’d let on.

When she’d lived with the kobold pack, she’d been constantly surrounded by her adopted family, after all. Even if she’d grown accustomed to sleeping alone by this point, she must’ve been homesick at first.

“If Paul says it’s okay, let’s have a sleepover again sometime!” I offered, feeling a bit guilty it hadn’t occurred to me sooner.

“Okay!” Spica eagerly agreed.

We chatted all the way to the courtyard, where Sol was still lounging just as we’d left him. When he saw us, he said wryly, *“I thought you might come.”*

You know me so well!

I laid out the sleeping bag Paul had procured for me against Sol’s stomach.

“Lord fire dragon, I’m entrusting Lady Neema into your care. Please look after her this evening,” Paul said.



Paul bowed deeply to Sol, and Sol surprised me by gracing him with a response.

“I imagine you have your hands full with this one. I will protect Neema, so be at ease.”

“You have my deepest gratitude.”

After Paul left, Sol nagged at me, saying that I shouldn't put so much stress on someone who's clearly working himself to the bone for my sake.

But if I let this chance pass me by, when will we all be able to get together like this again?!

“It's just for one night!” I promised, then called the others' names. “Lars, Euche, Sache, Kaideetay.”

“I see... So that was your objective, eh?” Sol chuckled, clearly deducing my plan the moment I spoke the other holy beasts' names.

I could see the holy beasts clearly when they appeared despite the darkness.

Euche was the color of a blue summer sky, Sache was the color of the sky at sunrise, Lars was such a bright white that he seemed to almost shine, and Kaideetay was a beautiful black darker than the night.

Sache seemed worried that I was planning to sleep in a place like this.

Euche, on the other hand, seemed to find the idea appealing because he sat down right in front of me, ignoring Sol completely.

Lars and Kaideetay were growling back and forth, apparently having a conversation about something.

“Lars and Kaideetay, join us!”

I patted the ground next to me, urging them to come on over, and after looking at each other for a moment, both holy beasts gave in and made their way over to me.

“Oh, that's right! Kai, why don't you transform into your horse form too?!” I suggested.

Kai easily agreed to my request, transforming from a human into a horse. In

that form, he was a small, almost pony-sized horse with an otherworldly coat the same color as the underground lake he called home.

Among the several forms he could take, this was one I rarely got to see.

When he's standing next to Sache like that, they look almost like parent and child!

Haku and Gratia came out as well, and after a moment of surprise at the sight of all the holy beasts gathered around, they quickly got over it and searched for a comfortable place to sleep.

Inaho would be sleeping on Sol's back. She was already curled up in a ball and was slowly, almost languidly waving her tails back and forth.

Seigo seemed curious about Kaideetay. After sniffing the earth tiger a few times, the little kobold snuggled right up against him and lay down.

As for Rikusei, he seemed to have taken a liking to the unique sensation of Euche's body, which he was poking his nose into playfully over and over again. Thankfully, Euche didn't seem particularly bothered by that and ignored Rikusei in favor of rubbing his head against my hand, begging for pets.

Sache and Kai chased each other around for a bit, then curled up next to Kaideetay, each using the other as a pillow.

While everyone was finding their preferred sleeping arrangement, one was doing something strange...

"Haku, knock that off."

Inspired by the sight of Rikusei prodding Euche with his nose, Haku was attempting to force itself *inside* Euche's body. Although it might've been physiologically possible, given that they were both liquid-type creatures, I had no idea what might happen. I also didn't want to find out.

"Pew!"

Thankfully, Haku obediently followed my order to stop trying to climb inside of Euche and instead settled for climbing up onto one of the blue pegasus's folded wings.

Of course, Haku had to choose a strange place to sleep—what else was I

expecting?

Gratia, who had developed a deep love of Lars's fur that I could *totally* relate to, was in the same pose he'd adopted during our flight, sunken down into the plush fur spread-eagle, using his entire body to experience the fluffiness to its full potential.

As for Shinki, he'd chosen to use Sol's tail as a pillow and was already out cold.

Spica looked undecided for a moment but finally chose a spot between Sol and Lars where she curled up in a ball and wrapped her tails protectively around her body.

I wiggled like a worm, sliding my body into my sleeping bag.

"May you pass the night in safety and peace," I said, wishing everyone a "good night" in the traditional manner of this world before my eyelids drifted shut.



THE shadowed outline of a figure stood on a terrace in the section of the imperial palace reserved for the imperial family's private residences.

It was the only one of the current emperor's siblings who was still unmarried and living in the imperial palace: Louvence Taux Linus.

"There's a sight you don't see every day."

