

Author: Kureha
Illustrator: Yamigo

The White Cat's Revenge

as Plotted from the
Dragon King's Lap



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Asahi Shinomiya

Ruri's childhood "friend." Adored by those around her for seemingly no reason, she's clueless and always clinging to Ruri, much to Ruri's dismay.

Jade

The young and wise ruler of the Nation of the Dragon King. Takes Ruri, a Beloved, into his care. In contrast to his cool and suave appearance, he has a soft spot for all things cute and cuddly.

Ruri Morikawa

A girl summoned to an alternate world after getting wrapped up in her childhood "friend's" nonsense. She is a Beloved, a person with mana that spirits find especially attractive. By putting on a special bracelet she can transform into a white cat.

Character Introductions



Ewan

Finn's young brother and subordinate. He has an absolute obsession with Finn and will rampage at the drop of a hat if it's about his brother, but he doesn't seem like a bad kid.

Finn

Captain of the Dragon King's Royal Guard, his duty is to bodyguard Jade. He's the second strongest dragonkin under Jade and a very helpful individual who is adored by his subordinates.

Joshua

A spy for the Nation of the Dragon King and Chelsie's grandson. On top of being able to handle pretty much any task thrown at him, he's sociable and can make friends easily with almost anyone.

Euclase

The Chancellor of the Nation of the Dragon King. They have a slightly difficult personality, but they're very capable when it comes to work-centric matters. They have the heart of a fair maiden, by their own account.

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Prologue

The gentle rays of the afternoon sun beamed into the royal office.

Ruri, in her cat form, was occupying her usual seat atop Jade's lap. Jade was right in the middle of his administrative paperwork. Sometimes, however, he would drop what he was doing to pet Ruri's head, running his fingers through her soft, fluffy fur in order to replenish himself with the cuddly comfort he so craved. Ruri didn't mind Jade's petting either. She squinted her eyes contentedly, not an ounce of dissatisfaction on her face.

There was a knock at the office door. Once Jade gave permission for the person to enter, a slightly tired-looking Joshua stepped into the room. Seeing the state Joshua was in, Jade's smile took an about-face into something more serious. Ruri saw that and instinctively corrected her posture.

"I've returned, sir."

"Excellent. So, how are things looking?"

"They seemed to be pretty gung-ho about beating the Nation of the Dragon King. I don't know if they just don't understand their role or they're just being optimistically naive, but having a bona fide idiot for a king sure makes you pity those poor citizens," Joshua replied. His tone was frivolous, but his words conveyed a strong disdain for the King of Nadasha.

Soon war would commence between the Nation of the Dragon King and their neighboring nation, Nadasha.

Although it felt like a matter happening in some faraway world, Ruri was very much involved in this upcoming war. The path she'd had to take before coming to the Nation of the Dragon King and ultimately leading a carefree existence sitting atop Jade's lap was long and arduous.

Once upon a time, Ruri Morikawa lived in Japan, constantly struggling to deal with her childhood friend, Asahi Shinomiya. She eventually enrolled in higher education and was in the midst of enjoying her fresh start as a college student.

That was until, one day, Ruri found herself abruptly summoned to this alternate world along with Asahi and four of her former classmates from middle school. Ruri tried her best to settle into life in this new place, the Land of Nadasha, despite the sudden turn of events—until she was framed for a murder plot and exiled into a dangerous forest.

As luck would have it, an elderly dragonkin woman named Chelsie who lived in the forest took Ruri in. After enough time had passed, Ruri moved to the royal capital of the Nation of the Dragon King, and even though she held out hope for a way to return to her world, she also grew accustomed to life in this different world.

Although still seething in rage at the people responsible for summoning her, not only was she away from Asahi, the bane of her existence, but she was enjoying her life in this alternate world being gainfully employed in the Nation of the Dragon King. She was at a turning point—instilled with motivation to keep trying her best for the future. However, that was when she heard the rumors of Nadasha plotting to invade the Nation of the Dragon King.

Jade, the King of the Nation of the Dragon King, quickly sent out his intelligence operative, Joshua, to investigate. His investigation finished, he returned and was right in the middle of reporting his findings. Jade’s greenish-blue eyes were focused on Joshua. Though his graceful features were wrought with exasperation, he listened attentively to the report. Ruri also listened in, quietly atop Jade’s lap.

“They’re forcing people into a draft and buying up weapons left and right. I was only half-convinced before, but now it does seem that Nadasha is steadily prepping toward an invasion. I have no doubt it will lead to war.”

“Do they *honestly* think they stand any semblance of a chance...?” Jade rhetorically asked as he sighed in disappointment.

Joshua smiled wryly, apparently thinking the same way. “Most of the people taking part in this war are a bunch of inexperienced citizens. Those implicated with the exiled moderates are eager to regain their good standings in the nation, but their morale isn’t exactly high considering the majority of troops are folks forced into serving. I have to wonder if they actually intend on winning this

war, don't you?"

"What in the blazes is the King of Nadasha trying to do here? This is practically sending his subjects to die in vain."

Ruri flinched upon hearing the words "die in vain."

"Hey, Joshua? Will their figurehead, the Priestess Princess, also be taking part in the war?"

"Yeah, looks like the Priestess Princess is joining in too."

Ruri's expression turned dour. Despite her practically drilling the warnings into Asahi's head, the message just didn't stick at all with her, betraying all of Ruri's expectations. The very thought of the upcoming war was enough to leave Ruri unsettled.

Chapter 1: Preparing for Invasion

The Land of Nadasha was a nation that had obstinately refused to enter into diplomatic relations with its neighbor, the Nation of the Dragon King, despite the latter's status as a major nation. Not only that, they were also envious of their neighbor's bountiful wealth, licking their chops at any opportunity to make the nation their own.

However, Nadasha's size paled in comparison to the Nation of the Dragon King. The Nation of the Dragon King dwarfed Nadasha in terms of sheer territory and population. And with their coastal access and bustling diplomatic ties with foreign nations, the Nation of the Dragon King was the epicenter of commerce in the world.

Even though their massive military force and the presence of dragonkin alone was enough of a viable threat, the kings of Nadasha past had declared war on the Nation of the Dragon King many a time only to be utterly trounced as a result.

Currently, Nadasha was gearing up for yet another one of those wars. Nadasha might have had less land overall, but its soil was rich. With proper tillage and maintenance, it would reap ample rewards. But with the nation sending all of their available hands out to war, the perfectly harvestable soil had fallen into disrepair.

Nevertheless, their longing and envy toward the Nation of the Dragon King gave rise to war. Soldiers scrambled back and forth in the castle, prepping for the invasion on the horizon. Amidst this, the King and the Head Priest were overseeing the work as it happened.

"How are preparations coming along?"

"Swimmingly, Your Majesty."

"And what about the you-know-what?"

"Rest assured, I have given them to the nobles and a handful of soldiers."

The King and the Head Priest grinned devilishly.

For this war, there were nobles who had been implicated with the anti-war moderates—the same moderates who were framed and exiled via the King and the Head Priest’s plot. In order to clear their family’s name, regardless if they were innocent or not, they dispatched many of their troops to help in the effort.

The King and the Head Priest provided the nobles and soldiers with a certain item under the guise of a “good luck charm.” It was an item paramount for disposing of the mighty dragonkin, which made both of the men feel assured of victory. The past kings of Nadasha underwent continuous hardships, but at last the time had come to get their revenge on their wretched dragonkin foes.

“Even the mighty dragonkin will be helpless when faced with what we have in store.”

“Indeed, and because dragonkin have such strong mana, *it* will be that much more potent, as well.”

As the two men conversed among themselves, Asahi walked up to them. Upon seeing her, good-natured smiles seeped over both of their faces.

“Ooh, *Priestess Princess*, are preparations coming along?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Excellent news. You are an important presence around here, so you mustn’t be negligent in preparing yourself. Oh, yes, there is something I need to give to you,” the King said. He glanced at the Head Priest, and the Head Priest pulled out a small sack and delivered it to Asahi.

Asahi took it with wonderment as she proceeded to look inside of it. “A stone...?” Inside was a rugged, transparent stone a little smaller than a balled fist.

“This is a good luck charm to keep you safe, milady. When you sense danger is afoot, please toss this toward your threat. It will surely protect you.”

Asahi unassumingly accepted the gift. “Yes, I very much appreciate it.”

The King and the Head Priest exchanged suggestive glances and slight smirks.

They had given her the same type of “good luck charm” they gave to the nobles and a handful of soldiers.

Ignorant to what their looks implied, and considering the trinket as nothing more than an ordinary good luck charm, Asahi kept the sack for safekeeping.

“So, um... I was wondering about Ruri-chan...”

“Aah, you mean the girl? To be honest, I am quite doubtful that was truly her...”

“I’ve told you the *truth*! I am positive it was Ruri-chan. I saw her and talked to her!”

“Yes, well, if that is what you say, then it must be true, Priestess Princess. However, from her slanderous claims about the Head Priest and myself, I would say she is under some rather heavy brainwashing. It is quite worrying, to say the least.”

“You don’t need to worry. I will get Ruri-chan back from those bad people and undo that brainwashing!” Asahi said with gusto.

In spite of Ruri’s warning not to trust the King or the Head Priest, Asahi had gone in a display of overly naive honesty to ask them directly for the truth of the matter. She asked them if they were both deceiving her, but seeing as how scammers never just up and admit to their wrongdoings, the King and the Head Priest managed to cajole her back to their side in no time.

Their method of choice was fabricating a story about brainwashing. By their account, the Nation of the Dragon King had brainwashed Ruri to do their bidding. The King urged that they needed to hurry to war in order to release her from their control. Since Asahi had been taught that the Nation of the Dragon King was evil, she bought their bogus story hook, line, and sinker. Ruri’s request was to no avail as Asahi had become even more proactive toward the war efforts than ever before. Everything was proceeding perfectly according to the Head Priest’s designs.

“I implore you to do your best in order to save your friend. I pray to god for both you and your friend’s safety.”

“Yes, thank you very much, Head Priest,” Asahi said with a bow before

walking away.

As soon as she did, the expressions on their faces took a turn.

“Quite fortunate that our Priestess Princess is a dimwit, I see. We were right about being prompt in throwing out that friend of hers, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is just as you say, Your Majesty. Admittedly, I never would have imagined she would live after being thrown into the forest.”

“No matter. It’s not as though a single little girl making a fuss would be enough to stop this war from happening. It’s a trivial issue at this point.”

“Very true.”

The King and the Head Priest both smiled and chuckled deviously among themselves. Everything was going according to plan—their plan to finally seize control of the Nation of the Dragon King once and for all.

Chapter 2: The Flying Clione

A few days had passed since Ruri failed to convince Asahi and Nadasha made their declaration of war. Nothing had changed in particular—no, Jade and the others might have been scrambling in preparation for war, but nothing had changed in particular for *Ruri*, who was living out her life as usual.

It was early afternoon, and the weather was so good it seemed impossible that war was really just around the corner. On this beautiful day, Ruri was working yet another shift at the diner as usual.

“Hey, Ruri dear? Sorry, but would you mind running an errand for me before you go home?”

“No problem!”

The lunchtime rush had fizzled out to a close, and because they were running low on ingredients for the night shift, Ruri was sent out to do shopping. As she walked through town, she would occasionally overhear the chatter of people speaking among each other about Nadasha declaring war and the conflict itself.

Their discussions were unsettling, but the looks on all of their faces were so optimistic that it was hard to imagine the nation was on the verge of war. In fact, they sounded more like they were discussing dinner plans, not wartime gossip. All of them were that confident in the Nation of the Dragon King coming out on top.

That helped lighten the load on Ruri’s conscience slightly. She had been living in the castle for quite some time and made acquaintances with the soldiers there, so the very idea of those same people possibly going off to war caused her to worry, no matter how hard she tried not to. Even if Jade and the others were naturally assured of their nation’s victory, it was a different story for someone as unfamiliar with war as Ruri. She couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

With the ingredients safely procured, Ruri walked back to the diner. On her way, she spotted something flying through the sky that *shouldn’t* exist in the

middle of a town.

“What is that? ...Oh, it fell.” The unidentified life-form floated through the air before flopping flat right in front of Ruri, drained of energy.

Slightly wary, she approached the collapsed being. She realized it was something she had seen before at the aquarium and on television—a sea angel, also known as a clione. The cliones from Ruri’s memory were transparent, but the one in front of her was milky-white. The tips of its wings were colored pink, and most importantly, it was relatively large. Ruri hesitated to even call this a “clione” considering it was just under the size of her fist. However, differences aside, its angelic appearance was essentially that of a clione.

Why was a creature known as the “sea angel” flying up in the sky instead of swimming in the sea...? Ruri crouched down and tried poking at it. When she did...



“Ugh... w-water...”

“Gah! It talked?!”

Surprised, Ruri distanced herself from the clione, but once she processed the meaning of the word “water,” she acted quickly. She held the clione tightly in her hands and ran at top speed back to the diner, bags in tow.

She dashed inside the diner and handed off the groceries. As soon as she did, she took a pail and went to draw water from the well in the back of the shop. She wasted no time in placing the clione into the now filled pail. However, she remembered that cliones were sea creatures. She rushed to the kitchen to fetch some salt and started pouring it into the water nonstop. Her panicked, mindless pouring resulted in a huge mountain of salt forming in the water, making her snap back to reality. She realized she might have overdone it, but the damage was already done.

“Why are you putting salt in here?! It’s ruining the water!” the clione sharply shouted, having regained its breath. Ruri wasn’t mistaken; it was really talking via telepathy.

It seemed upset, but its angelic appearance and round red eyes were so cute it struck Ruri’s heart with sudden comfort and joy.

“Well, don’t cliones live in the sea, after all?”

“I live in a lake!” objected the clione as it fluttered its wing-like appendages in the bucket.

Apparently, it was a different life-form that simply *resembled* a clione. Granted, it was pretty much guaranteed to be anything *but* a normal clione the moment Ruri saw it taking to the skies.

“Well, whatever. Not only did you help save me, but you’re just the individual I wanted to meet.”

“Hm? You wanted to meet me?”

“That’s right.”

Ruri didn’t have any clue as to why it would come to meet her, however.

The clone ignored Ruri's bewilderment and demanded, *"Give me a name!"*

"Pardon?! A name? Why do I have to name you?"

"Because you gave him a name, didn't you? Kotaro, wasn't it? He's been bragging that you gave him that name. So you should give me one, too!"

Ruri noticed it said "Kotaro"... Ruri only knew of one Kotaro. Actually, there was only one Kotaro that even *existed*, but she asked to be doubly sure.

Kotaro referred to the magic beast that lived in Chelsie's neck of the woods. It was a cross between a boar, a bear, and a scorpion. Despite its rather frightening appearance, he was as brave and loyal as any dog, and he was friendly to humans. But Kotaro having an acquaintance was news to Ruri.

"By 'Kotaro,' do you mean the boar-like magic beast that I named?"

"The one and the same. He's supposed to be a Spirit of Wind, but he's using a body that only has earth-type attributes, so he ended up running out of power, the big dummy."

Something extremely intriguing popped out to Ruri. "Wait, Kotaro is a *spirit*?! Not a magic beast?"

"Both him and I have the bodies of magic beasts, but we're both spirits on the inside. He never told you, I see."

"You're darn right he never told me!"

"Spirits lack physical bodies by nature, but high-level spirits can occasionally enter the bodies of magic beasts and humans to take form. I didn't have a body either up until recently, but I took a body that was dried up at a lake in order to come meet you. However, I didn't do enough rehydrating. That was such a close call. I was this close to needing to search for a different body again."

"Right..." Ruri replied listlessly. She had no idea how to react to the sudden bombardment of new information. At the same time, she pondered why in the world this clone would go so far as to attain a body to come see her.

"I heard from the spirits by your side that you love cute things, so I searched for a cute body. Well, how is it? I was told you actually like soft and cuddly, so I looked around for a demi-human body I could enter, but I couldn't quite find one"

that matched with me. If you prefer soft and cuddly more than this, should I go hunting around the area? I'm sure I can find a body that matches me, seeing as how this place seems filled with demi-humans."

Its body was indeed cute. However, its cuteness was overshadowed by the spine-chilling questions it followed up with. Ruri shook her head for dear life, flat out refusing its offer. Why was it that spirits always had such an extreme thought process?

"No, you're just fine like that!"

"Oh, I am? Good to hear, then. Anyway, give me a name!"

Ruri was stumped. How did they make such a jovial segue from that previous topic? But once she looked at its hopeful little eyes, she couldn't find it in her to say "no," and she started coming up with a suitable name on the spot.

"Um, alright... How about 'Rin'?"

"Rin? That's my name? I love it!"

Gleefully flapping its wings, the small creature jumped out of the bucket and started flying round and round in the sky. Seeing that, Ruri felt relieved that the small life-form was pleased with its new name.

"Oh, right! Kotaro said he would be coming here later."

"Huh? Wait just a second! Doesn't he realize he can't come into town with that body? It will cause a riot." With Kotaro's gigantic body, simply walking around was likely to destroy parts of the city.

"He does. That is why he cast off his current body and is looking for a new one. He said he would come to see you in a body that suits your preference."

It was no wonder why she didn't spot him when she went to Chelsie's place the last time; he was most likely out looking for a new body.

What kind of body would it change into from that massive beast build...? That question ran through Ruri's mind, rocking her with anxiety.

Chapter 3: Spirit of the Wind

Rin had gone to see Kotaro not long before meeting Ruri. Only twelve spirits sat at the highest level. Out of those twelve, the spirit that governed water, aptly referred to as the Spirit of Water, went to go visit her old friend. That old friend was also a member of those twelve spirits. As the Spirit of Wind, he was the most flighty, detached, and misanthropic spirit, who ironically enough was the same spirit that had allowed a human to name him.

For spirits, allowing someone to name them had extreme significance. Once a person gave a spirit a name to recognize their individuality, they had the ability to constrict and subjugate that individuality as well. It was different from the terms of a contract between spirit and human. With a contract, both were ultimately on even terms. If a spirit disliked the person they signed a contract with, then they could annul the contract at any time they desired, but subjugating a spirit by naming it lasted so long as the human contract-bearer lived.

That was why it wasn't something just anyone could do. A person with strong mana could coerce lower-level spirits, but if they did the same to a supreme-level spirit, it meant certain death. Or rather, if a high-level spirit were to actually be coerced into subjugation, then other high-level spirits would supply backup and the subjugator would probably rue the day they ever tried.

The Spirit of Wind would not let anyone attempt to shackle him down. However, the fact that someone named him regardless basically meant that the same prideful and freedom-loving Spirit of Wind allowed someone to subjugate him. This was a shock, to say the very least.

Upon hearing this, the Spirit of Water went to go see the Spirit of Wind, curious as to whether a contract had actually been drawn. They wanted to see who the contract-bearer actually was, but two years had passed since the event and the person in question was absent. Since spirits didn't have lifespans, their perception of time was extremely loose.

Details aside, the Spirit of Water was stunned when they went to visit the Spirit of Wind—stunned that this loner spirit had morphed into a brainlessly faithful pup.

“What kind of idiot are you? What did you think would happen if a wind spirit used a magic beast without any wind-type attributes?”

He actually wasn't even able to use telepathic speech in that form. Spirits didn't have to necessarily use that power and could mutually understand one another regardless, but it was only natural to be exasperated at the gigantic beast who was depressed from not being able to communicate with Ruri through telepathy.

As for why he ended up in that body, he apparently thought it would please Ruri if a big, strong presence was around to protect her from the Nadashian soldiers. But once he found out that Ruri liked cuddly and cute types more than strong and burly, he felt the despair come over him once again.

“Wind, if you're that unhappy, then why not just change bodies already?”

“I am not Wind. I am Kotaro now. It's the name Ruri gave to me. My own name now.”

From an outside perspective, it simply sounded as though he was making a bunch of wild “*bmoos*,” but he also seemed to be extremely happy at the same time. The usually standoffish Spirit of Wind was the happiest the Spirit of Water had ever seen him, which piqued her interest.

“Say, is a name really that great to have?”

“Yes. I never understood why Time and the other spirits who have names cherished their names so much, but now I see clearly. Ruri calling me by name makes me so happy.”

“Is that so?”

“If you want a name, just have her give you one. I'm sure you'll like Ruri as well. Time made a contract with her and allows her to call her by name, after all.”

The one thing that name-bearing spirits had in common was that they all

cherished their names. Allowing someone to refer to them by name was proof they liked the person they were speaking to.

“Wow, did she now? Still, color me surprised. If you fancy this person so much, I feel like you’d be telling me to stay away from them.”

“Ruri is all alone in this world. Even now, she is lonely, longing to see her family. I want Ruri to smile and be happy. So I’ll try anything I can to make sure she isn’t sad or lonely. You being with her, too, would stop her from feeling that way.”

Not even the Spirit of Water was partial to the idea of being subjugated, but judging from the immense joy and concern the Spirit of Wind showcased, the Spirit of Water thought it might not be a bad idea to let this person name her.

“You’re right. I’ll give her a visit. I might as well go with a body like you,” said the Spirit of Water.

The Spirit of Wind looked at them with a grimace.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want to go, too. But Ruri told me to stay with the old dragonkin lady,” said the Spirit of Wind, slumping his shoulders.

Seeing how dejected he was, the Spirit of Water couldn’t help but reflect on how completely different he was from before. *“I don’t see why you couldn’t go if you just got the dragonkin’s permission. Since you’re incapable of telepathy right now, why don’t I go ask for you?”*

The Spirit of Wind lifted his head up excitedly and wagged his scorpion-like tail in delight, mowing down the grasses and vegetation around him.

They both found Chelsie and proceeded to explain the situation to her. She seemed a little surprised to find out that Kotaro was actually a spirit in beast’s clothing, but she approved of him venturing away from the forest to join Ruri, nonetheless. Preferring to keep it a surprise, the Wind and Water Spirits told Chelsie not to inform Ruri of them coming.

The Spirit of Water headed off to Ruri, while the Spirit of Wind went off to the Nation of the Spirit King in search of a body that would be to Ruri’s liking.



Using information he gained from other spirits, Kotaro's preliminary investigation was a success. There was a race in the royal capital of the Nation of the Spirit King that had the cute and cuddly features that Ruri enjoyed so much.

Behind the white-walled royal castle that towered on the surface of a lake, there was a deep forest called the "Sacred Domain." In that forest, there was a certain creature which Kotaro had his eye on. It was called a "sacred beast," a life-form with a divine status among the people of the Nation of the Spirit King. While it resembled a wolf, its physique was several times bigger than an average wolf. Its coat was smooth and fluffy, composed of white, shining fur that exuded a sublime aura worthy of its moniker as a sacred beast.

Kotaro smiled in satisfaction, thinking he would surely please Ruri, as he stared at some prime examples who gathered because they noticed something wrong. All of them had a strong sense for wind-based powers and were highly intelligent. Once they affirmed his presence, the pack of wolf-like animals prostrated themselves to show they meant him no hostility. Then, the most leader-like out of the group stepped forward.

Kotaro expressed his desire for a sacred beast for his new body, prompting the leader to suggest that Kotaro use the body of a member of their tribe that had passed away just the other day.

"Does it have beautiful fur?"

To Kotaro, the coat of fur was the most essential point. If it couldn't fill that requirement, then it was worthless. In fact, Kotaro was ready to hunt the beasts before him if necessary, but the pack nodded their heads to his question.