He leaned against the railing that encircled the terrace, burning the sight he'd surely never see again in this lifetime into his memory.

The blue pegasi and earth tiger bonded with his parents and older brother, the great fire dragon of the north who was said to be the king of the primordial dragons, and the sky tiger bonded with his nephew, the crown prince of the allied country, all together in one place...

And it wasn't just the astounding array of holy beasts gathered around the young girl either; the small army of monsters she'd named were all there, too.

Nefertima didn't seem to have noticed, but the lindblossoms had also formed a protective ring around her and her companions' makeshift campsite.

“What exactly *is* she?”

Louivence was starting to get an inkling about something.

Nefertima was different from all of the other beloved children throughout history.

It was true that holy beasts and elemental spirits protected all of the beloved children. But there was no other instance in recorded history of so many holy beasts being bonded with humans when a beloved child existed.

Louivence wasn't the only one watching Nefertima.

In a guest room reserved for visiting state guests, Wilhelm was discussing his upcoming plans with Dan and Seerio when Lars suddenly announced that Nefertima was calling him and disappeared.

Wilhelm asked the elemental spirits to find out what Nefertima was up to and was surprised by their response that she was sleeping outdoors, so he stepped out onto the terrace to see for himself.

“What is she doing this time...?”

Hadn't he just finished reprimanding her during dinner for not taking her position as a duke's daughter seriously enough?

The way all of her thoughts and emotions showed on her face would make Nefertima an easy target for scheming aristocrats.

Every time it had come up, he'd made a point of reminding her that because of her high status, she needed to be careful with her words and actions to protect herself.

And yet, this very same duke's daughter was currently sleeping in a courtyard surrounded by holy beasts, monsters, and winged dragons.

“Dan, Seerio, come see this.”

However, Wilhelm was not beyond being able to find amusement in such a rare sight, either.

The two men obediently stepped out onto the terrace and looked in the direction Wilhelm had indicated before being struck speechless with shock.

The first to regain the power of speech was Serafi, the elemental spirit bonded with Seerio.

“That’s not fair! I want to sleep with the beloved child, too!”

That’s right—it wasn’t just the holy beasts who’d gathered around her.

Individually, holy beasts tended to attract elemental spirits, and there were usually a few hovering around Nefertima at all times as well. But with all of the holy beasts and the beloved child gathered together, the place where Nefertima was sleeping was *swarming* with elemental spirits. It was only visible to those who could actually see them, of course, but the sheer number crawling all over the pig pile of sleeping bodies like a seething mass of insects didn’t inspire reverent awe; it inspired nauseated repulsion.

“Seerio, I’m going to join them!”

With this, Serafi abandoned Seerio in favor of charging head-first into the swarm of elemental spirits below.

“I get it, I really do, but I still can’t help but feel a little jealous. I wish I could get that close to the fire dragon...”

Wilhelm and Seerio wryly smiled at the words their infamously dragon-loving companion muttered under his breath. Dan wouldn’t be Dan if, even in a time and place like this, he couldn’t help but think of dragons.

“But it bears consideration that it’s also possible to be favored a bit *too* much.”

Given how much they loved Nefertima, the elemental spirits might not be able to help themselves and unthinkingly misuse their powers based on the slightest change in her mood.

Was she sufficiently aware of the huge power and responsibility on her shoulders?

“She’s already learned for herself how terrifying power can be. It’s just ‘how to control it’ that she hasn’t yet mastered.”

“That’s the worst possible combination, don’t you think?”

“The elemental kings should be able to do something about the elemental

spirits. When it comes to holy beasts, the other humans bonded with holy beasts can teach her, but we can't help her when it comes to dealing with the elemental spirits. The extent of a beloved child's power is too different."

The men knew very well that there was a difference between what elementalists and what those bonded with a holy beast could use elemental spirits to accomplish.

But it was likely that a beloved child was different from both of those.

How would this incredible being known as a "beloved child" affect this world?

Seerio was of two minds on the topic: on the one hand, it filled him with unease, and yet, on the other, he was looking forward to seeing what would happen.

"I'm going to have to give her another lecture tomorrow," Wilhelm said, almost sounding like he was looking forward to it.

And Dan, who was still gazing longingly at the fire dragon, came to a decision. "First, I'll work hard to earn Ghizel's approval! If I can do that, I can join him the next time he pays his respects to the fire dragon!"

The other two were thinking the same thing: if all Dan wanted was to speak to the fire dragon, it would be easy enough to ask Nefertima for an introduction. But the two men wisely kept their mouths shut.



A large, powerful tongue licked the top of my head with so much force that it hurt a bit.