There was apparently a member of their tribe who had been poisoned to death recently. By their account, the curious youngster lapped at poison in a moment of carelessness, and while it wasn't the absolute best coat they had to offer, it was more than serviceable. It had a youthful luster, and since the young beast died from poison and nothing else, it remained in pristine condition. They then added a request—a request that Kotaro not set his sights on anyone else in their tribe in return.

Kotaro pondered on this. A beast with a better coat was more desirable in order to please Ruri. Plus, the younger, pre-adult body was much smaller than the other beasts, so it might appeal more to Ruri since she was a fan of cuter things. Coming to his conclusion, Kotaro accepted the pack's proposal.

He walked to the temple built in the forest. There, atop its altar, was the body of a single white wolf. It was indeed much smaller than the other sacred beasts, but its body was so well preserved it almost looked as if it were still alive.

Kotaro shed himself of the huge body he had been using thus far and entered the body resting on the altar. Now emptied, the gigantic body collapsed in place with a heavy and loud thud. At the same time, the snow-white sacred beast that once rested lifelessly on the altar slowly started to rise.

Kotaro looked over his new body and expressed his joy by wagging his bushy tail. He still felt a bit stiff in this new form, but he was certain he would acclimate in no time. Since the sacred beast belonged to Kotaro's attribute of wind, he was able to use the powers that he couldn't handle in the body he formerly occupied.

His task accomplished, Kotaro was ecstatic. He could finally go see Ruri, who was currently living as a white cat, according to what he was told.

"I'll match with Ruri's white fur. Also, with how fluffy it is, it's sure to please her." Imagining Ruri giving him a great big hug, Kotaro howled in delight.

He started to descend the altar in order to make his way over to Ruri, but suddenly a surge of soldiers of the Nation of the Spirit King flooded the temple with weapons drawn.

"What is this magic beast doing here?!"

"Where did it come from?!"

The soldiers cautiously surrounded Kotaro's former body lying motionless in the middle of the temple. One of the soldiers then poked it with a spear to see if it was alive or dead.

"Is it dead?"

"Seems so."

All of the soldiers breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short lived. In the next moment, one soldier whose eyes drifted over to the altar looked as if he had seen a ghost.

Another soldier, noticing how strange his comrade was acting, called out to him. "Hey, what's the matter?"

"L-Look at that..." the soldier stammered, pointing toward the altar.

As soon as the other soldiers simultaneously looked over in that direction, their faces took on a similar look of shock.

"Why is that sacred beast moving around?! It's supposed to be dead!"

"Don't tell me it was actually alive the entire time?!"

"That's impossible. I'm positive it was confirmed dead."

As he glanced at the soldiers, who all seemed to be confused over what was transpiring, Kotaro casually descended the altar.

"This body now belongs to me."

Sacred beasts shouldn't have been able to speak, so after hearing the beast make his proclamation, the soldiers' caution shifted from the lifeless magic beast over to Kotaro.

"W-What is this thing? Is it not a magic beast...?" Their minds racked with fear of the unknown entity before them, they readied their weapons as a means to escape from the terror set in them.

Kotaro was in a good mood from gaining his new body and had no intention of fighting, but if he were to be attacked, he would have no other choice but to retaliate. He obtained this body to appease Ruri, which meant he would be crazy to let damage come to it. Kotaro had no intention of showing mercy if these soldiers attempted to harm his new acquisition.

Kotaro stood his ground and growled menacingly at them. *"Move. I shall not let anyone get in my way."*

The situation was volatile, liable to explode at any moment, until suddenly...

"Stand down!" said a harsh voice, echoing throughout the area.

Hearing the voice that seemingly came out of nowhere, the soldiers all froze in place, but they kept their weapons still at the ready.

“Great Spirit of Trees...”

“Oh, it’s the Great Spirit of Trees.”

The harsh voice belonged to Kotaro’s brethren, a member of the twelve highest level spirits—the Spirit of Trees.

“That is my brethren. It seems he has come here to claim a sacred beast’s body. If you value your lives, then lower your weapons now.” Although its form remained invisible, its serene and majestic voice projected well across the interior.

The soldiers, startled and wide-eyed, quickly lowered their weapons.

With the hostility directed toward him gone, Kotaro also dropped his threatening posture.

“I swear, you’re such a fool. If you had just said something, you could have avoided all this commotion.”

“I see. Anyway, I’m in a hurry; I’m going to see Ruri.”

“You’re a hopeless case. Well, no matter. I know asking you for ‘consideration’ is asking for the impossible,” the Spirit of Trees said, their exasperated voice echoing. *“It appears you’ve made a contract. I would have never imagined that you would allow anyone to give you a name. Bring her here next time.”*

“I will. You should speak with Ruri.”

“Next time, make sure to say something in advance before you come barging in.” With those parting words, the voice of the Spirit of Trees disappeared.

Kotaro took a step forward. The soldiers all warily cleared a path for him. No longer paying them any mind, Kotaro slipped between the mob outside the temple and leisurely jumped into the sky with one destination in mind—Ruri’s side.

Chapter 4: The Training Grounds

Quite some time had passed since Ruri, as a white cat, explored the castle interior.

The Nation of the Dragon King's royal castle was divided into twelve sectors. Although she had far from explored the entirety of the twelve sectors, she had familiarized herself with the first sector. It housed the Dragon King's personal chambers and office, and she had seen almost everything it had to offer except one distinct area—the treasure room! The very words sent Ruri's heart aflutter. The treasure room held the many jewels and valuables presented to past Dragon Kings. It was an essential place to explore.

The aides of the court disapproved of granting Ruri access to the treasure room, even if she held the status of a Beloved, so she was going to have to pull out all the stops—she looked up at Jade with her large, pleading kitty eyes. She didn't end there though. She completed her one-two combo by nuzzling up against him while emitting a sweet purr.

Jade cracked like an egg. In a matter of no time, he declared Ruri fit for entry into the room. However, he wasn't keen on letting her go by herself, so she was required to have one of Jade's aides, Finn, accompany her.

Finn was a man with green eyes and short indigo hair. He boasted a soldier's physique, yet his demeanor was reminiscent of a calm wave gently lapping at the shore. He was a high-ranking military official who also served as Jade's bodyguard. His strength came second only to Jade, the Dragon King, and it was said that if Jade were to ever leave his position, he would most likely be next in line as ruler.

"Now then, shall we be off, Ruri?"

"*Yes, we shall!*" She hopped off of Jade's lap and walked over to Finn. Rin took notice and followed Ruri, flapping her tiny wings behind her.

Once they started to make their leave, Jade acted like he wanted to join

them. But Ruri wasn't trying to bait a landed fish and quickly exited the office.

With Finn in tow, the two made their way to the treasure room, greeting the soldiers they passed along the way. Normally, Finn would be outwalking Ruri because of the massive height difference, but he seemed to be courteously walking to match her pace.

For the sake of security, the treasure room was located in a part of the first sector that rarely saw visitors. The amount of passersby gradually dwindled as they proceeded down the dead-silent corridor. They eventually ended up at the thick, solid door leading to the treasure room. Guards were stationed right in front of it. Once Finn explained what was going on, they opened the entrance for them.

Ruri happily stepped paw inside the treasure room to see what it had to offer, but the sight left her tilting her head perplexedly. The room held a blinding amount of treasure from the eyes of the general public, but considering that the Nation of the Dragon King was a superpower in the world, it was Ruri's humble opinion that there just wasn't as much treasure as she had initially envisioned. In fact, she felt there was more in the inherited spoils she had gained from Lydia's former contract-bearer.

When she asked Finn about it, he told her that Dragon Kings weren't born into royalty but gained the title through their strength. Therefore, wealth was split between personal assets and Dragon King assets. It seemed as though everyone kept their personal assets in their pocket space for safekeeping, meaning this treasure was reserved for the Dragon King alone.

That made Ruri wonder about the mountain of items she'd inherited from Lydia's former contract-bearer. The fact that one person's personal reserves were on par with the king of a major nation made her a little uneasy. Regardless of how many riches they accrued from different owners in Lydia's spaces, it was hard to imagine a normal person amassing so many valuable possessions for themselves.

(Who exactly was Lydia's former contract-bearer, I wonder?)

The answer to that question came sooner than she ever expected.

On a wall in the far back of the treasure room, two lone portraits decorated

its surface. The first one depicted a man.

(I feel like I've seen this person somewhere before...) He looked familiar, but it was a foggy recollection and she couldn't place who it was.

She then shifted her view to the second portrait. Her eyes opened wide.

(Lydia~?!) The woman in the second portrait was, without a shadow of a doubt, Lydia.

Ruri called for Finn in a panic. *"Finn-san! Finn-san! Who is this woman in the portrait?!"*

"Oh, this woman? I haven't the faintest clue. It is said this was drawn by His Majesty the First Dragon King, but it's also said there was no such woman in the Dragon King's company at the time. Actually, His Majesty ended up going his whole life without marrying because he asserted that he had this woman."

"Is the First Dragon King the man next to her?!"

"He is. But why are you so worked up anyway, Ruri?"

Finn was clueless as to why Ruri had such an excitable response to the portrait, but Ruri had more pressing issues at hand. Out of the two portraits that adorned the wall next to one another, Ruri believed she recognized the other person depicted aside from Lydia. That same portrait had been hanging on the wall of her room unified with Lydia's former contract-bearer. Lydia had told her it was a picture of the former contract-bearer in question. She would also stare at the portrait whenever she had a free moment, which is what made it stick in Ruri's memory.

Rin also stared at the two portraits, fascinated. *"That reminds me, I remember hearing that Lydia made a contract with the Dragon King before."*

(So Lydia's former contract-bearer was the First Dragon King...) Unexpectedly uncovering the truth surprised Ruri for sure, but it made sense. If her former contract-bearer was the First Dragon King, then he would have enough mana to create such a large room and amass such a massive fortune within it.

Feeling oddly refreshed from the new revelation, she left the treasure room. As she racked her brain for what to do next, Finn made a suggestion.

“Ruri, if you don’t have any plans, would you mind coming to sector five?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind at all, but what’s at sector five?”

“It’s where the dragonkin soldiers outpost is located. It’s also where the training grounds are. I’m sure the soldiers are in the midst of training as we speak. Apparently, they’d like to have a chance to see you.”

Wasting no time, they both proceeded from the first sector of the castle to the fifth. Ruri had traveled to sector five and conversed with the laundry women in the past, but she’d never visited the training grounds. Because the area housed the soldiers outpost, nearly everyone they passed donned soldiers regalia just like Finn. And since Finn served as the Dragon King’s bodyguard and held a high rank, the passersby all made a path for him, bowing in respect. But once they looked down at Ruri, walking near his feet, they found themselves shocked.

At the outskirts of sector five and through a connecting corridor was an open area enclosed by stone walls on all sides. It was their destination, the training grounds. There, a sight so gruesome she couldn’t look directly at it unfolded before Ruri’s eyes; her years being raised in a peaceful environment made her ill-prepared for so much carnage. Ruri had imagined that soldiers would be clashing their swords at one another all over the place, but their level of intensity far exceeded her expectations—in a negative way. This display of drive made Ruri want to point out how bloodthirsty they all were. This was less “training” and more a battle royale for survival.

As iron clashed, people naturally got injured left and right, most likely as a result of the extreme lack of self-control. These injuries were no mere scratches either; every single one was so gruesome that you’d be convinced they were dead.

Seeing blood fly like it were an actual battlefield, Ruri’s telepathic exclamation came as no surprise. *“Finn-san, what is this place?!”*

“What is it? The training grounds, of course.”

“How do you call this training?!” Ruri objected, her tail positively ruffled.

Finn, however, calmly replied without so much as shifting his brow. “This is

just how dragonkin train. Is it a little too much for your system?"

"A little *doesn't even begin to describe it!*"

"A dragonkin's body is strong and sturdy. Why, those injuries are no more dangerous than being pricked by a thorn; they'll recover in no time. Even a hole right through their gut would fully heal without so much as a scar in a week's time, so you needn't worry."

They practically healed like lizards. However, Ruri dared not say that aloud. The word "lizard" was strictly off limits. She knew how much it offended dragonkin to be called as such, so she kept the thought to herself.

As they conversed, one of the soldiers that had been training noticed Ruri and Finn.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were here, sir. ...Oh wow, would this, by any chance, be the Beloved?!" said the soldier in utter glee despite the spear lodged in his back.

This *definitely* wasn't the place for him to be starting a calm and leisurely conversation, but neither the soldier nor Finn seemed fazed by their surroundings. The other soldiers took notice, dropped their training, and gathered by the droves. It was such a gruesome spectacle that Ruri wanted to tell them all to go seek treatment first.

She found herself encircled by soldiers drenched in blood, causing her to flee to safety behind Finn. Under the impression that she was freaked out from being mobbed, Finn let out a mighty shout.

"Can't you see that crowding around Ruri is scaring her?! All of you, fall in!"

Once Finn gave the order, all the soldiers snapped into lines, shoulder to shoulder. They all maintained a certain distance from Ruri, possibly out of consideration of her fright, and gazed at her from afar.

"Dang, she's *really* cute!"

"Look at that snow-white fur. Man, what I'd give for a touch..."

"Would she let us touch it? Or maybe not?"

Buckling under the stares of the many hopeful soldiers eager to pet her, Ruri

gave them all permission to do so, which triggered an outburst of joy—an outburst so thunderous it made Ruri nervous.

She was afraid the battle-hungry crowd would pet her head right off her shoulders, but the soldiers seemed to have the same reservations and petted her with the utmost of care instead. Their gentleness wiped away her fears and brought a smile to her heart.

These soldiers seemed to be similar to Jade in that smaller animals like cats tended to avoid them. *Many* of them were starved to pet something soft and cuddly, surprisingly enough. That was clear from how they melted into tender smiles once they stroked Ruri's fur.

Once everyone had a turn petting her, she was ready to make her way back, but suddenly she heard a call.

“Brother!!”

Running up to Finn was someone so absolutely delighted to see him that if they had a tail, they would have wagged it clean off their body. The person in question had quite the brother complex. A *sizable* brother complex, in fact. She also knew him as “Casualty of the Spirits’ Rage #1,” a name he’d earned as the first to suffer their wrath since Ruri started to live at the castle.

This young man with large green eyes, just like Finn, and frizzy yellow-brown hair was Finn’s cousin, Ewan. Though technically cousins, since Ewan’s parents both passed away, Finn’s family adopted him as one of their own and they grew up as brothers.

Once Ewan’s eyes landed on Ruri, near his big brother’s feet, he openly showed enough disdain that you’d think *Ruri* had killed his parents. Reacting to his hate, Ruri’s entourage of spirits readied themselves to strike. Ruri let out a small sigh of exasperation.

Ruri first met Ewan not too long ago. Even on the day they met, Ewan came up to Ruri, also with Finn at the time, with a demonic grimace on his face.

“So *you’re* the Beloved that showed up out of nowhere?!” exclaimed the mysterious boy as he stood in a daunting manner, cutting off Ruri’s path. The youth was seemingly already angry, offering no first-time introductions in the

slightest. The brazen display had made Ruri freeze, dumbfounded.

As Ewan looked at Ruri as if he were staring down his parent's killer, Ruri couldn't help but be confused. It made her question whether she had done something to offend him, but she would have remembered such a loathsome glare.

"Uh, yes, that would be me..." Perhaps because he already knew Ruri was a Beloved, even though he still asked, the intensity in his eyes remained the same. No, in fact, it might've cranked the intensity up a few notches. His eyes gleamed now he had acquired his target.

Just when Ruri was about to finally ask who he was, Ewan interjected before she had the chance.

"Well, I don't approve of you! *Not at all!*" he proclaimed, thrusting his index finger straight at Ruri.

"Uh-huh..." she replied in a vague tone, at a loss as to why the boy suddenly snapped at her.

"End this foolishness, Ewan." Finn had tried to pull the reins on Ewan, but the young man stared a hole into Ruri.

"Don't think for a *second* I'll just let you hog Brother to yourself just because you're a Beloved! You'd better learn your place around here!"

As the angry Ewan hurled his harsh comments, Finn nervously glanced over to the spirits. Ruri followed suit and looked at the spirits only to see that their usually bright and smiling faces had taken a rather unpleasant-looking turn. She then realized the situation was about to get ugly. There was no way the spirits would sit idly by while Ruri took this much verbal abuse.

"This boy is a jerk!"

"Should we get him?"

"Let's get him!" the spirits rallied, fuming mad at the belligerent Ewan.

"Hold on, you guys!" The spirits were primed to act, assuming fighting poses, but Ruri quickly held them back, preventing Ewan from being harmed.

And that was more or less how their first interaction went.

Ewan was a half-dragonkin, half-human. With his parents being of two separate species, the stronger blood of the two was more prevalent, making Ewan more dragonkin than human. Because of that, he possessed powerful mana, but unfortunately for him, his wavelength was never compatible with spirits. He was unable to utilize their magic.

On the other hand, Finn served as the captain of the royal guard, the squadron tasked with protecting the Dragon King, and his powers were said to be second only to the Dragon King himself. Ewan respected Finn above everyone else; he was not only his older brother but his pride and joy. However, Finn had been under Jade's orders more frequently as of late to accompany Ruri whenever she went exploring the castle.

Jade became ruler through his strength as an individual, so safeguarding Ruri, whose spirit entourage would cause widespread panic if anything threatened her well-being, was higher on the list of priorities. But seeing his brother, captain of the prestigious royal guard, being reduced to guard duty of a single cat instead of the Dragon King was an indignity Ewan wasn't willing to tolerate.

It was a feeling of vexation that he had let loose on Ruri herself, but because of that, he earned the ire of the spirits. In usual fashion, the spirits had boycotted serving him as a result. But since Ewan's mana wavelength was barely capable of spirit magic in the first place, the boycott didn't seem to hinder his daily life.

Since he was one of the rare demi-humans who couldn't see spirits, he also couldn't see how enraged the spirits were at him. Meanwhile, everyone around him had been quaking in fear.

Seeing that their punishment wasn't affecting Ewan at all, the spirits had planned to enact an even greater punishment, but Ruri put a stop to that, keeping the situation from escalating any further.

But now that Ewan had earned the spirits ire, it was dangerous for him to be anywhere near Ruri. Up until that point, Ewan had access to the first sector as Finn's personal aide, but he'd had that access revoked, giving him a de facto demotion.

Even though Finn had given him a stern lecture, Ewan didn't show any signs of

reflecting on his actions from the way he was now glaring at Ruri.

“So, bothering my brother again, are you?”

“Ewan, enough.”

“Brother, you’re supposed to be part of the royal guard, tasked with protecting His Majesty, so why are you reduced to protecting this mangy cat instead?!”

“Ewan! Say any more and you’ll be disrespecting not only His Majesty but the spirits as well. Watch your blasted tongue!” Finn shouted in clear anger, shutting Ewan up quick.

It was fine that Ewan couldn’t see the spirits, but for Finn and the soldiers who could see Ruri’s spirit entourage, this was a terrifying ordeal. They could see the wrathful expressions on their faces as they seemed liable to launch an attack at any moment as retribution.

“Can I shut this saucy little brat up myself?” Rin muttered, displeased.

Just as Ruri was about to call out to Rin and the other spirits to stop them, a chipper voice dispelled the tension in the air.

“Well, well, who knew the war was takin’ place in our own backyard?”

The cheerful voice didn’t match the atmosphere at all, effectively deflating the mood. However, Ruri thought it was extremely in-character for the owner of that voice.

She turned around. His short vermillion hair caught her eyes immediately—it was Joshua, looking at the scene amusedly with the same reddish-brown eyes as his father, Claus.

Finn quelled his rage and gave a friendly greeting to Joshua. “Oh, it’s you, Joshua. You finally made it back home?”

“Yup, finally is right. That geezer is a real slave driver, y’know. What the heck is he gonna do if I drop dead from getting overworked? ...Anyhow, what did Ewan do to make you lose your cool like that?”

“...You shut up,” Ewan replied coarsely, disheartened that his beloved big brother had scolded him.

Joshua sounded none too amused. The “geezer” that he had referred to was one of Jade’s aides—an old man by the name of Agate. Joshua had probably gone out on a task from him, which was most likely related to the war with Nadasha.

“Well, not like I care either way. Just don’t make the spirits mad. You may not care about yourself, but it’s not gonna be a pretty sight if the people around you get hurt as a result.”

Ewan leered at Joshua for a second before exiting the training grounds in a disappointed huff. Finn breathed a heavy sigh.

Joshua smiled in empathy. “Looks like you’ve got it pretty rough yourself, Finn,” he said in an extremely lighthearted manner.

Finn reluctantly shook his head and then took to his knee in front of Ruri to talk to her on eye level. “You have my apologies, Ruri.”

“No, don’t worry. It didn’t bother me.” She tried to assure Finn, but it was to no avail.

The complaints Ewan launched at Ruri were pretty much the same as the ones she always heard back in her world, so it *really* didn’t bother her in the slightest. Once they made eye contact with Ruri, Asahi’s followers would tell her to not come near Asahi. Even when they didn’t see Ruri, they would constantly talk about her behind her back. Considering she had no one to help her back then, having the spirits and Finn covering for her made for a world of difference. Ewan’s slight jeers didn’t affect her by comparison.

“Really, though. It didn’t bother me at all. It just shows he cares for you that much. I don’t think I’m causing you trouble to the extent Ewan says, but I do feel bad inconveniencing you, nonetheless. I think I can manage walking around the castle by myself.”

She was free to be on her own in sector one, but as of late, every time she went to any other sector, Finn usually accompanied her. While it was to keep Ruri out of harm’s way, it was also because the entire runaway debacle had spurred Jade’s anxiety over whether Ruri would go off somewhere under his nose. So Finn’s role was not only to guard her but to keep an eye on her as well. Thanks to that, she had a tough time slipping out of the castle for her job at the

diner.

Finn finally cracked a tiny smile. “His Majesty is just worried about you, Ruri. Just try to grin and bear it, okay?”

“Jade-sama worries too much.”

Finn was in no position to approve or deny that statement, so he smiled wryly instead.

That was when Joshua gasped as if he just remembered something. “By the way, the old timer wanted you for somethin’.”

“Lord Agate asked for me? I see, I’ll be on my way, then. Sorry, Joshua, but could you accompany Ruri back to sector one?”

“Roger that.”

Finn looked back at Ruri and gave a small, awkward smile. “Ewan isn’t a bad boy. He got bullied when he was young because he was never able to use spirit magic due to his mana wavelength being incompatible, you see. That’s most likely why he ended up so competitive—to make sure no one took him lightly. Also, since I stepped in to help him every time he was bullied, he seems to have a strong dependence on me. I know he doesn’t seem very likable after hearing his tirade, but as long as I’m not involved, he is kind. I hope you don’t hate him, if at all possible.”

“No worries. I want to start getting along with your little brother, Finn-san. I might not be able to now, but I can handle things if we just sit down and talk soon.”

“Thank you, Ruri.” Finn petted her gently on the head. “alright, I’ll leave it to you, Joshua.”

“Gotcha.”

Finn stood up and quickly walked out.

“Welp, ready to head back?”

“Yup.”

“Please come again!” said a soldier, waving them goodbye.

(Sorry, but the training grounds are so scary I don't think I can come back again...) Ruri thought to herself, turning away from the waving soldier and making her way out of the training grounds with Joshua.

Chapter 5: Busted

As they walked the empty hallway, Joshua dropped his gaze down to Rin, floating by Ruri's side. "Say, what is that? That's a magic beast, isn't it?"

"Appearance-wise, yes. But on the inside? Well—"

Rin cut her off before she could finish. *"I'm one of the supreme-level spirits~! You can call me Rin."*

Joshua's eyes opened wide, completely dumbstruck. "Wha? The *supreme-level*?! What are you even doing here?!"

When Rin had first arrived, she gave Jade and his aides the same explanation, and they'd had a similar reaction. Apparently, when it came to the supreme-level spirits, it was much harder and more surprising to meet one as opposed to a regular spirit.

"Hmm, well, she talked to Kotaro—another spirit—and came to see me because she wanted me to name her."

"And you ended up naming her?"

"Yup, I named her Rin... Um, is something the matter with that?" Ruri said, halting in place and looking at Joshua. He was acting strange.

"Is somethin' the matter, she says. Well, I'm surprised. *Anyone* would be surprised if they saw someone make a contract with a supreme-level spirit."

"Contract?" Ruri repeated, tilting her head in confusion.

"Wait, so did you subjugate it and not even know it? Geez, talk about being devil-may-care, Ruri," Joshua commented, apparently shocked.

Ruri, however, had no clue as to why he was so shocked in the first place. *"What's subjugation? I do have a contract with a spirit named Lydia, but I didn't make a contract with Rin."*

"So you really didn't know before you named her, then. Welp, can't say I blame you for not knowing, seeing as how you're not from this world, I guess."

“I mean, Rin was being pushy, telling me to give her a name quickly. ...Does naming a spirit do something?”

“Yeah, naming a spirit is one way of forming a contract. A typical contract simply puts the spirit and contract-bearer on equal terms, but a contract made through naming is even more binding than that.”

Joshua’s explanation wasn’t helping Ruri understand, so Rin elaborated further. *“Right, so, let’s say, for example, you order me and Lydia to kill one another.”*

“I would never do such a thing!” Ruri spat back in a flustered hurry, quick to deny the accusation.

“Yes, I know. It’s just an example. Let’s just say you did. In that case, since Lydia made a contract with you on equal terms, she can refuse to carry out your orders. But since you subjugated me through naming me, I can’t. Giving a spirit a name means being able to place them under your control.”

“Huh...? Then Kotaro, too?” Kotaro’s image popped into Ruri’s mind. Although she just found out the other day that Kotaro was actually a spirit, the fact that she incidentally named him meant she subjugated Kotaro by proxy.

“Of course, you subjugated him the moment you named him.”

Ruri had no idea of those rules. She simply named Kotaro because it would be inconvenient to call for him without an actual name. She was dumbfounded at the major event she accidentally caused. *“No way, I can’t believe that I...”*

Ruri took the matter rather seriously, but Rin was rather indifferent by comparison. *“No need to think so hard over it. As you heard a second ago, both Kotaro and I are supreme-level spirits—the most powerful entities in this world. Even with your powerful mana, you don’t come close to either of us. That’s why, if we hated being named by anyone... being subjugated by anyone, we would have killed them. But Kotaro was the furthest from displeased; he was downright ecstatic.”*

“True,” Ruri replied, recalling her memory of Kotaro nuzzling against her and squealing with glee every time she called his name. It certainly wasn’t how someone who resented being named and subjugated would behave.

“There is your answer, then. Kotaro allowed you to name him because he didn’t mind if you subjugated him. And even when I received my name, I asked you to name me. I would’ve never asked if I didn’t want it. Besides, you wouldn’t give us any unreasonable orders, would you?”

Ruri shook her head without hesitation. *“Never.”*

“Tee hee hee. At first, my biggest reason for seeing you was because Kotaro told me to, but he told me about you and I actually had a chance to meet and speak with you. Now, I absolutely love you, Ruri. I’m so grateful you were the one to name me.”

“I love you too, Rin!”

Rin nuzzled against Ruri, and Ruri returned in form by nuzzling her cheek against hers. The sight of the white cat and floating clone interacting like that was unbearably cute.

However, the charming scene didn’t last for too long before the other spirits dogpiled Ruri and Rin, each declaring their massive love for Ruri. Buried underneath the spirits, Ruri let out a holler, which echoed through the hall. After a while, she managed to pull the spirits off of her and catch her breath.

“That reminds me, Joshua. Where did you come back from this time?”

“Nadasha. Y’know war’s about to break out, right? I mean, not like the Nation of the Dragon King is gonna be losing, but it’s always best to have intel, regardless.”

“Oh, true.” It seemed preparations for the war were going steadily along unbeknownst to Ruri, leaving her with a vague sense of apprehension.

“Say, Ruri? How long do you plan on keeping you being a human a secret?”

Ruri looked up to see that Joshua’s face was dead serious.

“The war’s gonna be starting any day now. Their figurehead, the Priestess Princess, is someone you know, right? Isn’t it about time you tell His Majesty that you’re actually a human and not a cat?”

“Hmm...”

Ruri had been thinking about doing that on and off. Since Asahi was the

figurehead for their war efforts, Ruri couldn't say that none of this pertained to her. She probably should explain the details of how she came to this world.

Just as Ruri was about to discuss things over with Joshua...

"What did you mean just now...?"

A third party's voice came from out of nowhere, making Ruri and Joshua quickly turn toward the source.

"E-Euclase-san..."

"Grk!"

Ruri and Joshua both gritted their teeth and raised their brows.

Euclase was the chancellor of the Nation of the Dragon King, a wise yet beautiful androgynous-looking woman with long indigo-silver hair and blue eyes. Appearances, however, could be deceiving. While they swore up and down that they were a woman, their chest was as flat as they came and their voice, while higher than normal for a man, was too low for a woman. Nevertheless, the dainty Euclase cared more for maintaining personal appearances than most women in the kingdom. All in all, they had all the perfect markings of a beautiful woman—so much so that even if you looked *really* closely, you couldn't tell otherwise. In fact, Euclase's overwhelming femininity even made Ruri question her *own* merits as a woman. Even a *countless* number of men threw their heads back to choke back their tears of frustration because of it.

"E-Euclase-san, how long have you been standing..."

"You said you were human just now, didn't you?" Euclase walked toward them slowly with a furrowed brow, their glare stern, as if to say that lying would do no good.



Neither Ruri nor Joshua ever imagined that this was how the literal cat would come out of the bag, so they weren't prepared to deal with this in the slightest. They both struggled to contain their panic. Their hearts were beating out of their chests. Even so, in an attempt to smooth the situation over, Ruri's eyes started to wander as if trying to avoid Euclase's glare. She finally met eyes with Joshua, and the two tried to play off each other.

"What? No, that's not what we said. Is it, Joshua?"

"N-Not at all."

"Are you trying to play dumb? I heard you clear as day. You said that you're a human. I demand an explanation this instant!"

"You simply misheard."

"Yeah, we didn't say that."

Euclase's eyes stared a hole into both of them, only willing to settle for the truth. Perturbed, Ruri looked up at Joshua for help.

"...By the way, why are you in sector five? There shouldn't be any reason for you to be here, being the chancellor and all."

"Tee hee hee hee, I just stopped by between work for a little R&R for my weary eyes. My, the beauty of the male form sure is lovely," Euclase said with flushed cheeks.

Joshua threw a cold look their way and said, "Hey, don't you dare go messing with any of the soldiers. You can look, but don't touch. If you try any *funny business*, I'm telling His Majesty and banning you from coming here."

"There's nothing wrong with two consenting adults doing what they want! ...I mean, don't change the subject! In any case, let's go someplace different," said Euclase as they nabbed Ruri by the scruff of her neck so she couldn't run away.

Seeing that he couldn't change the subject any further, Joshua said, "Welp, it's a bust. If they heard that much of the conversation as clear as day, then there's no point in trying to fudge the truth." He reluctantly followed after them.

Unbeknownst to them, there was a pair of eyes silently watching this chain of

events from the shadows.

“She’s a... human?” they whispered to themselves.

Chapter 6: Interrogation

The three of them moved to Euclase's room.

"Now, you have some explaining to do!"

As Euclase stared at them with a look that demanded a straight answer, Ruri and Joshua knew they had nowhere to run. Euclase wasn't the chancellor of the nation for nothing; the pressure they exuded was the real deal. So Joshua reluctantly explained what he'd observed about Ruri from their stint in Nadasha.

Once they heard the story, Euclase commented, "I can't believe they're *that* stupid."

"I figured you'd think that," Joshua replied.

Ruri listened to their conversation, pensive.

"alright, I know what happened in Nadasha. Now, you're going to tell me why you've turned into a cat when you were a human up until you left Nadasha."

"It's apparently because Dad mucked things up."

"You mean Claus?"

"He said he was glad I wasn't a human Beloved. And I was afraid of how he might've treated me if I told him then that I actually was human, so I decided to keep things up as a cat instead."

"Did Claus really say something like that?" Euclase asked with a look of disbelief.

"Yes, he *did*." It was the honest truth.

"I don't know what Dad meant when he said that, but it sounds like he *did* say it."

Euclase breathed a heavy sigh. "I've got the picture now. If that's the case here, then you just need to talk to him when you're able to."

"Huh? You won't reveal I'm a human?" Ruri asked with a wide-eyed gaze, convinced they would immediately report this to Jade and Claus.

"We promised you that we wouldn't force you into anything when you first came to the castle. You should be observant and make the call yourself. But I will tell you this. Neither Claus, nor any of us, for that matter, are so fickle as to change our behavior just because you're a human," Euclase stated. "Well, there is *one* person who might," they added under their breath, so low that Ruri couldn't hear it.

"Thank you very much. Also, I'm sorry for keeping this a secret this entire time."

"It's fine. After all, Claus may not be aware, but he's accountable for making you feel too awkward to speak up. Although, if you keep being wishy-washy, it'll be harder for you to do so, so I advise you to be careful about that."

"Right, I will." Ruri nodded, taking Euclase's warning seriously.

"Sure, but you know the war with Nadasha is around the corner, don't you? That's why I was sayin' it's about time for you to come clean."

Euclase nodded. "A valid point. But we still have time, so I believe she should think about it a little longer."

"I'll wait and see a little longer, then." In the end, Ruri decided to put revealing her identity on hold.

"So then, now that I have the gist of your situation thus far, how does one go from human to cat, pray tell?"

Since explaining Lydia would take too long, she provided an abridged explanation. *"I came into possession of a certain bracelet with an odd history. Once you put it on, you transform into a cat."*

"And that's the bracelet you have on right now? It can even transform your scent and presence into a cat?"

"Yes, it was crafted by an overly obsessed eccentric." It was a creepy level of obsession, to be sure, but it was also this same eccentric's work that had helped her out this entire time.

“But why did you turn into a cat in the first place? If you had just gone to Claus as a human, then this misunderstanding would have never happened.”

“The thing is, a pair of men chased me around as soon as I got to the royal capital. I bumped into them the day after, too. I thought I would be inconveniencing Claus-san if they were to spot me as I was going into his house, so I turned into a cat. Also, I was hiding my hair and eye color in human form because of how uncommon they are, but when I was running away, I got spotted by a suspicious man, so I figured it was better to be safe than sorry.”

Euclase took an oddly long pause before asking, “...Say, Ruri? You said your hair and eye color are uncommon, but what color are they specifically?”

“My hair is platinum blonde, and my eyes are lapis-colored.”

Joshua reacted this time, sheepishly asking her, “Uh, if you don’t mind me asking, what did this suspicious man look like?”

Ruri thought about it for a moment. *“If I recall, he was fully dressed in black with only a slit open for his eyes. He seemed to have an unhealthy interest in my hair color, so I took him for a slave trader and ran away as fast as I could.”*

Silence descended upon the room.

“Wait, Joshua, you never once caught on?!”

“No, I mean, I never thought she was right under my nose this whole time...”

Ruri listened to their mysterious back-and-forth in confusion.

“Ruri, I need you to change back into your original form,” Euclase said anxiously.

“Huh? Right now?”

“Yes, now. Hurry.”

Urged to do so, Ruri asked Euclase to take the bracelet off for her, causing her body to radiate with light. After the light died down, Ruri appeared in her human form. Once Joshua and Euclase caught a glimpse of her platinum blonde hair and lapis lazuli eyes, they collectively looked stunned.

Joshua held his head and threw it back in frustration. “Gaah, are you freakin’

serioooous?! What in the hell was all my hard work for...?! I even extended my search to other nations, too, *arghhh*!!”

“You have my condolences. You did all of that hard work for nothing, it seems,” Euclase said, poking at their brow with a sigh.

“Huh? Is something wrong?” Ruri asked. They seemed surprised over something other than her being a human or her uncommon color combination, which left her confused.

“No, you needn’t worry about it, Ruri. Just a personal matter.”

Ruri tilted her head, completely stumped.



Euclase and Joshua huddled together and whispered among themselves.

“Hey, you sure we shouldn’t inform His Majesty?”

“We told her that we wouldn’t tell, so our hands are tied. He will end up finding out anyway if Ruri speaks up, so there is no need to rush the process.”

“Okay, sure, but unless Ruri talks, they’re gonna make me go on this manhunt *forever*.”

The manhunt he spoke of was for the girl with uncommon platinum blonde hair and blue eyes that Jade had met in town. Since he had shown interest, the elders wanted him to marry her, which led to them ordering Joshua to conduct a search. That all coincided with Ruri first arriving at the castle.

Joshua regretted not catching on to that coincidence sooner. Under the assumption that this mystery girl was sold off by slave traders since he couldn’t find any trace of her, he extended his search into other nations. He never would have guessed she was right under his nose the whole time.

Technically, he did track down his target, but unless he spoke up about Ruri’s identity, they weren’t going to allow him to cut his search short. If they told him to go to another nation, he would have no choice but to oblige.

“Just concede. Your father is the cause of this in the first place,” stated Euclase, mercilessly cutting Joshua’s complaint down to size.

Joshua slumped his shoulders in defeat. “Ugh, dammit, Dad. Kind Euclase, can’t you do something, seeing as how you’re chancellor? I don’t really have the time to be working for a pointless cause, you see.”

“I understand your concern, but you know I can’t really do anything. Not with the elders in a frenzy over His Majesty saying that he showed interest in someone. Nothing I say will sway them. Until either Ruri feels inclined to speak up or His Majesty brings home a bride, it’s simply impossible,” said Euclase, somewhat peevishly.

“That’s easy for you to say. That’s not going to be an option for a good while and you know it. His Majesty has *definitely* forgotten he even said that by now. So what’s the point in searching?” Joshua knew this because ever since Jade told the story of the girl, he never once brought up the subject again himself.

“I can’t refute that. I swear, His Majesty’s interests are solely on Ruri right now. But considering the person he mentioned and Ruri are one and the same, I’d say his intuition led him in the right direction.”

“Bet the old timers would be ecstatic...”

“Yes, but it’d be better if they got so ecstatic they keeled over.”

“Well, they did make it their life mission to find His Majesty a bride, after all. I wish they’d walk a mile in the shoes of the people they got wrapped up in this mess. I’m pretty freaking busy, y’know? What with the stuff with Nadasha going on right now, and all.”

“Finding a bride is far more important than any war—to them, at least. We have no choice but to comply with their wishes.”

Hearing that, Joshua let out a deep sigh of resignation.

Chapter 7: Shopping with Euclase

A few days had passed since Euclase found out Ruri was human.

“Let’s go, Ruri!” Euclase suddenly appeared behind Ruri as she walked through the hallway and grabbed her by the scruff of her neck.

“Unyaa!” The sudden yoink made her yelp in cat speak instead of telepathy.

“What are you doing, Euclase-san? ‘Let’s go’ to where?!”

“You’ll know once we get there,” Euclase said in an extremely positive tone. They apparently were keeping the destination a secret.

“U-Um...” This heavy-handed behavior was typical for Euclase, but Ruri was still confused as to why they were forcing her along with them.

“Ruri, wait for me!” Rin yelled, following right behind Euclase.

The trio eventually ended up at the town surrounding the castle. Euclase took them to a back alley and then removed Ruri’s bracelet.

Ruri, now back to human form, immediately protested. “What are you doing? Please, give that back!”

“Fine, here you are,” Euclase said, returning the bracelet with less fuss than expected.

Ruri didn’t have the foggiest clue what Euclase was up to. Why did they make this sudden trip down to the city?

Rin fluttered up and perched on Ruri’s shoulder.

“What did we come to the city for?”

“Tee hee hee. Why, to do some shopping, of course!” Euclase said excitedly.

“To... excuse me?” Ruri uttered, dumbfounded. “So why did you drag me with you...?”

“Because you’ve been living with Ms. Chelsie this entire time, haven’t you? Your clothes emphasize comfort over style, and it’s been bugging me ever since

I saw them. Since you're living in the royal capital, you *need* a more fashionable wardrobe. Indulge your feminine side."

"Uh, right..."

"I'll pick you out something nice, so come on! Let's go!" Euclase said, grabbing Ruri by the arm and quickly trotting off.

"Ah, wait, Euclase-san?!"

Euclase may have looked feminine, but they were a dragonkin through and through. They were physically strong, dragging Ruri along before she even had a chance to resist.

Euclase brought her to a clothing store that seemed to be a favorite of theirs. It also looked rather fancy and was located in a high-class area. The sharply dressed man who stood in front of the shop conducted himself eloquently, most likely the product of a proper upbringing.

Once the shop worker caught sight of Euclase, their lips curled into a gentle smile. "Oh, isn't this a treat? So good to see you back at our humble establishment. Oh my, and with adorable accompaniment, no less."

"Yes, I've come to look for some clothes for her."

"You've come to the right place. Please, take your time and peruse our selection."

Euclase stepped inside the shop without a moment's hesitation. Ruri, on the other hand, felt intimidated by the shop's extravagance and wavered in the doorway.

"Ruri, hurry inside."

"Wait a second, Euclase-san. I can't just do that. This place seems *super duper* expensive, and I don't have that sort of money."

Everything about the shop looked too rich for Ruri's blood; she wasn't going to be able to do any shopping here. She had the money she'd received from selling the spear when she first came to the royal capital, but she wanted to save that for emergencies as much as possible. And her pay from the diner didn't seem like it would be enough—not by a long shot. She'd rather shop

somewhere that seemed more affordable.

“It’s fine. I’m the one who brought you here, so I’ll foot the bill.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I’d feel bad.”

“If I say it’s fine, then it’s fine. Who do you think I am? I’m the chancellor of this fine nation, I’ll have you know. I make *more* than enough to buy some posh apparel, so quit your nitpicking and come here!”

Ruri’s resistance fell on deaf ears. Euclase grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the establishment. If you ever wanted a good example of a pushy person, you could look no further than Euclase. Figuring that any further resistance would be futile, Ruri gave in.

“Now, do you have any preference?”

“Well, I’ve never put much thought into it...” Ruri said, pondering as she scanned the shop. There was a wide and varied selection, but everything seemed too expensive to even approach. She decided it would be better to let Euclase handle things here. “I don’t know the trends of this world either, so would you mind choosing for me, Euclase-san?”

“Oh? Then, this, this, that, and that one, too...” Euclase grabbed one article of clothing after another.

Ruri was stunned. “Euclase-san, one outfit! Just one outfit will do!”

“I like this one.” Rin also seemed to be in high spirits, picking out clothes herself.

“Oh my, that is nice. I said you don’t have to hold back. Come now, time to try them on,” Euclase said, pushing Ruri into the changing room.

Left with no choice, Ruri put on the clothes Euclase and Rin picked out and modeled them.

“You look great.”

“Mm-hmm, a perfect fit.”

In the end, Euclase and Rin picked out a few casual dresses for everyday use as well as a gown—one which Ruri tried to argue against, questioning where

she would even wear it to, but ultimately caved into accepting it.

Knowing she would feel bad if she let Euclase pay for her, she was going to use the money she got from selling the spear, but by the time Ruri had changed back into her clothes, Euclase had already finished paying for everything.

“Euclase-san, I really think I should pay.”

“I told you it’s fine, didn’t I? Any more back talk and you’ll upset me.”

Seeing how Euclase was likely to get genuinely angry, Ruri backed down. She bowed respectfully and said, “Okay. I really do appreciate it.”

Euclase nodded in response with a satisfied look, saying, “Alright, then, let’s hit the next stop.”

“Huh? There’s more?”

“Why, of course. We’ve only picked out clothes. We still have shoes and jewelry to buy.”

Ruri’s face tightened. She thought they’d already done a significant amount of shopping, but they were off to buy even *more*?

Their next visit was to a shoe store—but it was no ordinary shoe store. It was yet another high-class shop where everything was made-to-order. That meant measuring her foot size and selecting the material, color, and even height, among other things.

Euclase took the initiative and picked out things that would go with the clothes they’d just bought, so Ruri only sat and watched. From how boldly and quickly Euclase was choosing, it seemed they were used to this sort of shopping. It gave Ruri a newfound respect for them.

With designs finalized, the completed shoes would be delivered to Euclase at a later day. They left the shop—with Euclase covering the bill, of course.

Their next stop was the jewelry shop to look at jewelry to match the new gown. However, Ruri had a distinct feeling that every single piece of jewelry boasted a high price tag. It was a feeling that certainly wasn’t a figment of Ruri’s imagination. That being said, browsing was free of charge. Ruri was a girl just like any other; she positively loved the glittering pieces. She decided that she’d

be satisfied with just looking.

On the contrary, Euclase was more than ready to spend, so she assumed they were going to try to pay once again. She would feel awkward allowing them to make any more pricey purchases, but Euclase had proven their determination. That being the case, she felt that picking the cheapest piece would be the best option.

With that in mind, Ruri began to walk around the shop, looking at the prices, until her eyes were drawn to a single hair clip. It was made out of a pink pearl-like stone and was the cheapest out of the entire selection.

“How about this one, Euclase-san?”

“Hm? Let’s see what you have here... Oh my, isn’t this cute? I like it because, if I had to choose, I would think you’re more suited toward cuter things than mature. But I don’t think this *alone* is enough...” Euclase summoned the nearby shop worker and asked, “Do you have a necklace with the same stone as this one?”

The shop worker briefly walked away. Once they came back, they presented a simple necklace with the same stone.

“Excellent, we’ll take it.”

Having bought all they came for, Ruri, Euclase, and Rin all went to a cafe. Ruri was exhausted from their shopping spree, but Euclase was as cheery as could be.

“Tee hee hee, shopping is the best stress reliever. We should do this again, Ruri.”

“Fine, but next time, I’ll pay for myself.”

“My, you’re short on desire. You should be jumping for joy; I’m telling you it’s all on me.”

“Yes, but that still doesn’t keep me from feeling bad for letting you,” Ruri said, cracking open the menu and looking inside.

Euclase had recommended this cafe, and apparently it was popular among

women in the royal capital because it was filled with female patrons. They were known for their cakes, so Ruri picked the black tea and a slice of cake before passing the menu to Rin. Once Rin and Euclase made their decisions, they called over the server and made their orders.

“I’ve been so busy lately with the war with Nadasha that I haven’t had any free time to go shopping. I finally managed to get a break today, but I won’t be able to do so again for quite some time.”

“Are you sure about using your precious day off on me?”

“Didn’t I already tell you, this is a stress reliever for me. *I* was the one who dragged *you* along, so you needn’t concern yourself.”