I knew Lars wouldn't do such a thing, so it had to be Kaideetay. I opened my eyes just in time to see a massive pink tongue coming straight toward me.

"Good morning, Kaideetay!"

I dodged Kaideetay's tongue and wrapped my arms around his gorgeous black and silver striped neck. While I was enjoying the unique silky-fluffy texture of Kaideetay's fur, the others all began getting up as well.

Euche, Sache, and Kai started galloping around the courtyard, enjoying the invigorating morning sunshine, their manes and tails streaming behind them as

they ran.

It probably feels nice to run around freely in the crisp morning air.

“You slept impressively soundly despite spending the entire night outdoors.”

That has nothing to do with the fact that I habitually sleep like a log, I assure you...

Yeah, yeah, it must’ve been the sleeping bag’s fault! The sleeping bag Paul found for me God-only-knows-where was just so comfortable!

It’s probably got a load of spells cast on it because my body isn’t even the slightest bit sore from sleeping on the ground, and I was the perfect temperature all night, not too hot or cold.

And as a bonus, I didn’t roll around in my sleep like usual, either. There’s something relaxing about being all wrapped up, snug as a bug in a rug!



AS they say, time flies when you’re having fun, and before I knew it, the time had come for Will and the others to return home.

“Ghizel, I promise I’ll come to play with you all as soon as I get back, so please wait for me!” I said.

“Sure, we’ll be waiting. Human bodies are fragile, so please be careful.”

Now even Ghizel’s worried about me...

Okay, fine, I promise to try not to do anything reckless.

I hugged Ghizel’s muzzle, which set the other dragons off.

“Hey, no fair!”

“Me too, me too!”

“Come home with us, Neema!”

“Sorry guys, I can’t go home yet.”

I hugged each lindbloom in turn, doing my best to comfort them.

Once I’d finished saying my goodbyes to the dragons, it was Will and Lars’s turn. I was still a bit put out at Will, who’d given me a stern lecture first thing in

the morning.

“Don’t forget what I told you, got it?”

He’d drilled it into me that, just like Karna, I was a representative of our country here in the Linus Empire and needed to behave accordingly.

“Yeesh, I said I’ve got it already!”

Lars gave me an encouraging lick on the cheek as if saying, “*You can do it!*”

I couldn’t exactly lick him in return, so I settled for petting the fluffy fur around his neck one last time before we parted ways.

“If anything happens, call me immediately. Understood?”

“Okay!”

For some reason, it didn’t feel like “goodbye” with Sol. Maybe that was because I could “call” him—not on the phone, of course, but telepathically—any time I wanted.

Telepathy sure comes in handy!

Sol took off first, and then one after another, each lindbloom took flight as well.

Will gave one last bow to the emperor, then climbed onto Lars’s back, and they followed after the lindblooms.

I watched as they got farther and farther away until they became tiny dots on the horizon and finally disappeared altogether.

Just then, Karna came up behind me and gave me a hug.

“You’re going to miss them, huh?”

“Don’t worry, Karna! You’re here with me, so I don’t feel lonely!”

I could see them any time I wanted once we got home. For now, there were plenty of things I wanted to do that could only be done while we were here, so I would focus on that.

“You two get along well, huh? I wish *certain people* would take a lesson from you ladies...” Louis said, smiling wryly as he ruthlessly criticized his niece and

nephews.

Louis sure doesn't hold back when using "tough love" against his relatives, huh?

"Forgive me, uncle, but I would have to disagree... In fact, I believe we're actually quite close?"

The imperial siblings' relationship was built upon a complex web of power dynamics that sometimes made it interesting to watch them interact.

"Now then, uncle and older brothers, work hard today at your official duties. It seems that Mother doesn't have anything scheduled today, so let's have tea with just us girls, shall we? Of course, Karna and Neema, you absolutely must join us!"

Eliza's something, isn't she?!

"Our princess certainly is as fierce as any man, isn't she?" the empress remarked, sounding exasperated.

You say that like it's a bad thing!

"If you ladies don't have any plans, might you consider indulging Eliza and joining us for tea?"

And that was how we decided to have a girls-only tea party.

In Japanese, we have an idiom that says, "If three women get together, it's bound to get noisy," and boy, did that ever prove true in this case. In particular, Eliza and the empress's complaints about the men of the imperial family were flowing forth like a *raging* river.

But when the empress glanced over and, with an enchanting wink, said to keep this just between us girls, I didn't dare disagree.

Phew, Theo and the others sure have their work cut out for them!



Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato Illustration by Meij

When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue Illustration by Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken Illustration by Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.



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