Nevertheless, Ruri felt like she was getting *too* much out of this. But she figured that saying that aloud would only make Euclase upset, so she decided to genuinely thank them instead.

“Thank you very much, Euclase-san. You’re such a big help since I’m not familiar with the trends and whatnot here.”

“That’s more like it. I much rather prefer seeing you *thankful* rather than *apologetic*,” Euclase said with a satisfied smile on their face.

When their orders arrived at their table, Ruri took a relaxing sip of her iced tea. She silently observed as a glass of juice was set in front of Rin, and she wondered how she would go about drinking it. That was when Rin’s head split open to reveal a wriggling set of tentacle-like appendages. Without pause, she plunged them into the cup and began drinking with them like a straw. Ruri nearly let out a shriek, but instead she took a deep gulp to quell her surprise. In the back of her mind, she remembered how clones ate. She took a peek over at Euclase to see them with an equally tense expression on their face.

Pretending that she never saw the gruesome sight, Ruri proceeded to take a bite of her cake. As one would expect from a famous cafe, it was mouth-wateringly delicious. Enjoying her delectable dessert, Ruri looked over to Euclase.

“Hey, Euclase-san. So, um, about the situation in Nadasha?”

“Yes?”

“It’s about the people who were summoned alongside me...”

Euclase’s expression took a serious turn. “If I recall, that girl they call the ‘Priestess Princess’ is a friend of yours, correct?”

“Well, ‘friend’ is a stretch, but we’ve known each other since childhood. That’s why I’m concerned about what will happen *after* the war...”

“Yes, that matter has yet to be set in stone. After all, His Majesty has the final say. But considering they were summoned here against their will and clearly manipulated to do their bidding, I’m sure they won’t receive as severe of a punishment as the King and Head Priest.”

“Oh, I see. They won’t?” That helped slightly relieve one of her worries, but she still had another. “Asahi thinks I’m being brainwashed by the Nation of the Dragon King.” This bit of news was something she’d learned through a spirit. She had been worried about what happened to Asahi after Nadasha declared war in spite of Ruri’s warnings, so she had sent them to investigate.

Euclase’s face took a very sour turn. “Yes, I’d say that is quite the problem.”

“That’s why I think that once we apprehend Asahi, she’ll tell the others my name or they will find out there was someone else summoned to this world. And when that happens, I think Jade-sama might figure out my identity. But what is your take?”

“Hmm, well, I think you’ll probably be alright. No one would connect the dots between a cat and human anyway. But if they find out there’s someone missing, then His Majesty just might conduct a search for them.”

“He just might, yes.”

Knowing Asahi, she would likely raise a big stink, asking where “Ruri” was. Since the whole brainwashing angle was unfounded, the Nation of the Dragon King would refute it as being false. But then they would know Ruri had gone to see Asahi before war was declared.

That meant they would probably send men out to investigate if there was a chance someone unaccounted for was out there alive—all the while not knowing that the person in question was right under their nose. Feigning ignorance while knowing the truth would do a number on Ruri’s conscience.

“If that’s the case, why not just talk now? If you’re worried about speaking to Claus, then just speak to His Majesty instead. I’m sure you’ll be fine once you cuddle up to him.”

“Actually, I’m afraid of how Jade-sama will react once he finds out that I’m not the cat he loves so much,” explained Ruri. She was worried that Jade would be so shocked and sad it would turn to rage.

“You’ll be fine. In fact, his court might be absolutely thrilled.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you don’t know, then don’t worry. For now, at least,” Euclase commented in a suggestive manner, causing Ruri to rack her head over the implications of their statement.

After enjoying their cake and some lighthearted banter, Ruri decided to get the same cake for takeout to treat Lydia. She reverted back to her cat form and went back to the castle.



Meanwhile, Kotaro was still in a town within the Nation of the Spirit King.

“Well, O Great Sacred Beast, care for our merchandise?”

“I’m not a sacred beast, I’m a spirit.”

“I do not discriminate either way. Well, how about it?”

“Mm... I’ll take it.”

“I’ll wrap that up for you!”

Since he had come all the way to the Nation of the Spirit King, Kotaro decided to drop into town to look for a present for Ruri. However, when a sacred beast, a holy symbol in their nation, appeared out of nowhere, the townspeople were taken aback. It caused a bit of commotion. Once he informed them he was actually a spirit housed in a sacred beast’s body and they learned why a sacred beast would be in town, the commotion died down.

Be that as it may, all the townspeople had come to the consensus that he was an object of worship regardless, so they offered him local merchandise as gifts

—“tribute,” in their eyes. Kotaro was currently singling out something that Ruri would like out of all the things offered. It seemed it’d be a little longer before Kotaro was back with Ruri.

Chapter 8: Tea Time with Lydia

Ruri traveled down to the kitchen in sector one. She wanted to have some tea made to eat with the cake she bought for Lydia. Hearing her request, the cook asked if she'd like it served in a saucer instead of a teacup. Although it was their form of courtesy to make sure it was easy enough for a cat like Ruri to drink it, it still left Ruri in an awkward position. They also talked about cooling it to room temperature for her, so she had to scramble to tell them to serve it hot. The cook didn't say anything aloud, but on the inside, their entire concept of a cat was probably crumbling before their eyes. It was an unavoidable consequence, however, since Ruri wasn't actually a cat, meaning she didn't have any innate aversion to hot things.

Ruri placed the tray with the prepared tea into her pocket space and hopped inside herself. As soon as she stepped inside, she saw Lydia, in her materialized form, placing that same tea tray on a table.

"Welcome back, Ruri," Lydia greeted, flashing her usual gentle smile.

Ruri asked Lydia to take off the bracelet, and she reverted back to human form. Then, she took a seat at the table, where the cake she bought at the cafe was already set out.

"This cake is from a popular cafe in the capital. Try some."

"Oh, I'm in for a treat, then."

After watching Lydia take the first bite, Ruri dug into her own slice of cake. It was a different cake from the one she ate at the cafe, but it was still outstanding, living up to the shop's stellar reputation.

Enraptured, Ruri asked Lydia, "So? How is it?"

"It's so very good. Thank you, Ruri."

Satisfied with that answer, Ruri decided to tell Lydia the recent news, the major events being Rin's arrival and Euclase finding out her identity. Once she finished, Lydia smirked.

"You can be quite scatterbrained, Ruri. But this 'Euclase' person hasn't changed their attitude now that they know you're a human, have they?"

"They haven't."

"I don't see the issue, then. I doubt that any dragonkin, who unlike humans can see spirits, would do anything to a Beloved in the first place. If they did, they would only upset the spirits. So even if they react unfavorably to learning you're a human, you'll be fine; I'll protect you."

"So you think I should speak up as soon as possible, too, Lydia?"

"I do. Keep it a secret for too long and you won't be able to speak up when you need to. I mean, it's already gotten too awkward for you to do so, hasn't it?"

"You'd be right..."

Some time had passed since Ruri started living in the castle. Jade, his aides, and all of the people of the castle treated Ruri favorably. However, they seemed to look at her like they would a pet animal. It put her in a difficult place. If she were to suddenly come out as a human after all this time, the way they'd look at her would definitely change, and the way they interacted with her would get awkward.

She regretted not coming out with the truth from the start, but it was too little, too late.

"Unghh~" Ruri groaned, clutching her head.

"You'll need to tell them eventually, so muster the courage."

"I'll take a trip to Chelsie-san's and talk it over with her first."

Ruri figured that if anyone knew the most about Claus, it would be Chelsie, his mother. She might even gain some insight behind what he meant when he said he was "glad she wasn't a human."

"...Oh, right. Lydia, did you know that Kotaro was a spirit? I was shocked when I heard the news from Rin," Ruri said, abruptly changing the subject.

Lydia giggled to herself before answering. *"But of course I knew. We're both spirits of the highest level, after all."*

“You could have filled me in, you know.”

“Since we’re both spirits, we can understand each other’s intent non-verbally, but I can’t tell exactly what he is thinking at any given time. I just thought that the reason you didn’t know was because Wind wasn’t telling you on purpose. I never would have thought he was in an ill-fitting body and had lost his ability to speak completely. And seeing as how Wind wasn’t speaking up on his own, and since I can’t leave here, I don’t have a detailed knowledge of the goings-on in the outside world.”

Lydia chuckled. She was seeing Ruri in a new light, and she found her ditzy behavior endearing.

“By the way, I ended up naming Rin without knowing, but is that okay? She did come up to me practically begging for a name. But how was it for you? Oh, right. Your former contract-bearer was the First Dragon King, wasn’t it?” asked Ruri, remembering the portrait she saw in the castle’s treasure room. She looked around the space until she found the same portrait of the First Dragon King hanging on the wall.

“Yes, that’s right. But how did you find out? I don’t ever recall talking about that.”

“Someone filled me in after I noticed a similar portrait to that one hanging in the castle,” Ruri replied while pointing at the painting.

Lydia then looked off into the distance reflectively as she began to talk. *“I don’t know how he came across in the Nation of the Dragon King, but he really didn’t have what you’d call a ‘king’s demeanor.’ He was mischievous and a practical jokester, like a big child,”* explained Lydia, recalling the past with an extremely delighted expression on her face.

“Oh wow,” Ruri responded.

“He always wanted to give me a name, but I consistently turned him down. But he was pretty persistent. I found myself suckered in somewhere along the way, and I ended up spontaneously agreeing.”

Lured by how beautiful Lydia looked as she tenderly smiled, Ruri ended up asking her, “Did you love the Dragon King? Were you two in a romantic

relationship of some kind?”

Lydia’s eyes opened wide and she smiled wryly. “*We were never romantically involved on any level.*”

“Really?” Given how she treated the portrait with such great care, and given her attitude recalling memories about him, Ruri had been convinced that they were. It seemed she had been wrong.

“*But I could see...*” Lydia started, but she stopped her sentence short.

However, Ruri had a feeling that Lydia’s smile held all the answers she needed.

Chapter 9: Agate

Jade had an aide who served as his royal advisor by the name of Agate. He was a loyal retainer who had supported Jade ever since his coronation at a young age. Around the same age as Chelsie, he had crimson eyes, a head with follicles receded and ravaged by old age, and a long, white beard resembling some sort of mountain sage. In stark contrast, at the end of that long, luxurious beard, tying it all together under his chin, was a rather adorable-looking bow. This was the same Agate who had been putting his subordinates to work in search of a bride for Jade.

Meanwhile, in Jade's office, the entire room was draped in silence. The only sounds came from Jade and Claus's pens as they scribbled across their documents. It was dead silent. Until...

"Oh, Your Majesty~! Just when are you going to find your bride-to-be~? What happened to the young lady that Joshua brought with him?!" Agate shouted, barging in unannounced.

The sudden shouting alarmed Ruri, who was dozing off on Jade's lap, making her jump.

Jade simply sighed and said, "Agate, we're in the middle of working."

"What are you saying, Your Majesty? If you keep saying things like that, then you will *never* decide upon a bride! Now then, put down that pen and let us go to the young lady that Joshua brought to us."

In spite of Agate's prodding, Jade didn't seem to have any intention on stopping his hand. "Not necessary."

"You said there was a girl who caught your interest. That is exactly why I've been putting so much effort into the search."

"Uh-huh, you don't say."

"I do not appreciate that listless response, Sire. Now, come. One little visit will not kill you," said Agate as he tried to wrench the pen from Jade's hand in an

attempt to get him to come along.

Jade, however, had no inclination of rising from his seat and sighed in an exasperated manner.

Ruri did nothing but silently listen in. She looked off to the side to see Claus continuing to scribble, smiling awkwardly. He seemed to have no intention of interjecting.

"I know Joshua brought someone back with him, but according to him, it's most likely a different girl," Jade started as Agate's eyes opened wide. "Joshua's girl bears some resemblance to the person I talked to, but on the day I met the girl in question, she was apparently already shipped off to sea by slave traders. Basically meaning, it's *not* the same person. So there's no reason for me to meet them."

"What is that?! And here I thought your future bride had finally come..." Agate commented, clutching their head in shock.

Jade remained completely unfazed.

"Jade-sama, you don't seem very perturbed about their predicament. Isn't this girl someone you fancy? Don't you want to see them?" Ruri asked.

He shot back a comforting smile and patted Ruri's head. "Since I have you, I have no need for a bride right now. You help comfort me more than enough."

Even though she knew his statement was driven by affection toward his pet, Ruri's heart skipped a beat, nonetheless.

"Your Majesty, I implore you to show that same winning smile to the girl you fancy so," Agate pleaded.

"Ruri is a girl herself, is she not?"

"Well, yes, but that is not quite what I meant by that remark..." Agate said, slumping his shoulders in disappointment. "Ruri, you should say something, too! At this rate, His Majesty will never be wed!!"

"I mean, that's not really my business... But I do think that forcing the matter won't help him find that special someone. Why not just wait until Jade-sama is ready to marry on his own?" replied Ruri, giving an innocuous response. She

wanted as little involvement in this as possible.

“You heard Ruri. I don’t need a wife right now.”

“Grk! I shall not give in. It has been my dream to care for your children one day, Sire, so I will not leave this earth before one is born, mark my words!”

“Enough with the grim commentary before you jinx yourself.”

Ruri thought that whoever Jade’s bride was, she would have it rough. If they married Jade, it seemed they would be getting a very naggy “mother-in-law” as well, who would most likely try to butt in on every occasion if they ever had a child of their own. She felt a tad sorry for Jade, suspecting that this was making his search for a partner difficult.

“Next time, I will bring portraits of suitable young girls for you to check!” Agate said before hurrying out the room.

Jade breathed a tired sigh for what seemed to be the umpteenth time.

“I really wish he would just give up.”

“I cannot say I blame the effort. All of your court wishes for you to be wed, Your Majesty. Me included, of course,” Claus said, smiling in a teasing manner as Jade rolled his eyes in slight disdain.

Overhearing the whole conversation, Ruri started thinking about marriage. The marriageable age in not only the Nation of the Dragon King but this entire world was pretty early. Late teens to the early twenties was the prime age, which was relatively early in comparison to the world Ruri was raised in. In this world, it wasn’t uncommon for women around Ruri’s age to have children.

Seeing that was the case, Ruri became interested in her own marriage. As long as she couldn’t return to her world, she would probably spend the rest of her days on this side.

(I do want to get married, and I do want kids as well...)

Ruri suddenly realized something. There were more than just *humans* in this world. There were demi-humans and beast people—some soft and cuddly just like she liked them. If she were to marry one of those special humans, then she would have a child with those soft and fluffy attributes.

(My own fluffy little child... That might be a good idea.)

Ruri's heart went aflutter. However, in order to accomplish that, she would need a soft and fluffy husband first.

(Right, let's shoot for that.)

Just like Jade, she didn't have any desire to marry yet, but she figured dating someone couldn't hurt.

With that, Ruri found a new objective for herself.

Chapter 10: Invasion

Peaceful days continued for some time in the Nation of the Dragon King. One day, as Ruri was basking in the sun in the castle's garden, Joshua came up to her. He approached with his usual warm and inviting smile, but the news he brought was just the opposite—it was blunt and tense.

“Ruri, Nadasha is finally starting their invasion. They'll be entering the Nation of the Dragon King in a few days.” Ruri flusteredly jumped to her feet, so Joshua crossed his legs and sat down in front of her. “It seems the Priestess Princess has joined the army, too.”

“She's still taking part in the war even though I gave her that much warning?! She can't even fight!”

It would be fine if Asahi could freely use magic like Ruri, but the only magic she was capable of was Bewitchment. Or was it possible she'd learned how to use other forms of magic as well? Regardless, it was still reckless on her part. Considering Asahi was born in a world and era of peace, never having seen a war outside of a television screen, the thought of her participating in such bloodshed was absurd.

“She's probably hopping aboard to get you back personally.”

“I can't believe that idiot!”

“Alright, relax. We've been notified to capture the Priestess Princess alive. Now, whether or not she comes with us unscathed is another story...” said Joshua, looking off to the side.

“That is not a vote of confidence!”

“What do you want from me? It's humans versus dragonkin. We're way stronger than they are. And you saw them training. All those dragonkin soldiers go crazy for the thrill of battle. Once they charge in and forget to hold back, a human doesn't stand a chance. Doesn't help that the human body is made weak anyway.”

It was less that humans were *weak* and more that dragonkin were *abnormal*. Any other race of demi-humans would be in seriously bad shape if they got shot with arrows or pierced by weapons. They wouldn't just laugh it off and get back to training like dragonkin would, either.

Ruri was extremely worried that the next time she saw Asahi it *wouldn't* be in one piece. That sight was likely to haunt her dreams.

"M-Maybe I should go along, too." Although Ruri lacked the courage to fight, she was powerful enough to protect herself, unlike Asahi.

"You know that's a no-go. His Majesty would never allow it."

"I'll go and ask Jade-sama, then," said Ruri, leaving Joshua behind and dashing off to Jade.

The royal office, receiving reports of Nadasha's invasion, was filled with Jade's vassals. They all had the same distressed expression. Ruri slipped in between them, through the unwelcoming atmosphere, and headed toward Jade. She jumped onto his desk and voiced her desire for them to take her into war, but...

"No."

"Pretty please?" Ruri pleaded in an adorable tone, doe eyes wavering.

Jade flinched just slightly, but winning him over wasn't so simple today. "I said no, and I mean no. It's too dangerous. War isn't some game."

"I'm well aware of that, but it's crucial I go along. I'm not going to participate in the war. I'd be fine with just watching from someplace safe. I don't want to inconvenience anyone."

Perhaps moved by Ruri's desperate display, Jade contemplated the matter until someone else spoke up.

"I don't see any issues." That someone was Euclase. They most likely knew why Ruri wanted to go so badly since they already knew her identity.

"But if something were to happen to Ruri..." Jade started, still torn despite Euclase's show of approval.

"You'll be in quite the predicament if you continue to turn her down and she ends up running away like the last time. Which is why I believe keeping her

within eyeshot and assigning guard detail would be the safer option.”

Looking somewhat convinced, Jade started to weigh his options.

Seeing this, Ruri also piled on the pressure to keep the opportunity from slipping past her. *“Don’t worry. I’ll have the spirits with me. I’ll also have Rin. She is the highest level of spirit there is. I’ll be completely safe. Isn’t that right, Rin?”*

The conversation now shifted to her, Rin backed Ruri, saying, *“So long as I’m around, I will keep Ruri safe even if every dragonkin in the kingdom attacked her.”*

“...Alright, then,” Jade said, finally raising the white flag. “Follow my instructions, don’t pull any dangerous stunts, and don’t leave the spirits’ side. Can you uphold all that?”

“Yes, sir! Thank you very much!” Ruri said, relieved. She had gained Jade’s permission, albeit reluctantly.

Although she wouldn’t be fighting, the idea of watching the war unfold instilled her with a sense of fear. But she remembered that the King of Nadasha and the Head Priest planned on getting rid of Asahi.

(Hopefully nothing happens to her.) Ruri thought, her heart uneasy.

One day elapsed into another, and eventually Nadasha crossed the border, starting their invasion. The Nation of the Dragon King dispatched their troops immediately, and Ruri headed toward the battlefield with Rin in tow.



Far ahead from where Finn was stood the army of Nadasha, a few hundred thousand in number all lined in formation. There were people as far as the eye could see, all of them brandishing Nadasha’s flag.

Their opposition was the army of the Nation of the Dragon King, composed of only a few thousand soldiers. The reason why they were so few in number wasn’t because they lacked soldiers. Far from it. The Nation of the Dragon King’s military strength was leagues ahead of Nadasha. The reason why they

were so limited despite their superior military force was simply because any more soldiers would be excessive. The gap in power between dragonkin and humans was so massive they were confident they could win comfortably even with the numbers skewed so heavily.

Knowing that, the troops of the Nation of the Dragon King were filled with enthusiasm. In fact, it was more apt to say that the dragonkin troops were a tad *too* enthusiastic. It was the complete opposite of the Nadashian troops; many of their soldiers were both physically exhausted from the long trek on foot and mentally exhausted from the fear of having to do battle with their dragonkin foes.

Sensing that at this rate the situation could take a turn for the worse, Finn made a declaration to the soldiers in front of him. "Listen, men! Be sure to exercise restraint! The majority of those soldiers are regular citizens, untrained and forced to serve under their nation's orders. I'm sure there are many who would join us if persuaded. And make sure not to get near the girl known as the 'Priestess Princess' and their prince. Just report their location and contain them. You all are very likely to kill them instead, so I'll dispatch a different troop," Finn said, adding an extra warning. "Are we clear? Don't do more than what is necessary!"

"Aye, sir!" the soldiers shouted back, pumping their fists in the air. However, from the looks on their faces, it was extremely doubtful they actually heard a word Finn said.

"Well, that's worrying..." Finn said under his breath.

The front line consisted of dragonkin soldiers. Originally, the plan was to decrease their force by facing them with their non-dragonkin demi-human troops, but the dragonkin soldiers loudly objected, demanding to be allowed to fight as well. There was opposition to this too, though, as letting battle-hungry soldiers out into the wild was far too dangerous. But the upper brass of the army was filled with dragonkin, the same as the political branch, meaning the opposition fell on deaf ears.

Therefore, Jade sent Finn out to the front lines. Considering he was strong enough to take over as Dragon King himself, he was capable of stopping any

dragonkin soldier that went berserk from the thrill of battle. The fact that he was there, not to help battle against Nadasha but to help contain his own allies, was quite pathetic, but if so many dragonkin soldiers were to run amok, then it would take a powerful dragon like Finn or Jade to deal with them.

With that concern weighing on Finn's mind, the war started.

At first, the Nadashian army rode the momentum of their large numbers, but the dragonkin soldiers tore through the masses at full force, charging their way into the center of the Nadashian troops in no time. Any boulder catapulted their way, they punched it to smithereens. Any offensive spell unleashed on them, they charged straight through without defending. Any arrow fired at them, they repelled it with magic before it could hit them. One swing of a dragonkin's arm could send ten men flying, and they even had a mastery of magic. The difference in numbers didn't matter at this point. It was turning out to be a one-sided massacre.

Many of the Nadashian soldiers lost the will to fight in the face of the overwhelming strength of the dragonkin. However, the dragonkin soldiers were relatively calm and composed. Perhaps they found it difficult to lose themselves in the heat of war with such severely weak human opposition. They didn't even bother with the soldiers whose legs quivered like a newborn fawn; they nonchalantly faced only those who came at them.

The dragons in charge of supporting the rear guard circled the skies, calling for the Nadashian soldiers to surrender. Hearing that their lives would be guaranteed if they complied, the people who begrudgingly took part in the war admitted their nation's defeat and cast aside their weapons, one after another. The outcome of this battle was already clear.

Finn, overseeing the events unfolding before him, breathed a heavy sigh. "This was far too anticlimactic... Did King Nadasha truly wage this war with the intent to win?" Finn asked himself. The curtain fell so quickly it made him contemplate if this war was started with some ulterior motive in mind.

As a result of the quick outcome, the dragonkin still had plenty of fuel to spend. Pent up with frustration and resentment, they started to take it out on their own allies. Spats and fights began to break out all over. Finn breathed yet

another heavy sigh. Since spats like these were commonplace during training, he let them do as they pleased.

While they fought amongst themselves, Finn received a report that the Prince and Priestess Princess had been located. Entrusting the supervision to someone else, he quickly rushed off, turning into his dragon form and gliding at a low altitude. He spotted a single location from above that was completely cleared out. Several individuals stood in the center, the troops of the Nation of the Dragon King surrounding them.

Finn descended to where they were and returned to human form. There he saw a well-dressed man shivering in fear. Finn guessed that this was the Prince of Nadasha. Standing next to him was a girl in her late teens to early twenties, glaring with unyielding spirit at the soldiers surrounding her. She was clad in clothes ill-fit for the battlefield—a fancy, fluttery outfit that seemed difficult to adequately move in. And behind them both were several other men and women who didn't seem like combatants, their faces twisted in fear like the Prince.

“Which of you would be the Priestess Princess?” Finn asked.

The young girl beside the Prince stepped forward. “I am! And you're the group of kidnappers who took away Ruri-chan! I can't believe you'd stoop so low as brainwashing her! Now, give Ruri-chan back!”

The soldiers surrounding her heard the word “kidnap” and looked at one another, slightly confused and unsettled. There were quite a number of them who heard the name “Ruri” and thought of the Beloved. However, they immediately realized that a Beloved couldn't possibly be kidnapped under their noses.

“Kidnapping? We have done nothing of the sort.”

“You're lying.”

“I assure you I am not. Who is this ‘Ruri’? I know of no person by that name.” The only “Ruri” Finn knew of was not a person but a *cat*. Be that as it may, the Nation of the Dragon King had neither kidnapped nor brainwashed Ruri in any way. In the first place, the spirits would not take that lying down.

“I won’t be fooled by your words!”

Neither of them were on the same page. The girl claimed that the Nation of the Dragon King had kidnapped Ruri, but Finn honestly had no idea what she was talking about. Asahi was erratic, and she didn’t seem as though she’d listen to whatever he had to say. He wasn’t sure how to handle this situation, but he eventually came to the conclusion that he should calmly speak to her after she settled down. And since Ruri was nearby, Finn had no desire to draw this back-and-forth out longer than necessary. He wanted to hurry Ruri back to safety as quickly as possible.

“Seize them,” Finn said to the circle of soldiers. They slowly closed in, following their commanding officer’s orders.

The Nadasha group was unarmed and their mana was paltry. Plus, the soldiers that were protecting them were already apprehended, leaving them with nothing to defend themselves. That was why Finn let his guard down. He thought that these people wouldn’t stand a chance even if they resisted.

Asahi took out something from a pouch tied on her waist and chucked it at Finn. It was a transparent stone no bigger than a human fist.

A last hurrah? Finn hadn’t a clue as to what the stone was, but he decided to put up a magic barrier to block it. It harmlessly bounced off of Finn’s barrier—or so everyone thought. But once it hit the barrier’s surface, the entire thing was practically sucked into the stone and vanished without a trace.

“What?!” Finn exclaimed, eyes wide in shock.

Immediately afterward, there was a massive explosion so intense that the winds from the blast reached the rear guard soldiers off in the distance.

The area was enshrouded in a cloud of dust as everyone’s vision went white.



Ruri was with Rin and the other spirits in the skies. They had a clear view of the battlefield. No attack would reach Ruri up here, but she could still clearly see the war unfold. Below, the troops of the Nation of the Dragon King and Nadasha faced off against one another.

“Hey, doesn’t it look like the Nation of the Dragon King is short on people? Will they be okay?” Ruri asked.

The Nadashian troops outnumbered the Nation of the Dragon King severalfold. Under normal circumstances, it looked like a losing battle.

“They’ll be alright. It seems like their front line is composed of dragonkin, so I’d say they’re overpowered,” replied Rin.

“Well, that’s assuring, I suppose.”

After a standoff, both armies set out and collided with one another. Ruri prayed on bated breath for the safety of the Nation of the Dragon King’s troops, but her prayers were unnecessary. The dragonkin were crushing the Nadashian army with their overwhelming strength.

While most of their forces were non-dragonkin soldiers in the rear guard, the scant collection of dragonkin on the front lines were doing most of the fighting. However, despite lacking the numbers their opposition possessed, they were clearly coming out on top.

“Holy crap...” Ruri trailed off in awe. She had always heard that dragonkin were strong, but seeing that strength in action was a different story.

Ruri was baffled. How did Nadasha have the gall to wage a war against a land composed of dragonkin in the first place?

“Ruri, it looks like it is coming to an end.”

Down below, soldier after soldier lost their will to fight and surrendered. The Nadashian Army was largely composed of common folk with no combat experience who were forced to enlist anyway. It only made sense that they had neither the willpower nor the patriotism to maintain morale in the face of their fighting-crazed opponents. There were still smaller skirmishes happening in patches all over, but it wouldn’t be long before they were suppressed.

Ruri searched for any sign of Asahi. *“Now, where is she? Hmm... Oh, there she is!”* She was wearing an inappropriate dress, so she stuck out like a sore thumb.

After a while, Ruri saw Finn turn into a dragon and fly over her way. Asahi was safe for now. Ruri felt relieved that she had worried over nothing, but the spirits

around her noticed something odd happening. She looked around to see they all looked extremely uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong, guys?”

“Something’s weird.”

“Yeah, I don’t like it.”

“Don’t like ‘what’?”

“The mana around here is flowing into somewhere.”

Ruri cocked her head in confusion. As she pondered what they meant, the soldiers down below started to close in on Asahi and the Prince in order to restrain them. That was when Asahi pulled out what appeared to be a stone.

Once Rin saw it, she raised her voice in alarm. *“That presence... I can’t believe it. It’s a Spirit Slayer!”*

“What’s a ‘Spirit Slayer’?”

As soon as the other spirits heard that ominous name, they all ran, screaming their tiny heads off.

“Huh? Guys?!” Ruri exclaimed, looking at Rin for an answer.

“Magic is something you employ the help of a spirit to use. There are other forms of magic you can use via your own mana alone, like physical boosting or Bewitchment magic, but magic with bigger effects will never manifest without the assistance of a spirit. But there are few people who can see spirits and many who don’t believe in them. We can’t help those who don’t believe. Because of that, humans came up with a way to forcibly take power from the world. That way being Spirit Slayer magic. Spirits answer an individual’s wishes and let them borrow power in proportion to their mana. But humans don’t have much mana. Spirit Slayer magic squeezes the mana it needs from the world around it. If any weaker spirits are in the area when it’s used, it drains their powers and they disappear. That’s why it’s referred to as ‘Spirit Slayer.’ It’s a wicked magic developed by humans with small mana reserves. I’d thought that this magic, which ignores the will of spirits, had been lost to the sands of time, but someone must have uncovered it from texts of the past.”

Rin's tone was stern, and Ruri's face tensed up. *"If that's the case, you need to hurry up and get away like the others, Rin! You'll end up disappearing, too!!"*

"I'll be fine. There are limits to magic controllable by a mere human. It may rob weaker spirits of their powers, but no magic exists strong enough to take the power from a supreme-level spirit such as myself."

Those words helped relieve Ruri.

"But, this is still bad. Any mana in the area is going to be sucked into that stone, little by little. And in other places as well..."

"Wh-What do we do? What's going to happen?"

"I'm not certain."

"This is most likely the handiwork of the King and Head Priest, right? They did say they'd eliminate Asahi, after all," Ruri said, panicked. She knew she had to do something, but she didn't know what.

As Ruri stood flustered, a film of water surrounded her. *"Huh? What is this?"*

"It's not safe, so stay here. Make sure you don't move," said Rin, heading down and leaving Ruri where she was.

"Wait a second! Rin?!"

Immediately afterward, there was a huge explosion below.



Finn took the blast from the stone at close range. He closed his eyes and crossed his arms in front of him, bracing for impact. Several seconds went by, but he didn't feel an ounce of pain. He nervously opened his eyes. His vision was obstructed by a dust cloud, and he couldn't see what had become of the other soldiers. He could, however, hear the intermittent sounds of explosions from several places, close and afar.

Just as Finn started to assume the worst for his men, he curiously wondered why he remained safe. And while there was a cloud of dust all around, it wasn't touching Finn's body. He focused his vision and noticed a semi-circular wall formed around him, protecting him from the outside world. He reached out and touched it, feeling it out on his fingertips.

“Is this... water?”

It wasn't long before the explosions stopped, the dust settled, and visibility cleared again. Finn, who had been worried about the well-being of his allies this entire time, breathed a sigh of relief. He could see that they were all protected by the same kind of water wall that was around him. Everyone was standing around dumbfounded, but they all seemed to be unharmed.

The walls of water began to disappear all at once, as if they'd fulfilled their purpose.

“That was a close call,” said an unknown voice. Soon after, the Spirit of Water flapped her wings down toward Finn.

“Lady Rin...? Why are you here? Is Ruri alright?”

“Ruri is just fine. I’ve used the same water barrier to protect her.”

“Was it you who just protected us?”

“Yes, it was.”

Finn placed his hand on his chest and took a deep, gracious bow. “You have my utmost gratitude. Thank you very much for saving me and my men. But what in blazes was that explosion just now?”

“I suppose you could call it Nadasha’s secret weapon. I never would have imagined that they would actually use Spirit Slayer magic.”

“Did you say *Spirit Slayer*?!” Finn exclaimed. He had never seen it before, but he'd certainly heard about it. It was a magic that forcibly pulled power from the world, slaying spirits. Each spirit that disappeared upset the delicate balance of nature. For that reason, it was forbidden magic in the Nation of the Dragon King and many other nations.

“I thought it just a figment of my imagination, but when I defended myself, it almost seemed as though my barrier was absorbed into that stone...”

“No, that wasn’t your imagination. Spirit Slayer is a type of magic that steals power in order to manifest. It absorbs magic and makes magic unusable. Granted, it’s pretty much ineffective against a spirit of my magnitude,” Rin proclaimed with a proud, haughty chuckle.

“Its presence hasn’t dissipated just yet. There must be other stones out there.”

Remembering the size of the last explosion, Finn’s expression went grim. Once Rin had settled herself down on Finn’s shoulder, he looked to where the Prince and the others were. Rin had shielded them from the blast, so there wasn’t a scratch on any of them, but they all seemed to have buckled under the fear and passed out. Asahi was the only one who had remained conscious through the ordeal, but she was deathly pale, terrified from the explosion.

Finn barked at the soldiers around him, “Search to see if there are any more Nadashian soldiers carrying transparent stones!”

“Sir!” the soldiers replied, carrying out their orders and dispersing over the battlefield. However, searching each individual soldier was shaping up to be a difficult job since there was such a huge disparity in numbers between the two armies.

Once they started searching, the walls of water that had protected Finn and his men earlier sprung up in several locations over the battlefield. They seemed to be enclosed around certain people.

Finn looked at Rin, riding on his shoulder, for answers.

“We don’t want to expose Ruri to another one of those explosions, after all.”

“So you know who is in possession of the stones?”

“Yes, because the mana around them is being absorbed into the stone. It exudes a nasty presence.”

“Your help is appreciated.”

Since explosions could happen at any moment, once Finn had Asahi, the Prince, and his entourage apprehended, he ordered his men to move them somewhere safe, away from the battlefield.



From her safe space above, Ruri overheard Finn down below ordering his soldiers to “perform a body inspection on those enclosed in the walls of water.” She decided to descend and provide her help.

Finn, with Rin on his shoulder, looked at Ruri and knit his brows, saying, “Ruri,

it's still too dangerous here."

"But the battle seems to be over, and I should be fine since Rin has her barriers in place. Besides, I'd like to help you retrieve the stones."

"No, we don't know when they might explode. You're better off keeping yourself out of this."

"And what do you plan to do with the stones after you've apprehended them? Collecting them is one thing, but as long as you don't know when they might explode, it's still just as dangerous, isn't it?"

"Well..." Finn stammered. He hadn't thought that far ahead. He awkwardly furrowed his brows.

However, Rin had a solution to that quandary. *"You should place them into pocket space. Time remains frozen in there, so they wouldn't explode even if they did absorb enough mana. Plus, if you give them to Lydia, she can erase them with any other pieces of space she doesn't need."*

"Oh, that sounds like a good idea."

Disposal of such volatile items left the others scratching their heads, but it wouldn't be much of a hassle if the stones were erased from existence. Deleting them along with room space was a relatively simple task.

"In that case, I really should help you, Finn-san. If we collect them into my pocket space, then it'll be easier to dispose of them later."

Finn seemed slightly at odds with the suggestion, but he ultimately decided it was the best course of action and nodded in consent.

"Then I'll be back!"

"Wait, I'm coming with you, Ruri."

Since they were able to pinpoint the location of the stone holders thanks to Rin, the search went much faster than expected. There were some that exploded before they picked them up, but Rin's water barriers made sure that the explosions didn't outpour.

Ruri ran around the battlefield with Rin, recovering stones and placing them in her pocket space. By the time they finished, she was dead tired from all the

running. But she was also satisfied knowing that she was able to make a difference.

Once they had finished, the Nation of the Dragon King's army escorted the apprehended Prince and Priestess Princess to the royal capital, signaling the end of the war with Nadasha.

Chapter 11: Kotaro Arrives

The men and women who were summoned to this world, including Asahi, were brought to a room in sector six of the castle. Everyone aside from Asahi was being compliant... or rather, they seemed to be watching how the situation would play out, afraid of what would become of them.

In front of them stood Jade, his expression stern. By his side were his main aides—Euclase, Finn, Claus, and Agate.

Jade was actually close to tearing his hair out. Although Joshua had told him the details behind their summoning, he wanted to hear the story from Asahi and her friends' perspective and attempted to establish a dialogue. But no matter what he asked, he was met with the same replies.

"Where's Ruri-chan? Give back Ruri-chan."

Due to that, the conversation went absolutely nowhere.

Only one of them knew that the "Ruri" Asahi referred to was the feline Ruri. Neither Jade nor anyone else assumed they were actually one and the same, simply thinking they shared the same name. Because of that, all Jade could do was deny Asahi's claims. Considering that the nation never kidnapped anyone, Jade probably would have denied her claims even if he *did* know about Ruri.

Despite politely explaining to her that they didn't know who she was talking about and that they hadn't kidnapped or brainwashed anyone, Asahi wouldn't believe them. She apparently was treated with the utmost hospitality in Nadasha, which made her reluctance to believe somewhat understandable, but even *with* that in consideration, Asahi's inability to comprehend was utterly atrocious. The other four were also skeptical, but they seemed to have their doubts about Nadasha. Asahi, however, was the only one to remain firm in her disbelief. She was convinced that Nadasha wouldn't possibly do anything to put themselves at a disadvantage.

Asahi wouldn't listen to what *Jade* had to say, but she wanted them to listen

to what *she* had to say. Suffice to say, this only made Jade tense his brows more and more. The aides in attendance were equally exasperated, even if their expressions didn't reflect it.

"...I believe that is enough, don't you, Your Majesty?" advised Euclase, sounding annoyed.

"Yes, I agree. I feel any more of this would be pointless. We've already applied a magic seal in place for the time being, so why don't we try resuming this conversation when the effects of Bewitch magic have worn off on the other four?" Claus said, agreeing with Euclase.

"Good point. Finn, take them away," Jade said, deciding that he had run out of patience for this discussion.

Finn breathed a sigh, possibly out of relief, and immediately complied to Jade's orders. He approached Asahi and her crew, but as soon as he did...

"Wait, what about Ruri-chan?!"

"You don't believe what we're telling you, correct? In your mind, dragonkin are the villains. So why do you think the villains would comply with any demands you might have?" Euclase retorted in a snarky manner.

Taken aback, anger filled Asahi's eyes as she snapped back, "Then you *do* admit that you brainwashed her!"

The king and his aides all let out a heavy sigh of disappointment.

Euclase simply put their palm to their face and shook their head, fed up and exhausted.



The Nation of the Dragon King managed to safely repel the Nadashian invasion, and now Jade and his aides were busy with cleaning up the aftermath. They were so busy, in fact, that they needed all the help they could get, be it man, woman, or even cat—not that a cat would provide much help, all things considered.

Ruri, the resident feline, wanted to be in Jade's office so she could gain some information about Asahi and the others. She was extremely curious about their

fate going forward, but the royal office was far too hectic. She decided to do some sunbathing with Rin and the spirits instead, so as not to disturb their business.

Suddenly, a shadow descended over Ruri. Considering she was in the garden in the first sector of the castle, there shouldn't have been anything higher to cast a shadow. She looked up, perplexed. There, she saw the belly of a creature with white fur—a creature that was dropping straight at her.

“Unyaaah!” Ruri screamed in a panic. It was going to slam right into her! Or so she thought. Despite the fact that the white creature was falling from high in the sky, it gently landed in the garden without so much as a sound or crash.

The being in question was a wolf with long, snow-white fur. Ruri was caught breathless by the giant wolf, who was bigger than Ruri even in human form.

Several questions ran through her mind. What was a wolf doing here, of all places? Why did it have a big bag tied around its neck? And more importantly—would she end up in this creature's belly?

Ruri started to back away slowly, but the wolf tilted its canine head in a perplexed manner. For a second, she thought it was a cute gesture, but then she remembered she was dealing with a wolf and refocused herself. If she showed any weakness, it would come attacking her.

However, unlike the wary Ruri, Rin fluttered her way over to the wolf unafraid.

“Rin, don't!”

“Oh? But it's fine. It's just Kotaro.”

“...Huh? It's Kotaro?” Ruri asked, looking over in disbelief at the white wolf, gleefully wagging its tail.

“Uh-huh, I am Kotaro. I'm finally here to see you, Ruri.”

“He talked!” Ruri exclaimed in surprise.

“Well, of course he talks,” Rin quipped in reply. *“And, in fact, him not being able to talk was what was odd. I explained it to you, didn't I?”*

“Because he was using a body that was outside his own elemental attribute,

right? I do remember. I really do, but it's still a really big shock to the system..."
When Ruri had last seen him, Kotaro was only capable of *bmooing*. It made it difficult to communicate, so seeing him suddenly speak to her in intelligible language threw her off guard.

Since their heights were now on opposite ends of the spectrum, Ruri had to look up at Kotaro to speak to him. *"Erm, well, welcome back, Kotaro,"* Ruri greeted, no longer afraid since she knew it was Kotaro.

Kotaro ended up dropping to his stomach in order to match Ruri's eye level. *"Good to be back, Ruri. Well? I searched the entire world to find a soft and fluffy body. Is it to your liking?"*

Ruri circled around Kotaro, getting a look at him while thinking about how refreshing it was to have a conversation directly instead of using the spirits as an intermediary like before. His long, snow-white fur looked fluffy and extremely comfortable. When she actually laid paws on it, it was soft and smooth.

Unable to contain herself any longer, Ruri glomped Kotaro's body and fell into a coat of fluffy fur. Kotaro's body was pretty meaty, so she didn't hit any bones. Instead, she was met with a soft and indescribable sense of comfort.

Ruri would love to make this the bed for her afternoon naps. Kotaro's body temperature felt so warm through his coat. She felt as if she would conk out if she were to lie down against him.

"This is heaven..."

Realizing that Ruri was happy, Kotaro's emotions swelled to the max and he wagged his tail without any hesitation.

"It seems you were able to meet Ruri, too, Water."

"I'm not Water anymore. I'm Rin," Rin said, declaring her name, loud and proud.

"Rin, is it? That's a fine name."

"I know, isn't it? ...By the way, what is that you've been lugging around?" Rin asked.

Ruri had been wondering the same thing for a while now. She walked away from Kotaro and turned her attention to the cloth-wrapped bundle around his neck.



“A present for Ruri,” said Kotaro, using his wind power to take the package from his back and set it on the ground.

This finally convinced Ruri that Kotaro really *was* a wind spirit. She didn’t necessarily doubt Rin, but she had been somewhat skeptical because she’d never had a chance to see him use his powers up until now.

Inside the giant cloth package was a bevy of different things—foodstuffs, clothing, jewelry...

“Kotaro, you had the money to buy all this?” This haul looked like it cost a considerable amount, which made Ruri ponder whether he got the money from Chelsie.

“No, when I flew into a town, the townspeople brought it all to me, saying it was tribute. They gave me so much, so I only picked the things that would make a good gift for you. Do you like them?”

“Yes, thank you. Next time, I’ll make sure to get you a gift.”

Kotaro wagged his tail in glee. He had come back to Ruri with tribute in tow like a faithful dog. And now that he’d changed his body, he was fitting the bill even more so than ever.

“By the way, what did you do with your old body?”

“I left it behind because I didn’t need it anymore.”

“Which means it wasn’t eaten, right...?”

Because magic beasts were a delicacy in this world, Ruri was concerned for Kotaro’s body since it looked large enough for a sizable meal. Even though it was originally just a regular magic beast, Ruri couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable thinking about what used to be Kotaro being eaten up. Granted, it was probably too late to concern herself with that...

Ruri then proceeded to play around with Kotaro afterward, but it wasn’t long before Joshua showed up.

“Heya, Ruri.”

“What’s going on, Joshua? Aren’t you supposed to be busy right now? Are you

skipping work?"

"If I did something like that right now, Dad would *murder* me. Even though I'd love to, personally speaking. But wait, what's that? Isn't that the Nation of the Spirit King's sacred beast?!" Joshua looked at Kotaro in wide-eyed shock.

"Nation of the Spirit King's sacred beast? What's that?"

"Basically, it's a sanctified animal that only exists in the Nation of the Spirit King."

Completely surprised, Ruri looked at Kotaro. She couldn't believe *this* was the body he came with.

"His name is Kotaro and he's a spirit just like Rin. He lived with me back in the forest, but apparently he followed after me. Kotaro, this is Joshua, Chelsie-san's grandson."

"Ya don't say. So he followed you, huh?"

"Hmm, Chelsie's grandson? I've heard of you from the other spirits. You made sure Ruri stayed safe in Nadasha. You can call me Kotaro."

"Much obliged... So you're kind of like Ruri's protector, huh?"

"By the way," Ruri said, *"if you're not skipping work, then what did you come here for?"*

"Oh, right. Almost forgot," said Joshua, carefully scanning around the garden for some reason.

Ruri watched him scope the area in confusion. *"Joshua?"*

"Hm? Oh, right. I've got to check to see if anyone is around or else we'll have another Euclase-eavesdropping situation on our hands," Joshua said before he squatted down to talk to Ruri. "So, you know that the Priestess Princess and the other four summoned with you were apprehended in the war, right?"

"I do."

"I came here to give you a little status update. I already knew because I had my eye peeled on her in Nadasha, but that Priestess Princess was pretty darn ardent, if I do say so myself."

"I appreciate the news; I was pretty concerned about Asahi and the others. You say 'ardent,' but did Asahi do something specific?"

"She was yelling up a storm the entire time. 'Give back Ruri-chan, let me see her, undo your brainwashing!' At first, she talked about how another person was summoned to their world, so it piqued His Majesty's interest. But when he kept telling her that the other person wasn't here, she wouldn't listen. She didn't doubt what she believed for a second. Even when he tried to politely explain things, she kept on making the same claims. So at this point, everything is gonna go in one ear and out the other with her. Still, I'm going to be searching for a missing refugee either way."

That sounded exactly like Asahi. Ruri felt sorry for Jade; he was being forced to endure an audience with such a noncompliant person.

"No one thought it was me?"

"Nope. At the moment, there's no one who's connected the cat Ruri with the person Ruri summoned with the Priestess Princess."

Ruri breathed a sigh of relief.

"As for the Priestess Princess, they put a magic seal up because of her Bewitch magic and put the Prince and the other four on house arrest in separate rooms."

"A magic seal? That exists?"

"Yeah, more or less. And now that the Prince and the other four are away from that Bewitch magic, they should be coming back to their right minds soon."

"So their abnormal attachment for Asahi will go away, then," Ruri surmised, a tad curious about how they would feel after being free of Asahi's magic.

"Well, do you wanna see them?"

"Huh?"

"I've already given my report on the people that Nadasha summoned against their will. They're being treated like prisoners of war now, but it doesn't seem like His Majesty intends to punish them since they're technically victims. I

assume he'll be making arrangements for them to live in a territory away from the royal capital. My guess would be somewhere 'round Idocrase."

"Idocrase?"

"It's a territory of the Nation of the Dragon King, on the opposite side from Nadasha if you go from the royal capital. It has a vast amount of farmland, and it's always looking for extra manpower. But if they end up away from the royal capital, you're not going to be able to see them, right? So why don't you at least see Asahi before that goes down? If you want to see them, I can arrange a visit in secret."

"Hmm..." Ruri paused to think about it.

While she didn't want to see Asahi, she did want to try talking to her former classmates. Because of all the harm that'd been done to her in the past, Ruri was extremely curious about a number of different things. She wanted to learn how it felt to be under Asahi's Bewitchment, what their mindset was when they held all that animosity toward her, and how their feelings for Asahi had changed since the magic wore off.

"I don't want to see Asahi, but I might want to speak with the other four."

"Okay, you got it."

"But is that possible? I'll naturally have to be in human form when I see them, but I still haven't told anyone that I'm a human. I'll get found out. Even if no one thinks that the 'cat Ruri' is the same, if they were to tell that the 'missing Ruri' that came along with them was in the castle, it would raise a huge scene, wouldn't it?"

"Don't worry. I can find a way to fudge that. Just leave it to me."

"Well then, I'll take you up on your offer."

"You got it."

Just as they had come to an agreement, they noticed a commotion coming from inside the castle.

"Wonder if something's up."

As Joshua said that, they spotted Finn rushing through the hallway.

“Hey, is something wrong, Finn?!” Joshua yelled out to Finn, making him halt in place.

“Oh, it’s you, Joshua! Our prisoner, the Priestess Princess, has disappeared!”

Ruri’s eyes opened wide as she locked sights with Joshua.

“What did you just say?!” Ruri’s shrill exclamation echoed throughout the garden.

Chapter 12: Trading Places

In a small country next to the Nation of the Dragon King, far removed from any sort of extravagances, there was a small village where the villagers lived off of the land. It was here that Ada was born. But Ada had an uncommon hair color that stood out. Her mother had married into this village, so Ada never really gave it any mind, but here it was seen as a rarity and the villagers would marvel at her from afar. It was Ada's dream to ditch this creepy, deadbeat village, go to the Nation of the Dragon King, and live with some glitz and glamor like a regular girl.

One random day, her father informed her that he'd found some work for her, so Ada was brought to the royal capital of the Nation of the Dragon King. However, she didn't even have a chance to take her first look at the capital before she was taken away to the port. There, standing in front of her father as he bowed over and over, was a well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman. He certainly didn't seem to be an acquaintance of his.

Ada realized how fishy the situation appeared. The gentleman ogled her from head to toe, making her feel extremely uncomfortable.

"Mm-hmm, her hair color is indeed unique. A deal it is, then," said the gentleman, nudging his chin at the attendant behind him, signaling him to come to the front and present a drawstring purse.

From the dense jingle, and from her glimpse of the contents when her father took a peek inside the pouch, she knew it was filled with money. It seemed like a considerable amount of money, as well, from the perspective of Ada's poor family. Once he received the purse, her father left the scene without so much as looking Ada's way.

With a sense of uneasiness settling over her, she followed the gentleman onto the boat. It wasn't soon after she was aboard, however, that she was informed her father hadn't found her work—he had sold her off.

Rocked by the waves upon the boat, tears flowed endlessly from Ada's eyes in

an attempt to escape from reality as she wallowed in despair over the turn her life had taken.

Once they had docked and unloaded the ship, she was taken to their stronghold and imprisoned in a room. She was certain she'd be sold off to someone else and forced to live out the rest of her days as their slave. However, the curtain closed on that hopelessness faster than she could have ever expected.

A ruckus outside the room where Ada and the other girls were being held unnerved the whole lot. They thought the day they would be sold off had finally come. But it wasn't slave traders that came to their room—it was soldiers from the Nation of the Dragon King.

They helped liberate the girls from their enslavement. Those kidnapped and brought to this place against their will were sent home per their requests. Those with more complicated situations, such as being sold off by their parents, refused going back and were instead brought to the royal capital—the very royal capital Ada had long dreamed of.

On their way, they took up lodging in a local inn. As Ada was casually passing by the soldiers' room, she just so happened to overhear them speaking, causing her to pause in her tracks. They were slightly tipsy from drinking, and since they weren't staying in a five-star establishment, the inn's doors were paper thin. She was able to hear every drunken word they shouted.

“—and so you're saying Ada is the very girl His Majesty is searching for?”

“His Majesty finally has a girl he's fond of, does he? I thought it was odd they sent so many men to bust up a human trafficking operation, but it makes perfect sense if they abducted the girl who is slated to be the Dragon Queen.”

“We need to be on our best behavior, then...”

The moment she heard that, Ada carefully tiptoed away from the area. However, if she had only listened a little bit longer, she probably would have taken a different course of action.

Immediately after Ada left, Joshua, who was also in the room, clocked each of the drunken soldiers across the noggin. “Hey, quit your speculating, ya bums. If

someone overheard your chitchat and got the wrong idea, Dad would chew *me* out, not you guys.”

“Speculating *what?* She *is* the Dragon Queen.”

“She’s definitely *not*.”

“And how’re you sure?”

“I got the entire rundown. The day His Majesty met his mystery girl, Ada was already getting shipped off. We’ve been chasing the wrong girl.”

“The hell? Then we did all this work for *nothing*?! We dropped our own work just to help out, too.”

Joshua stepped in to calm his booze-fueled comrades and give them a harsh warning not to spread any hearsay. But since Ada ran off before she could hear Joshua’s part in the conversation, there was indeed a massive misunderstanding.

“I’m the Dragon Queen...” whispered Ada. The prospect that she, a poor girl raised in a poor village, was going to be the queen of the superpower known as the Nation of the Dragon King gripped her with so much joy that she trembled all over.

However, you only had to think a little to see what was wrong with this picture. Ada had never met a dragonkin in her life, much less the Dragon King, so how exactly could he have fallen in love with her at first sight? But now that the carrot had been dangled in front of her face and she was as giddy as could be, she tossed that obvious query off to the far corners of her mind.

And so Ada entered the royal capital under that false assumption. Although she thought she’d be able to see the Dragon King immediately, she first had to meet with the chamberlain. Before she had a chance to think, the chamberlain led her to a common room used for servant quarters and assigned her servant work herself.

But, why? Why...? Ada couldn’t figure out why someone who was supposed to be the Dragon Queen was assigned menial labor as a servant. Still, she wanted to see the Dragon King one way or another, so she approached a fellow servant for advice.

“U-Um, excuse me, but how would I go about visiting His Majesty the Dragon King?” asked Ada.

Once the servant heard her question, her eyes widened for a second before she smiled sarcastically, saying, “There’s no way servants like us can seek an audience with His Supreme Majesty the Dragon King. What are you even talking about, girl?”

Ada stood dumbfounded. Sorrow overcame her, and she questioned why His Majesty hadn’t come to greet her even though she was chosen to be the Dragon Queen. Although she tried to make her case, the other servant girls simply laughed her claims off as poppycock, leaving her practically helpless.

Time passed, and Ada lived life in the castle, carrying out her servant duties as she secretly contemplated her options all the while. One day, she was sent to deliver a meal via cart to a room on sector six of the castle. “I’ve come on meal delivery,” she said, letting the guards in front of the room inspect what she’d brought. Once they oversaw the contents, they allowed her passage.

She opened the door and pushed her cart inside. Behind her, she caught wind of the guards’ conversation.

“Has His Majesty come down yet?”

“No, not yet. He probably won’t be down during your shift anyway.”

(He’ll be coming down here...?) Ada thought, her joy slowly bubbling to the surface. It was short lived, however, as she needed to vacate as soon as she dropped off the meal.

As she lost herself in thinking of a way to remain in the sector, a voice calling, “Ruri-chan?!” yanked her back into reality. Her head shot up in surprise.

The person who had called out to her looked at Ada’s face for a second before pausing. “Oh, you’re not Ruri-chan...” she uttered in disappointment.

The girl occupying this room went by the name “Asahi.” Once she explained that she’d been on house arrest for the past few days, an idea popped into Ada’s mind.

“Then why not trade places with me?” Ada proposed.

Asahi's only reply was a clueless, blank stare.

Ada and Asahi were around the same age and possessed similar physiques. The servant's outfit came with a special cap, so if she were to stuff her hair inside of it, no one would notice her hair color. As for moving between sectors, while the guards did conduct a thorough investigation when entering a sector, they simply let you through when exiting if you had a clearance pass.

Plan in motion, Ada swapped clothing with Asahi and gave the girl her own authorization pass. "That should do it. When you leave, keep your head down and don't say a word. I'm betting people won't recognize you in passing, so I'm pretty sure you won't get found out if you just keep your face lowered."

"Thank you!"

And so, after Ada told her the route to the outside, Asahi proceeded to make her house arrest escape.

Ada watched as Asahi left the room and walked out of sight. Then she let out a chuckle, unable to contain it any longer. "Tee hee hee hee, at long last..."

Ada's chance to see the Dragon King was right at her doorstep. Now all she had to do was wait quietly and patiently until he arrived.

Chapter 13: Escape

After Finn reported that Asahi had disappeared from her room, Ruri pressed him for answers.

“What do you mean, Finn-san?! I thought that Asa... I mean, the girl was supposed to be under twenty-four hour surveillance?!”

Ruri’s intensity took Finn by surprise, but he promptly replied, “U-Uh, yes, I stationed soldiers outside her room, just as you suggested, Ruri. The room has a window, but it leads right into a cliff, so I figured no ordinary person would be able to escape. But when one of our officers went to ask her about her time in Nadasha, they said that she was gone.”

“How did she disappear in the first place?”

“There was apparently a servant girl in her place.”

“A servant girl?” Ruri repeated, staring back in confusion.

Joshua also seemed surprised by this, his eyes bulging out before he tensed his brow and asked, “What do you mean ‘in her place’?”

“The servant apparently helped her escape. She exchanged places with her by giving her both her servant’s outfit and clearance pass and stayed in the room herself.”

“Did they know each other? But wait, the Priestess Princess *just* arrived in the Nation of the Dragon King, so that doesn’t add up.”

This was far too harebrained of a scheme. The whole thing would be a bust the second someone entered the room. Allowing someone on house arrest to escape meant punishment was guaranteed, but this person was willing to bear that to help Asahi. Granted, it would perhaps make sense if they were acquainted in some way.

“No, it seems they weren’t acquainted with one another. However...” Finn awkwardly cut himself off as he bitterly scrunched his face, “she ordered that

we ‘allow her audience with His Majesty,’ claiming she was the ‘Dragon Queen.’ From what we’ve investigated, she is the same girl you brought back with you not long ago, Joshua,” Finn said, firing an indescribable look at Joshua.

“Grk, wait, for real? It was one of the girls we rescued from those slave traders in search of His Majesty’s bride?”

“That it was.”

Joshua clutched his head.

“But didn’t Jade-sama say that you had the wrong person, if I remember correctly?”

“You remember right. It’s the completely wrong girl. My guess is she overheard part of a certain conversation. The part pertaining to *her*, conveniently enough.”

“In any case, Joshua, help in the search. I’m going to His Majesty to report this incident,” Finn said before hastily making an exit.

“What do we do now, Joshua?”

Asahi escaping was the last thing Ruri expected, and she rebuked Asahi’s actions profusely in her mind. She had just learned that Asahi would not be punished, so it was frustrating to see her do something that would bring about punishment again.

“I’m working on it. After all, it’s gonna be bad news if we don’t find her quick.”

“What kind of ‘bad news’?”

The look in Joshua’s eyes intensified. “The Nadashian soldiers imprisoned in the war are all being held in sector eleven. And all of them have a chip on their shoulder for the Priestess Princess. If they spot her, it’s not going to be pretty.”

“‘Not going to be pretty’...?” Ruri repeated, picturing the sight in her head. A shiver ran down her spine.

“She won’t be able to go higher than the sixth sector with that servant girl’s clearance pass. In which case, she’d have to go down. This is *not* good.”

The prisoners of war were mostly composed of peasant farmers and people forced to enlist by their nation. It wouldn't be surprising if they held strong feelings of anger or resentment toward Asahi since she spearheaded the war.

"Searching for someone sounds like the job for a wind spirit," Joshua said, looking at Ruri—and then shifting over to Kotaro.

Ruri stood for a second before gasping, *"Oh, Kotaro!"* She turned to him too. *"Kotaro, search for Asahi. I know you can do it, right?"*

"Why?" Kotaro asked back.

"Huh? 'Why'...?" Ruri repeated, not expecting his answer and finding herself at a loss for words.

"I would love to grant you any wish you so desire. But don't you dislike that girl, Ruri? So why are you trying to help her? I think that whatever happens to her would be reaping what she sowed. That's why I can't comprehend why you're trying to help her."

"Uh, well, I do dislike Asahi. So much so that I don't want to see her. But as much as I dislike her, I don't hate her that much. I can't just hang back and tell her to eat crow when I know she's in danger."

"But it's her Bewitchment's fault that you ended up thrown into the forest. She almost got you killed, albeit indirectly. Not only that, but she has inconvenienced you in a host of other ways, hasn't she?"

"You're right about all of that, but I'm safe now. And as long as I keep Asahi out of my life, I'll be just fine. I never thought about getting her back for all the trouble she's caused me in the past. And especially not using a dangerous situation like this one to do it. So, I'm asking you, search for Asahi. Pretty please?" asked Ruri, folding her hands in prayer.

Having said that, it was true that a part of Ruri wondered why she was so desperate to help Asahi. If this were King Nadasha or the Head Priest, she wouldn't hesitate to let them fend for themselves. But since Ruri and Asahi had been together since childhood, it left Ruri with a shred of emotion in her heart. That didn't apply just to Asahi either. She would most likely refuse any offer to get payback on her classmates, who plotted to eliminate her, as well.

Maybe it was an “affinity” developed from all of them being castaways from the other world, but she felt something in her heart, something hard to explain—something that kept her from being completely uncaring toward their plights.

Sensing Ruri’s unwavering determination, Kotaro consented, saying somewhat reluctantly, *“If that is what you wish, Ruri...”*

The wind started to gently waft, centering around Kotaro. *“It seems that she’s in sector eleven of the castle.”*

“Cripes, of *all* the places she could be,” Joshua spat out, face tense. He clicked his tongue in frustration.



Asahi aimlessly wandered around the castle. She wanted to see Ruri, but she didn’t know where she was. Instead, she decided to follow the instructions of the girl who’d helped her escape. She left the sixth sector and walked further down and down toward the base of the mountain. She was occasionally stopped at the gates leading to the long hallways between buildings, but once she showed them the finger-sized silver tag she’d received from the girl, they easily granted her passage.

As she continued to trek onward, she passed by a room filled with chatter. Since there was no door, she could easily see inside. It seemed to be a cafeteria of some sort; several people were partaking in meals. Remembering that she’d left before eating her own meal, Asahi’s stomach suddenly started to rumble at the aromas wafting her way.

That was when a question popped into her mind that made her uneasy. How was she supposed to get food once she got out of here? She had been treated lavishly in Nadasha’s royal castle this entire time, and despite being under arrest, the people here would bring her food. What would she do from here on?

Neither her mother nor father was here—nor the person she could depend on the most, Ruri. Also, her classmates, who had come to this world with her, were taken to different rooms. She had no idea where they were. Asahi was all on her own.

She quickly decided that she’d simply have to work to stay fed, but Asahi

didn't know how to look for work in this world either. The uncertainty of her future paralyzed her with fear.

As she stood stock still in the hallway, she met eyes with a man in the middle of eating. Something triggered in that man, and he took a closer look at her. After a second, his eyes opened wide. Rage swept his expression, and he suddenly shouted out, "Hey, you're the Priestess Princess, ain't you?!" His cry alerted all the other feasting men to turn their heads toward her as well.

Asahi was thrilled someone recognized her. She could possibly alleviate her situation by asking them for Ruri's location. However, contrary to Asahi's carefree and optimistic views, the mood of the room grew hostile.

"Hey, is she the real deal?"

"Yeah, no doubt in my mind. I saw her face up close durin' the war, so no way I'd forget it."

"Ain't that the servants' outfit she's wearing? She just lands herself a job in the castle after tryin' to lead our guys off to their deaths?!"

"Some 'bringer of prosperity' you are!"

The men slowly started to close in on her. So much anger and bloodlust flowed from their expressions that even Asahi, typically slow to pick up on people's emotions, sensed the danger she was in. With that in mind, she quickly turned around and started to sprint.

"She's getting away!"

"After her!"

The many men dropped their meals and went after Asahi.

"We're gonna get payback for us and our buddies!"

Asahi dashed down the halls, panting, her face tense in fear. That didn't last long, however, as she staggered and collapsed to the floor. Gasping and turning around, she saw the men drawing near.

"It's all your fault!"

"N-No, it wasn't my fault! It was the King's."

“N-No, it wasn’t my fault!” one of them mocked. “The moderates were exiled and the war started all because you wanted it!”

“It was necessary to save Ruri-chan!” Asahi said with a trembling voice, desperately trying to justify her reasons. But her words had the opposite effect.

“Why do we have to risk *our* lives to save some friend of *yours*?! We’ve got families waiting at home for us, dammit!”

“Huh? But...”

Up until now, Asahi had gotten anything she desired. She naturally assumed they would help her, and she struggled for an answer when asked why they *should*.

“‘But,’ *nothing*! I lost my little brother in this damn war!”

“Eek!”

Just as the men went to grab her, a wind blew around Asahi, forming an invisible barricade.

“Gah! What the hell is this?”

“Never mind what it is! Just break through it!”

However, they couldn’t reach Asahi no matter how hard they outstretched their arms. Something halted them.

Despite this reprieve, Asahi didn’t feel relieved. These men were surrounding her, staring at her with enraged eyes—some of them tackling the wall only to be deflected and some of them repeatedly punching the wall until their hands bled. Seeing this, she couldn’t possibly feel any sense of relief. On the contrary, watching it up close only added to her fear.

“Eek, someone, please...”

Obviously no one heard Asahi’s whimper for help, but soldiers of the Nation of the Dragon King came running up from behind the mass of men and began to pull them off one by one. Seeing them appear through the gaps in the crowd, Asahi finally found relief and passed out on the spot.

Chapter 14: Farewell

Ruri was in Jade's office, resting atop his lap in her cat form. After Finn delivered his report that Asahi was safe and sound, Ruri breathed a sigh of relief.

"Kotaro, thank you."

"So long as I was of some assistance to you, that's all I need," he said piously, nodding.

Seeing that, Rin whispered to him so Ruri wouldn't hear, *"You managed to get her out of there, but you fixed it so she would stay there and get freaked out, didn't you?"*

"I'm not used to this body yet, so that was the best I could exert my powers."

Rin could smell the lie coming off of him—but she decided to keep it to herself. After all, Kotaro had been in his new body for quite some time; he should already be well accustomed to it by now. While Kotaro was acting as if nothing had happened, all of the inconveniences Asahi caused for Ruri hung on his mind, so keeping her behind that barrier was probably his form of payback. Rin had to admit that he did do a good job of it, so she decided to keep her hunch a secret from Ruri.



"So, Finn-san? Where is she now?"

"She is resting in her room. No injuries, but being surrounded by those men shocked her so much that she starts to tremble when anyone approaches her. Other than that, she is perfectly healthy."

"Good to hear..."

"What's the matter? You seem awfully interested in the Priestess Princess."

"A-Ahahah, no, just a little curious; that's all."

"I suppose that's reasonable." Though Finn was probably suspicious, he didn't

know about her relationship with Asahi. Luckily, it seemed he was buying her story.

“What about the servant girl who helped her escape?” Jade asked.

Joshua, also in the room, came to the front to deliver his report. “The servant girl has been jailed for abetting an escape, sir. She is a human girl who was among the slaves we recovered and not a citizen of the Nation of the Dragon King. But since she was sold off within our nation’s walls, we recovered her with the other slaves. And since she said she had no home to return to, I gave her a job as a castle servant. It seems she partially overheard a conversation between my colleagues on the way back and got the impression that she was your future bride, the Dragon Queen. She said she overheard the guards talking about how you were supposed to come see the Priestess Princess, so she helped her escape in hopes of meeting you on her behalf. And she also said that she’d never met the Priestess Princess before then.”

“I *explicitly* told you to not make such careless remarks,” Claus harshly admonished.

Joshua was left at a loss for words. Though he hadn’t said it himself, he was the person in charge at the time. All he could do was bow his head before Jade. “...My sincerest apologies.”

“I will deal with her later,” Jade said. “Nevertheless, even if she did overhear half of a conversation, don’t you still find it strange? We’ve never even met before. I could understand if she belonged to the kingdom, but she only came to the royal capital once—and she only passed through it, at that. How does one even misconstrue things *that* badly?”

“Yes, it’s quite baffling,” Claus said in agreement.

Once their meeting was over, Joshua called Ruri over. He looked around and then lowered his voice before speaking. “Due to this incident, the other four are going to be shipped off to Idocrase sooner than planned now. I’ve heard the Bewitchment has worn off too, so do you want to have that meeting?”

“I do.”

“There’s just one issue, though. Because of her little escape, the Priestess Princess is now sharing a room with the other four since we’re not sure what’d she try to pull on her own.”

That meant if Ruri was going to see her former classmates, she’d have to inadvertently see Asahi as well. She was actually fine with that, however.

“That’s okay. It’s the last time, after all. And I have some words for Asahi now.”

And so, following Joshua’s lead, Ruri visited Asahi and the others in their room.

There were guards on duty in front of the door, but they left as soon as Joshua told them he had matters to discuss with the occupants. Ruri watched him deal with the guards from a short distance away. Once the coast was clear, Joshua gave her the signal and she approached closer.

“Is it safe?”

“Safe as safe can be. Now, c’mere, I’ll take your bracelet off.”

Since the room was tucked far back in an isolated corner and no one was around, Ruri allowed Joshua to take off her bracelet. She turned back to her human form, and then she opened the door and headed inside. She entered the room, anxious as to what kind of reception she would receive.

As soon as the others saw her, they froze in place, eyes wide with shock. The first one to move was, of course, Asahi.

“Ruri-chan!!” cried Asahi with a big smile as she ran toward Ruri.

Thrilled to see her old friend once again, she reached out her arms to embrace her, but before she could reach, Joshua came from behind, grabbed her arms, and held her back.

Asahi glared straight at him, saying, “Let go of me.”

“No can do.”

“Don’t get in the way of me and Ruri-chan! I *knew* Ruri-chan was here the whole time, you big liars!” Asahi screamed, still staring at Joshua with the same glare.

Joshua, however, seemed completely unaffected.

As the air in the room turned hostile, Ruri spoke up in a tone so cold it even surprised herself. “Asahi, why did you pull that stunt?”

“Stunt? What stunt?” Asahi asked. She was oblivious to Ruri’s stern look and alight with joy from simply speaking to her.

“The King of Nadasha and his people fed you lies to incite that war.”

“But I did it because I couldn’t save you all on my own, Ruri-chan...”

“There’s *nothing* or *no one* to ‘save’! I told you that, didn’t I?!” Ruri exclaimed. She proceeded to carefully explain King Nadasha and the Head Priest’s plot to her once again—loud enough for her former classmates to hear as well. Furthermore, she explained that Asahi was almost killed alongside the Prince back on the battlefield.

It seemed as though Asahi hadn’t discussed any of this with the other four. They all stood motionless, mouths agape.

Perhaps the massive explosion on the battlefield was still fresh in her mind because it seemed Asahi finally realized she’d had a target on her back the entire time. Fear rocked her to the core. “No way... That’s too cruel. They tricked me the whole time, didn’t they?”

The other four still looked bewildered.

Ruri gritted her teeth and slowly lifted her right hand. Then, with all the power she could muster, she quickly slapped her open palm square across Asahi’s cheek. A sharp sound resonated throughout the room.

Reeling from the impact, Asahi looked at Ruri, flabbergasted. She held her cheek, now red and singing in pain. “Ruri... chan...?”

“Why, you... Don’t you *dare* say that anything is ‘*too cruel*’! Do you have *any idea* how many people died in this war?! It had to sink in when that mob attacked you, didn’t it? That rage? That sadness? That’s all from the people who lost friends and family in the war!”



“But the King and everyone else did that. Why aren’t you angry at them, too?”

“Yes, the King and the Head Priest are the ones who incited the war. But things *might’ve* been different if you had just tried a *little* harder to think for *yourself*. I gave you *more* than enough warning. So why did you let the King and the Head Priest play you like a fool? I *told* you to not trust them! *Didn’t I?!“*

“I mean, I was still lost even after hearing that, though...” Asahi replied irresponsibly.

Those words almost raised Ruri’s rage to the boiling point, but she took a deep breath and pushed it back down. “Listen, the people in Nadasha are no better than kidnappers! If you’re willing to swallow anything they give you whole, then your sense of danger is practically nonexistent!”

“I was confused, and I thought it was the truth. It sounded so convincing.”

“Wait, what are you saying? If you’re confused, that suddenly makes crime *legal*? You can *never* trust manipulators like them! For God’s sake, think on your own for *once* in your life!” Ruri vented.

Joshua simply nodded his head in agreement.

Ruri glared icily at Asahi, hoping to get her to understand, but Asahi showed no signs of feeling even the slightest bit of guilt. The rage that had taken hold in Ruri’s heart waned as resignation took root.

Ruri let out a sigh, expelling her drive to keep convincing Asahi. “Whatever. There’s no one here to listen to your selfish requests like in the past, so you’ll see the reality whether you like it or not.”

“Selfish? But I...” Asahi looked saddened by Ruri’s words.

But Ruri couldn’t care less. “There’s no way back home, so you better start shaping up.”

“That’s what the King and the others told us, but you always end up back home at the end of video games, so we should be just fi—”

Before Asahi could finish her sentence, Ruri swiped her palm across Asahi’s other cheek, knocking her head clear out of the clouds.

Asahi's eyes filled with tears. "...Ruri-chan, stop. It hurts..."

"Yeah, it *does* hurt, doesn't it? This world may have magic and people with animal ears, but this is not some video game. This is *reality*. Things aren't as convenient. We *can't* get back home anymore."

It wasn't as though Ruri had stopped hoping for the same thing, but from living in this world for so long, Ruri knew this was real—all too real.

"There's no embassy here, and your knowledge from our world won't fly. All of you are going to have to live pulling your own weight from now on—no family, no relatives, no one else to rely on but yourselves. You can't just quit like a game because you're tired of it. You'll have to spend the rest of your lives in this world," Ruri lectured, almost as if she were giving herself a reminder at the same time.

The heads of the other four all snapped up, and they stared at Ruri. It seemed as though reality was finally starting to sink in.

It wasn't unreasonable that it took this long for them to understand. Getting suddenly transported to a world where magic existed—a concept completely fictional by their standards—and being guaranteed all the living necessities on the spot probably didn't enforce any semblance of reality.

The same went for Ruri. If she hadn't been tossed into the forest almost as soon as she came to this world, she'd probably be living without a grip on reality, too.

However, Asahi continued being Asahi. "It's fine. I can do my best anywhere so long as you're there, Ruri-chan!" she declared with a smile.

Knowing that not a single thing she said actually got through to Asahi, Ruri felt less resigned and more exhausted. "Just so you know, I don't intend on being involved with you at all from now on, Asahi."

"Huh...? But why?"

"'Why'? That should be my question. Tell me, Asahi, why do I have to take care of *you*?"

Asahi's smile was the picture of innocence. "I wasn't planning on just you

taking care of me. I can work on my own. We can live working as a team.”

Ruri couldn't help but roll her eyes. “I want you to think back on life in our world. You always insisted on your own needs and wouldn't give my requests the time of day. That's some way to treat your supposed ‘best friend.’ I'm nothing more than a *servant* to you. I'm tired of being your convenient little companion. I only foresee you pushing all the burden onto me anyway, so I have zero desire to be together with you,” said Ruri, laying it out as frankly as she could.

Asahi's face scrunched up as though she were going to cry. “This isn't right... I can't believe you thought that way this whole time, Ruri-chan... You should have just told me. I would have...”

(*I did freaking tell you!*) Ruri thought in an outburst of anger. She had told her over and over again, yet Asahi refused to listen every single time.

Just as Ruri started to feel that continuing this conversation any longer would just cause her anguish, one of her former classmates rushed in front of her and got on his hands and knees.

“Huh?”

“We're sorry for what we've done to you,” he said, apologizing.

The remaining three followed after him, prostrating themselves before Ruri and apologizing in suit. Ruri's jaw almost hit the floor—same for Asahi. She had never seen these four treat her like this before in her life.

“We're glad you made it through all that alive. I can't even believe what we tried to do to you...” said the second male classmate.

The female classmate added, “We're sorry. Even if we were under a spell, we did the unthinkable.”

“I don't think you can ever forgive us even if we apologize, but we feel terrible about this,” said the last classmate.

Ruri didn't know how to react, rightfully so. They had done nothing but diss her, but now they were apologizing one by one. It was clearly a result of them being free of Asahi's Bewitchment.

Since she couldn't rationally converse with a group of people on all fours, she said, "Okay, but in the meantime, could you guys stand up?"

Her request lifted them to their feet, and one of them continued, "I don't even understand why we did that to you, but we did it nonetheless, and that's a fact. Right now, I can't help but say that we're sorry. Please, forgive us."

Ruri couldn't bring herself to say if she forgave them or not. She understood their actions weren't of their own free will, but that didn't just wipe away their treatment toward her. While she eventually learned to ignore the constant badmouthing and cold-shouldering, the memories of all the times their bullying hurt and made her cry still remained. Worst of all, they tossed her to the mercy of the woods—an act that clearly endangered her life.

Unable to find the right words, she changed the subject. "What did it feel like while you were under Bewitchment?"

They all looked disappointed at the shift in topic, but they followed Ruri's wishes and answered her question, possibly thinking they'd be immediately forgiven if they did.

"When I would think about Asahi-san, a faint feeling of intoxication would overcome me. Once it did, I identified you as someone different from us. And because you were different, I got defensive. I hated the fact that Asahi-san cared about you so much," explained one of the male classmates.

Another classmate explained, "I couldn't contain my emotions, and I didn't think it was wrong."

"I even thought it was right to feel that way since you were different," said another.

"And what about now?"

"I feel extremely refreshed, but extremely guilty at the same time. Back then, I didn't feel a shred of doubt about the actions we were taking. But now I understand completely. I understand that what we did to you was heinous."

"After the Bewitchment wore off, I was terrified looking back at what we'd done."

“Thank goodness you’re safe.”

“We’re so sorry for everything.”

They bowed their heads in forgiveness.

Ruri figured they were being truthful from the bitter anguish on their faces. It seemed that Asahi’s Bewitchment was completely dispelled.

“That’s enough...” Ruri murmured, causing them to suddenly lift their heads in surprise. “Don’t get things twisted. I haven’t forgiven any of you... But there’s no point in talking about what’s already done. We all have a lot we need to think about in order to live from now on, so that’s enough.”

No matter how much that Bewitchment had thrown their sensibilities out of whack, Ruri wasn’t the type to just say, “Well, them’s the breaks,” and completely forgive someone. If just one thing had gone wrong back then, she would’ve been dead, after all. But now that she knew they wouldn’t have wronged her so if they weren’t under the Bewitch spell, Ruri couldn’t find it in herself to hate them.

“But...”

“I said that’s enough, so that’s enough. I can’t forgive you, but I accept your apologies.”

“...Thank you.”

Ruri looked back at Joshua.

“All done?” he asked.

“Yeah,” replied Ruri as she held her hand out to the four, “Farewell.”

As Ruri shook each of their hands, they all got the feeling they’d likely never meet again.

With that done, Ruri turned toward the door.

“Ruri-chan!” Asahi shouted as Ruri walked away, but Ruri ignored her cries. She knew they’d never see eye to eye, no matter what she told her.

Several days after their meeting, Asahi and Ruri’s former classmates all

ventured to Idocrase.

The girl who assisted in Asahi's escape was charged as a criminal. She repeatedly claimed she was the Dragon Queen, even while in her prison cell, but naturally no one bought into her claims.

Later on, Joshua, the one who had brought her to the Nation of the Dragon King in the first place, came to explain that she was mistaken. At first, she didn't believe him. However, it became apparent that, no matter how long she waited, the Dragon King wasn't coming to her rescue. She at last opened her eyes to the truth and gradually began to cease her claims.

Although she eventually came around, it didn't abolish her crime. Afterward, she would be given suitable punishment for her actions.

Chapter 15: Report

A few days after Asahi and the others were sent to Idocrase, Jade called out to Ruri, stopping in mid-stroll. He lifted her up into his arms, naturally bringing her to eye-level so he could look at her with his deep greenish-blue eyes.

Ruri's pulse raced just a tad bit faster.

"Ruri, I'll be leaving with Finn and Claus for a few days. If you need anything, make sure to tell either Euclase or Agate."

"Where will you be going, Jade-sama?"

"I'll be going to the Nation of the Spirit King. I won't be back for a few days, so make sure not to do anything crazy while I'm away."

"With all due respect, I am not a child," said Ruri, slightly miffed at being talked to as if she were an unruly adolescent.

"You tend to suddenly disappear. The thought of something happening while I'm away worries me; that's all. Why don't you accompany me on my trip, Ruri?"

While she wanted to go along since she wouldn't be able to see him for a while, she also wanted to go back to Chelsie's house.

As Ruri hesitated, Claus stepped in and rebuked his king. "We cannot do that, Your Majesty. Finn and I will also be in the meetings, meaning there will be no one left to tend to Ruri in the meantime."

"Yes, I had almost forgotten," said Jade, letting out a sigh of disappointment. He gave Ruri one last hug before reluctantly putting her back on the ground. "It's unfortunate, but reasonable. I couldn't just leave you all on your own, after all."

"I don't necessarily need someone to 'tend' to me all hours of the day. I can manage on my own," Ruri replied. Regardless of whether she went or not, she felt offended that they both thought she wasn't reliable enough to be left by

herself.

“Yes, we understand that. That isn’t what he meant by that...” Claus hastily replied with an awkward smile.

Ruri simply looked at him, head atilt.

“I believe it’s time, gentlemen,” Finn urged, prompting Jade to turn his attention away from Ruri.

“Oh, Jade-sama? I’m thinking of going to Chelsie-san’s house. I might be away by the time you come back from your journey.”

“I see. Very well. Be safe on your way, then. I’ll make sure to bring you back a souvenir.” He petted Ruri’s head a couple of times, and then walked away with Claus and Finn.

It wasn’t long before Ruri spotted three gigantic dragons taking to the skies; it appeared they were going to the Nation of the Spirit King in their dragon forms. Ruri stood there, seeing Jade off until he was completely out of sight.

After a few days and a few shifts at the diner, which had been closed due to the wartime situation, Ruri made her way to Chelsie’s house in the woods. She had thought that flying there would take several days, but Kotaro could apparently travel there in several hours. It was a feat that only the supreme-level wind spirit could accomplish, one that filled Ruri with admiration.

Before long, they arrived at Chelsie’s house. There it was, standing alone in a clearance smack-dab in the middle of a dense group of trees.

“Chelsie-san, I’m back~!” Ruri announced, returning to human form and opening the front door.

Chelsie came out from the back with a wry smile. “I swear, you’re always a bundle of energy, aren’t you? Now, come in,” she said, but her eyes stopped at Kotaro, who stood beside Ruri. “Would that happen to be Kotaro?”

“That it is. Well? How do you like my new body? It’s soft and fluffy, just like how Ruri likes,” Kotaro bragged with his chest puffed out proudly.

“So you knew about him this entire time? I wish you had filled me in,” Ruri

said.

“Listen, I didn’t know in the very beginning either. Well, I *did* know by the time of your last visit, but Kotaro told me to keep it a secret.”

“Yes, I wanted to surprise you, Ruri.”

Settling into the room, Chelsie quickly began to prepare tea. Ruri pulled out the sweets she’d purchased in the royal capital, placed them on plates, and set them on the table. Once she set the tea Chelsie prepared next to them and took her seat, they began to talk.

“Assume you’re here today to talk about Asahi?”

“That’s right. Asahi and the other four who came with us have been sent off to Idocrase.”

“Idocrase, eh? Well, I’d say that’s an appropriate place. Perfect place for folks with no one to turn to.”

“What kind of place is it, might I ask?”

“It’s a territory with a large amount of farmland. It’s often called the Nation of the Dragon King’s food bank. You know Finn, correct?”

“Very well, yes.”

“Finn’s father is the lord of that land.”

“Oh wow...” Ruri said in casual admiration, thinking that he must have had a good upbringing. Finn’s father was the person who’d adopted Ewan and was his uncle by way of marriage.

“It’s filled with live-in laborers from out of town and orphans working there, so it’s a perfect place for someone summoned to this world without a home or anyone to rely on. Farming might be rough on them, but the lord and lady of the land are decent people, so they’ll be in a good crowd.”

It sounded like a reliable place if Finn’s parents ran it. On top of that, Chelsie vouched for it. They would probably do fine. Ruri was somewhat relieved, but...

“Aside from Asahi, I spoke to the other four as well. They were freed from Asahi’s Bewitchment and apologized to me, so we had a straight conversation.”

“That a fact?”

“...I was honestly surprised. I was also scared. Scared that her Bewitchment power could change personalities so much.”

“I bet.”

“Asahi grew up spoiled, surrounded by people under her Bewitchment. I’m a little worried if she’ll fare alright suddenly being dropped into a tougher environment.” Granted, she was less worried about Asahi and more the people *around her*.

“Well, what will be, will be. I mentioned it before, but Idocrase’s lord and lady are scrupulous people, so they’ll deal with Asahi in a fair manner.”

“Still, here’s hoping she’ll finally start coming to grips with reality.”

She was hoping that the stormy waves of society would help build her up to be a halfway-decent adult in due time—or, at least, mature enough to hold the *semblance* of a conversation.



Later, after going to check on them, Joshua gave Ruri a status update on Asahi and the others.

Idocrase was abundant with farmland, so it was called the “food bank” of the Nation of the Dragon King. It grew harvestable produce all year long, but as the years rolled on, they started to grow shorthanded. Because of that, they employed the work of out-of-town laborers, orphans, and single mothers.

Asahi and Ruri’s former classmates were sent to this territory filled with working expatriates. They were there to atone for spearheading the war along with the upper brass of Nadasha and inciting mayhem for both Nadasha and the Nation of the Dragon King. This was done as a punishment and to keep tabs on them, but more so than that, it was also an act of clemency—granting Asahi and the others, refugees from another world with nowhere to go, a chance to live on their own.

The four former classmates seemed to comprehend this right away, but Asahi was—in classic fashion—Asahi. She was acting as if she were unjustly arrested

and sentenced to indentured servitude, inquiring of the lord of the land, “So how long do I have to be here before I’m released?”

The other four rushed to apologize, but the lord didn’t seem too pleased with Asahi’s language toward him. He didn’t appreciate her remarks, seeing as how he was taking in a group of troublemakers out of the goodness of his heart.

Once that first bit of commotion was out of the way, however, the five started their new lives. They were given farmwork, difficult work under even the best circumstances. And since none of them were accustomed to that sort of labor, it was a steep learning curve. Despite that, the classmates worked themselves to the bone without a single complaint. Gradually, they became accustomed to Idocrase life and blended in with the locals.

However, just as Ruri feared, Asahi did not similarly acclimate. She had enjoyed her entire life spoiled rotten, so there was no possible way she would happily perform such demanding labor without complaint. She inconvenienced everyone around her by depending on them for every little thing.

Because it happened so frequently, it started to dissuade people from dealing with her. Meanwhile, her classmates grew more and more accustomed with each passing day. This rift caused Asahi to feel massively out of the loop.

In the past, Asahi didn’t need to say a word to have everyone offer her their assistance. Even back in school, when she had student cleaning and daily class-helper duties, if she were to show any sign of reluctance toward the task, everybody would prioritize helping her. Since she’d received the same treatment in Nadasha as well, Asahi couldn’t wrap her head around the sudden shift in reception after coming to Idocrase.

Asahi didn’t understand why no one was coming to her aid, but even that became normal in due time. Now that her Bewitchment effects were gone, there was no one around to grant her self-centered requests. Unable to grasp that concept, Asahi wept to herself often. She eventually began to skip the work provided for her, causing everyone else to look upon her even more harshly and throwing her further outside the circle—and the vicious cycle would repeat.

Joshua finished giving his report, and after taking it all in, Ruri’s reaction was

much to be expected. This news matched her expectations—she'd figured it wouldn't work out for Asahi unless she had other people wiping her nose for her.

The days rolled on. On a certain day, Ruri heard word that the lord and lady of the land had finally had enough. They callously rebuked Asahi, who refused to see reality for what it was, and forced her to get to work, her tears falling on deaf ears.

Perhaps Asahi knew they weren't willing to hear her opinions because she eventually got into the habit of working as she should—albeit crying all the while. She probably realized they were people she shouldn't oppose.

Once Ruri heard that, she found herself clapping. Asahi was probably on the right track, even if she was technically being forced to take it.

She silently prayed that not only Asahi but her former classmates as well would be able to live soundly in their new surroundings.



Jade, Finn, and Claus were on their way back from their business in the Nation of the Spirit King, their national ally. Since the three of them could fly while in dragon form, they were taking the skies back to the Nation of the Dragon King. It was faster than traveling by land since the Nation of the Spirit King was located much further than Nadasha, the neighboring land which had been utterly trounced in their recent invasion attempt. While Nadasha's usage of the Spirit Slayer magic was bloodcurdling, thanks to the assistance of Rin, a spirit of the highest level, they managed to get by without any issues.

Nadasha's repeated declarations of war in the past were met with a quick and easy defeat by their dragonkin opposition, what with their mighty bodies and mana. Yet the current king pushed for war despite not having the resources to fund it, never once considering the people of his land, and imposed massive taxes, stating that they were for the war. For several years, citizens of Nadasha who struggled to keep themselves fed flooded in droves into the Nation of the Dragon King, and that number continued to grow even to this date. Despite this, as they heard from Joshua's reports, they turned the heavy taxes into funds to buy weapons.

Faced with Nadasha's intolerable deeds, the upper brass of the Nation of the Dragon King came to the decision not to send them back from whence they came, like in the past, but to remove the Land of Nadasha completely. However, due to the alliance treaty, the Nation of the Dragon King was not allowed to attack other countries and make them part of their own territory, even if it was in retaliation. In order to do so, the Alliance of Four Nations needed to discuss it, and the other three nations needed to give their consent.

Jade and his entourage visited the Nation of the Spirit King for that very discussion. It went relatively smoothly, with the alliance agreeing with the Nation of the Dragon King's decision. The information Joshua had compiled and the current state of Nadasha, showing no consideration toward their people and creating a mass exodus, served as the biggest deciding factors.

Jade and his men would begin preparing for their invasion on Nadasha once they made their return. However, before that, Jade had a cuddle deficiency that needed rectifying.

"I knew I should have brought Ruri along," Jade mentally muttered toward no one in particular.

Claus awkwardly smiled and replied, *"It would have been a disaster if Ruri had been taken away while we were occupied, so leaving her behind was the reasonable decision."*

There were many nations that coveted Beloveds. None would do something as foolish as forcing a Beloved to accompany them, but it was a different story if they gained their consent. If Ruri were to be convinced to go of her own free will while Jade and the others were away in a meeting, they would be completely out of luck.

With that fear in mind, they couldn't possibly bring Ruri along with them. They couldn't afford to because Ruri was the first Beloved to appear in the Nation of the Dragon King in many years. But she had also become a major part of Jade's life in general—so much so that he felt depressed from just a few days away from her.

"While I think the Nation of the Spirit King would be alright considering they have a Beloved that is still young, the Nation of the Beast King, on the other

hand...” said Claus. Jade and Finn both looked discomforted at this.

The Alliance of Four Nations was composed of the Nation of the Dragon King, led by the titular Dragon King where humans and dragonkin coexisted; the Nation of the Spirit King, home to a Beloved and ruled by one of the only Qilins in the world; the Imperial Nation, the strongest out of the human nations and ruled by the Emperor; and the Nation of the Beast King, ruled by its titular Beast King and filled with demi-humans and a bird demi-human Beloved.

The Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King had a “chipper” personality, to put it nicely, and she had her eye on being Jade’s wife. Jade wasn’t a fan of hers and would constantly shoot down her countless attempts at trying to court him, but she never took “no” for an answer, even to this date.

However, this wasn’t just an issue for Jade; it was an issue for the Nation of the Beast King as well. Jade marrying her meant that their Beloved would go off to the Nation of the Dragon King. With the Nation of the Beast King possessing more wasteland than farmland and having limited rainfall, the Beloved’s presence greatly affected their harvest. It was a marriage they sincerely wanted to avoid happening.

However, the Nation of the Dragon King had a Beloved of their own now. From the Nation of the Beast King’s perspective, if there was a chance of their own Beloved going to the Nation of the Dragon King, then it was inevitable that they’d want to invite the Nation of the Dragon King’s Beloved over to their side to compensate. And since the Imperial Nation had no Beloveds of their own either, it was very likely that they would also try to make contact with Ruri if she were left unattended.

It was a mystery as to where they procured their information since it hadn’t been officially announced yet, but the news of a Beloved showing up in the Nation of the Dragon King seemed to pique the interests of both the Beast King and the Emperor.

The problem Jade had faced at the meeting was that their Beloved, who accompanied the Beast King, had not only tried her hand at courting Jade like usual, but she had suggested that if he brought their newly discovered Beloved to the Nation of the Beast King, they could be wed without issue.

Jade staunchly refused to hand over Ruri, making sure that the topic didn't proceed any further, but the Nation of the Beast King's Beloved still hadn't given up.

"Well, Your Majesty, if you had a fiancée, then she might give up."

"Finn, you're starting to sound like Agate."

They eventually ended up on the same old topic.

"Lord Agate has a selection of girls suitable for you, Your Majesty."

Jade grimaced.

"Your Majesty, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from grimacing. You were the one who let it slip that you had someone you're interested in."

Jade sighed wearily. *"I thought saying that would lessen her drive a bit, but instead..."*

"It just added more fuel to her fire. It was almost as if you didn't deny that you had interest in her," Claus replied with a wry smile. Then a thought suddenly came upon him. *"If Ruri were human or demi-human, then this might not have turned out to be that much of a problem, don't you think?"*

Jade thought wistfully of Ruri. There had been individuals with compatible wavelengths in the past, but Ruri was the first to feel so comfortable. Normally, one would marry someone with a compatible wavelength, but meeting someone who was specifically compatible was not easy. There were those among the long-living dragonkin that journeyed to find that special someone, but many of them ended up compromising to a certain degree.

"Ruri, huh? True, it's not every day you run into anyone with a mana wavelength quite like Ruri's. I probably would've given it some thought if she weren't a cat. Ruri is going to be my standard from now on, so finding someone to marry just might be impossible."

"Lord Agate would go mad with rage if he heard that after all of his tireless searching, Your Majesty."

"I bet he would," Jade said with a small chortle.

Talking about Ruri at length made Jade's urge to see her unbearable. It would

be a bit of a detour, but he couldn't pass up a chance to go to her.

"Finn, Claus, we'll be heading to Chelsie's house."

Finn and Claus simultaneously blinked in surprise.

Jade ignored them completely and changed their flight trajectory.

Chapter 16: The Decision

Joshua returned from his work outside looking positively exhausted, holding his shoulder and cracking his neck as he made his way to the royal office. When he knocked on the door, a voice granted him permission, but it didn't belong to the Dragon King—it was Euclase.

As he entered, he saw it was indeed Euclase there instead of the king—as well as Ewan, who was supposed to have had his privileges to enter sector one revoked because of his mishap with Ruri.

“Huh? His Majesty hasn't returned yet? Also, what are you doing here, Ewan? Did you reconcile with Ruri or something? You look to be in an awful mood, if you did.”

After glaring at Joshua, Ewan turned his eyes away, seemingly in a foul mood.

“I'm having him deliver some work I assigned to him while Finn is away. Since Ruri isn't here now, I figured there wouldn't be any harm and gave him clearance,” Euclase explained.

“Oh, Ruri went out, too?”

“Ruri is at Ms. Chelsie's. His Majesty sent correspondence that he shall be going to pick her up.”

“Aah, makes sense,” Joshua said in understanding, turning his attention to Ewan. The king's detour meant that Finn, his bodyguard, was naturally with him. The resident brother-complex boy was probably waiting with bated breath for his older brother's return only to be denied that chance. His bad mood most likely stemmed from that.

“Listen, it's fine if you love your big brother, but don't take your jealous frustrations out on Ruri, alright?” Joshua warned, somewhat jokingly.

His tone was lighthearted, but the intent of his message was serious—he wanted to dispel any misgivings. Ewan had already earned the ire of the spirits on *two* separate occasions. The king and the others saw to it that he wouldn't

be allowed to see Ruri, but it was impossible to bar him from *ever* running into her. Ruri often went off on explorations, and Ewan's high rank meant that his basic area of activity was in the upper sectors of the castle. Therefore, Joshua was keeping an eye on him since he had a skill for being narrow-minded when Finn was involved.

Taking the documents from Euclase, Ewan remained silent as he exited the royal office without a single glance Joshua's way.

"Hey, this ain't looking too pretty, is it?" Joshua said. "I get the feeling he's gonna blow up at Ruri if he runs into her."

"I swear... It's a shame considering he's such a good kid—he's a hard worker, and he's patient. Plus, he shows great consideration for his subordinates—so long as Finn is involved. Also, not to nitpick, but couldn't you have made your warning seem a little more serious?"

"That's more up Dad's alley, not mine. I can't help the way I am, after all."

Euclase simply sighed in resignation.

"Backtracking a bit, but Ruri went to Grandma to give her a rundown?"

"Yes, I presume she went with the intention of telling her about the girl and her friends being sent to Idocrase."

"Don'tcha think it's about high time we tell His Majesty and the others that Ruri's one of the humans summoned to Nadasha?"

"Quite. We'll talk it over with Ruri once she makes her return."



As Ruri enjoyed her casual visit to Chelsie's house, she suddenly remembered what she wanted to discuss with her. "Chelsie-san, I've been living in the castle in cat form and hiding that I'm a human."

"And why in the world are you doing that?"

She hadn't told Chelsie about living as a cat. Judging from Chelsie's reaction, Joshua hadn't relayed that information either.

"No, you see, I didn't do it because I was out to deceive anyone. The thing

is...” Ruri gave a detailed account of when she first arrived at the royal capital and met Claus and what Claus said shortly thereafter. “...and after that happened, I started living as a cat. Joshua and Euclase-san know I’m actually a human, but they’re keeping it a secret for my sake. Although, I’m starting to think it’s time I come clean.”

“If you think so, then you should,” replied Chelsie as frankly as she could.

“Uh, well, you’re certainly right, but I’m kind of afraid of the reaction I’ll get.”

“You’ll never know unless you actually tell them and see their reactions firsthand. After all, I can’t speak for Claus.”

“Valid point.”

“If you keep thinking about the ‘what-ifs’ beforehand and don’t take any action, then you’re never going to make any progress ever. This isn’t something you can keep under wraps forever either, so do your thinking *after* you see how they react and not a second before.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chelsie’s advice was right. Seeing as how it was already hard enough to come out with the truth, there was nothing to Ruri’s advantage by overthinking things any longer.

“Well, speaking as someone who knows more than a little about how Claus, the king, and his aides operate, they aren’t the type of people who would suddenly change their tune, be you cat or human, so you can rest easy knowing that.”

“Right, I’ll try my best to come clean once I return to the capital.”

“That’s for the best, child.”

As they basked in the kind and nurturing atmosphere, Chelsie suddenly paused. Ruri sat in confusion for a moment before realizing that someone had entered Chelsie’s periphery barrier. However, since Ruri and Chelsie both knew that the only people or animals permitted to enter were ones that Chelsie allowed, they were calm about it.

“It seems we have company.”

“Aye,” said Chelsie as she got up from her seat. “Quite a lot of visitors today...

Hm? That mana...”

As Chelsie froze in place, seemingly befuddled, a knock came from the front door. This spurred her to move, and she rushed to open the door.

“My, what a surprise. I am humbled by your visit.”

Ruri could faintly hear Chelsie’s polite tone coming from the entryway, and she wondered who their visitor could be. She casually sipped at her tea, but the next thing she heard made her hands stop in place.

“Chelsie, where is Ruri?”

The all-too-familiar voice that Ruri heard clearly from the next room made her eyes bulge in shock. “Wait, what? Why is Jade-sama here?!”

“Is Ruri inside?”

“Why, yes, she is here.”

Ruri couldn’t help but be baffled. “Why is Jade-sama here of all places?”

“Hey, Ruri, are you okay like this?” Rin asked, her wording a bit vague.

Ruri tilted her head. “Like what?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be hiding the fact that you’re human?”

“...*Gasp!* Oh no!” Ruri exclaimed after a brief pause, remembering what form she was in. If she just kept sitting around like she didn’t care, she was going to be found out.

She began to panic. “The bracelet! Where did the bracelet go?!” She rummaged around in her pocket space but nothing came out.

As she tried to remember where she put her bracelet, she could hear the sounds of footsteps approaching the room. This was bad. This was *extremely* bad.

“Ruri, His Majesty is here,” Chelsie announced, her voice practically right next to her.

“Wait, wait, where’s the bracelet?!” Ruri asked, her panic levels reaching their max. “Why isn’t it coming out?!” She dug her arm deeper into her pocket space but still to no avail.

“I’m pretty sure it’s not in your pocket space, but your regular pocket~”

“Oh, duh! My pocket!” Ruri exclaimed, the spirit’s reminder helping to jog her memory. She hid behind some furniture to look for the bracelet without being detected.

Almost as soon as she did, Chelsie walked into the room with Jade right behind her. Behind Jade was Claus and Finn, both out of breath from trying desperately to keep up with Jade’s flight speed before.

“Where is Ruri?” Jade asked.

Chelsie looked around the room, but when she didn’t see Ruri in the chair she was in a moment ago, she scratched her head.

After a second or two, Ruri peeked out from behind the furniture—in her feline form.

“Ruri, weren’t you going to talk about this? Why go back to cat—”

“Nyaaaaa-uhh nyaaaa!”

Before Chelsie could finish asking why Ruri went back to cat form, Ruri quickly let out a holler to cut her question short. Chelsie looked at Ruri with a tinge of disappointment, but she smirked and kept her mouth shut.

(J-Just in the nick of time...) Ruri thought to herself, barely making it back to cat form. She covered up the fact that she was sweating cold bullets on the inside and let out a sigh of relief.

Thanks to Chelsie, Ruri was able to prepare herself to speak about her situation soon, but she never imagined the chance would come right now. Since she hadn’t given the matter the priority it deserved, the abrupt visit caught her severely off guard. If she was going to talk to Jade, she wanted to do it in a composed manner and with her points neatly laid out in her mind. This push might have been exactly what she needed, but she sincerely wished that she had just a little time to mentally prepare herself.

Ruri looked back at Jade. *“Jade-sama, why are you here? Didn’t you say you’d be in the Nation of the Spirit King?”*

Jade looked at Ruri and his face melted into a smile as he answered, “I

wanted to see you, so I came to pick you up.”

Behind him, Claus slumped his shoulders and added in an exhausted tone, “We didn’t have to be in such a rush. Ruri wasn’t going to run away, after all.”

Finn didn’t verbally express his frustrations, but he seemed just as tired as Claus, nonetheless.

With an inkling that the two needed a breather, Chelsie got started on tea. Once the tea was prepared and she returned, she saw the Dragon King in absolute delight with Ruri placed on her now usual location right on his lap. As they enjoyed their tea, Claus and Finn paid the familiar sight no mind, but Chelsie viewed it with a somewhat awkward expression.

By the time Claus and Finn recharged from their short break, they were all ready to head back to the royal capital.

“Alright, I’ll be off now.”

“Yes, come back any time you’d like, child,” Chelsie said in a similar fashion as last time, as if she were her mother.

She then turned her attention toward her *actual* son. “Claus, I’ve heard you said something off-putting to Ruri.”

“What might that be?” Claus asked back, dumbfounded.

“Apparently, before you went to the castle, you said you were glad she wasn’t a human Beloved.”

Claus pondered, seemingly unable to remember what he even said at that time.

“I thought I told you that Ruri doesn’t know the ways of the world. Don’t go confusing her by saying things that make dragonkin out to be some kind of elitists,” Chelsie scolded in an attempt to clear Ruri’s worries now that she knew why Ruri was staying as a cat.

In contrast to Ruri, who had been bogged down by the matter this entire time, Claus struggled to even remember it. He looked as though he was questioning whether he said that aloud, but with a little concentration, he seemed to finally remember.

“Now that I recall, I had just received Joshua’s report of Nadasha around that same time, so maybe that is to blame. When I said I was grateful you weren’t a human, I think I meant I was grateful in the context that you weren’t a lump of avarice like that King and his Head Priest.”

(Argh, those two agaaain!) It seemed that the King of Nadasha and the Head Priest were the cause of yet another mishap. For the first time ever, Ruri felt the urge to kill—directed solely at them.

“Has that cleared up any misunderstandings?” Chelsie asked Ruri, coming up to her and speaking in a hushed voice.

“Yes, it has. Thank you very much,” Ruri said in gratitude. She owed almost everything to Chelsie at this point. Ruri made up her mind that she would secretly buy Chelsie a thank-you gift when she got back to the royal capital.

En route back to the capital, while Ruri traveled on Kotaro’s back, she called out to Jade, who was next to them in his dragon form.

“Jade-sama?”

“What is it?”

This was the first time she heard Jade telepathically communicate, and hearing his voice practically echo directly through her head caused her to feel a tad timid.

“When we return, would you mind if I talked to you about something I’ve been keeping a secret?”

“Secret? You can’t just tell me now?”

“I also have something that I want Joshua to explain, and I wouldn’t want you to fall out of the sky in shock.”

“What? Even Joshua knows?” Jade said in a somewhat sulky tone. But shortly after, a low and gravely chuckle resonated from his draconic body. *“I look forward to how big of a surprise it may be.”*

(I think this surprise is a little too big.) Ruri quipped, thinking to herself.

Chapter 17: The Eavesdropper

Ruri and the others returned to the castle. They all landed on a terrace that was wide enough to accommodate the three gargantuan dragons. Once they did, Ruri jumped off of Kotaro's back, and Jade, Claus, and Finn returned to human form.

In front of them was Agate, standing at the ready with a grin. "I have been awaiting your return, Your Majesty."

"Yes, I know. Sorry for leaving you with all that work. I'll head to the office now."

Although they had stopped the Nadashian invasion, they still hadn't tied up all the loose ends, and in the midst of that, Jade had left the castle for several days. He was positive that work had accumulated in the meantime.

"That isn't what I am here for! This time I have picked out some girls I know you'll like. And since a portrait alone isn't the best to judge from, I've brought them to the castle, so come and meet them for yourself!"

"...Ah, I see." Jade replied in a rather listless manner, a stark contrast to Agate's overenthusiastic display. "That will have to wait for later. The war with Nadasha is our top priority right now," he added. He didn't seem the least bit interested as he promptly proceeded to walk in the direction of the royal office. It was as plain as day that he was planning to put the troublesome matter off for as long as possible.

"You're just saying that so you don't have to go see them, aren't you?! Meet them now! Meet them right this instant!" Agate shouted, chasing after Jade.

"Agate-san doesn't get deterred so easily, does he?" Ruri asked.

"He's pretty much obsessed at this point. Unless Lord Agate keeps bringing the subject up, the idea of searching for a queen would be a bygone thought by now, after all. I'd say a suitable person for his majesty won't show up for quite some time," Claus said with a wry smile as he watched Agate chase after Jade.

Ruri suddenly felt herself being lifted. When she looked up, she saw Finn looking back at her with a warm smile. He brought his thick, hard soldier-like hand to Ruri's head and stroked it in an unexpectedly kind and gentle manner. "Yes, especially considering His Majesty seems to find you more important, Ruri."

"But what if I were to find a partner for myself first?"

"If that were to happen, it would surely bring tears to His Majesty's eyes," Finn replied with a slight smirk as he proceeded to walk toward the office with Ruri cradled in his arms.

"Oh, I can walk on my own."

"No, I insist. I don't get many opportunities to pet you when we're in front of His Majesty."

Finn saw Ruri as he would a pet. However, he wasn't the only one who saw her in that light. Every soldier, official, and even personal attendant she passed by in the castle viewed her the same way. And since it was difficult for her to confess to being a human, Ruri was constantly at a loss as to how to react.

Ruri and the others were about to enter the royal office, where Jade was presumably already inside, but just before they could open the door, two familiar voices rang out.

"Brother!" shouted one voice, pleasantly.

"Oh, crap!" shouted the other, panicked.

When Finn turned around with Ruri still in his arms, they were met with the sight of Ewan running toward them with an ear-to-ear smile and Joshua standing behind him.

Ewan ran straight toward Finn at top speed, but as soon as he saw Ruri in his arms, he grimaced in clear discontent. "Hey, get away from Brother," he said. The resident brother-complex boy apparently didn't like that Ruri was being cradled in Finn's arms.

Seeing this would cause issues, Ruri was about to jump down, but Finn strengthened his grip on her—perhaps discerning that Ruri was in harm's way,

judging from Ewan's attitude. However, that simply added fuel to the fire.

"Brother, let go of her!"

"Ewan, enough is enough. It's about time you grow up a little," Finn rebuked with a sigh.



Ewan glared daggers at Ruri. “What are you trying to pull?! What are you plotting by getting close to Brother?!”

“*Huh? I... don’t know what you mean by ‘plot,’ but I’m not trying to...*” She had never even considered “plotting” anything against Finn. It was a completely false accusation.

However, Ewan continued on as if he wasn’t listening to Ruri’s words. “No, I get it. You’re just like the women who try to sponge off of Brother’s status. Well, I won’t stand for it! A lying woman like you isn’t fit for Brother at all. I’ll only allow for one type of woman for my Brother—one with beauty and grace, wise and willing to support him! Qualities you lack!”

“Ewan, what in the world are you talking about? Ruri is a *cat*,” Finn stated, holding Ruri in his arms and shooting a distressed look at his younger brother.

“...So you don’t know the truth after all, do you, Brother?” Ewan said with surety as he shot Ruri a look so sharp it could kill.

“I’m guessing you’ve kept it a secret from His Majesty, too, haven’t you? Maybe your goal is His Majesty instead?! Well? You evil floozie?!” Ewan said, implying some preposterous things.

As Finn and Claus looked on stunned, Ruri started to have a bad feeling about all this.

“Enough of this, Ewan,” said Claus. “There is nothing that could happen between Ruri and Finn. One is a dragonkin and one is an actual cat. You need to regain your composure.”

“I will *not* be deceived! She may have the appearance of a cat, but she is actually a human woman. This *woman* has been *deceiving* all of you this *entire time*!!”

“Ewan...” Claus started.

Before Claus had a chance to refute what seemed like a nonsensical argument, Ewan continued. “I am certain of it! I overheard her and Joshua talking. The chancellor knows about it, as well.”

Surprised to hear that Joshua and Euclase both knew, Finn and Claus’s eyes

fell upon Ruri.

“I can’t believe it... Ruri, is what Ewan is saying true?”

“Ruri?”

“*Well...*” Ruri was left without much to say at the sudden disclosure she faced right before she was going to come clean to Jade.

That was when the door to the office behind them opened, revealing Euclase. “All of you, step inside,” they said, urging them into the office and into the chairs directly in front of them.

Ruri could see Jade staring at her in silence and Agate doing the same in shock. They had been causing a commotion at the foot of the office door, meaning they most likely heard the entirety of their conversation due to Ewan practically shouting his accusations.

Once Ruri stepped down from Finn’s arms, she slumped her shoulders and hopped over to Jade’s desk, sitting to face him directly. She had no idea what Jade was going to say. She didn’t intend to deceive him, but since she ultimately kept quiet about the whole matter, she pretty much *did* deceive him. Still, Ruri never expected that *this* would be the way she would be found out. The news coming by way of a third party’s angry rant was the worst way to get busted.

Like a prisoner awaiting the judge’s verdict, Ruri waited for Jade to say something.

“Is what Ewan just said back in the hall true?” Jade asked in a cool and composed tone.

“*Well... um...*” Ruri stammered, obliged to inform him that it was the truth but unable to form the right words.

“Well, Ruri?” Jade asked again, his voice several degrees softer than a second ago.

His gentleness helped her make up her mind. “*Yes, it is true. I am so sorry for keeping it a secret, Jade-sama,*” Ruri apologized, fearing Jade’s reaction so much that she couldn’t lift her head.

She wanted to be the one to tell him if at all possible, but it was her own fault

for continuously putting it off. Since she did in fact deceive Jade, she couldn't blame Ewan for what he said.

Jade was either going to be disappointed or angry for sure. Ruri was overcome with regret for not telling him sooner. She even had an opportunity to speak to him about it back at Chelsie's house, but that was all too little, too late now. He was either going to give her a very stern or a very angry reprimanding. Either way, she braced for his response.

However, contrary to her expectations, he didn't utter a single rebuke. Instead, he placed a warm palm on Ruri's head.

She timidly lifted her head to see Jade's face—not brimming with rage but beaming with a kind smile.

"I'm sorry, Ruri." The first thing out of Jade's mouth was neither resentment nor an accusation—it was an apology.

Ruri's eyes shot open wide at the unexpected turn of events. *"But why are you apologizing, Jade-sama? I'm in the wrong here for keeping it a secret in the first place."*

"You thought it was necessary, didn't you? Chelsie scolded Claus for saying he was glad you weren't a human Beloved. So I presume that is the reason why you found it difficult to speak up?" Jade explained.

As soon as Claus heard that, he made an uncomfortable grimace.

"Yes..."

"In that case, it is our responsibility for putting you in such an awkward position. There's no need for you to apologize. You heard that it was 'better you weren't human' and took the natural course of action to protect your own well-being," said Jade, suddenly shifting his gaze to Claus.

Understanding that signal, Claus stepped forward. "Ruri, I sincerely apologize for my careless remarks being the source of your worries this entire time," he said, bowing his head apologetically before Ruri.

Ruri frantically tried to set things straight. *"No, I'm the one who came to see you while in cat form and caused this mix-up to begin with! Please, you don't*

have to bow and apologize!"

"Will you ever forgive me?" Claus asked.

"Of course!" Ruri emphatically stated, nodding her head up and down.

Claus's expression loosened. And it seemed as though that settled matters. That was until...

"Why are you all apologizing?! She deceived you! *She* should be the one to apologize!" Ewan shouted, pointing at Ruri.

His sudden outburst made Euclase furrow their brow in displeasure. However, the one to come to Ruri's defense first was Joshua.

"Okay, been meaning to say this, but what's been your deal?" Joshua said. His quiet yet deep voice, filled with frustration, echoed through the room.

"Blabbing other people's secrets like that? You don't know the first thing about Ruri's situation. So what makes *you* so fit to mouth off about her?" In stark contrast to his normal playful tone, Joshua's voice was filled with real anger and his eyes formed a piercing glare.

Faced with that, Ewan faltered for a second, but he stood by his convictions and lashed back at Joshua, regardless. "Hmph, I simply told the truth behind a rebel with designs on His Majesty. And you're just as guilty! You're an intelligence operative, but you kept silent that she was human this entire time!"

Hearing that Joshua was "just as guilty," Ruri panicked. Even she knew that an intelligence operative shouldn't be keeping secrets from the very king he was sworn to serve. She had casually asked him to keep a secret, but this seemed like a *far* bigger problem than she bargained for...

Ignoring Ruri's flustered state, Joshua laughed scornfully without showing any signs of being perturbed. "In that case, why did you decide to withhold your report until now? Just because you're barred from entering sector one, Finn could have easily reported that to His Majesty at any time."

"Okay, well..."

"You simply dislike Ruri, and you say that now as a means to attack her. It's all been for your own benefit! Don't go saying it was for His Majesty or Finn just

because it's a convenient excuse, kid!" Joshua shouted in a rage.

Ewan was left speechless. He had no rebuttal.

"Finn," called Jade.

"Sir!" Finn replied, kneeling before Jade.

"This is the third time that Ewan has shown hostility toward Ruri. The importance of a Beloved is something that even an infant knows. Banning him from sector one was sufficient enough up until now, but he has been swept up in his impulses and has attacked a Beloved thrice already. This is a result of your mismanagement as his superior."

"I have no words, Your Majesty."

"Therefore, Finn, you shall be demoted by three ranks and are hereby banned from entering sector one for the time being. I expect you to re-discipline yourself as a soldier."

Ruri had no idea how much of a penalty being demoted by three ranks was, but being denied entry into sector one meant that he was being removed as a royal guard.

"As you wish," Finn replied, solemnly receiving his punishment without objection.

Ewan watched with his mouth agape, unable to understand why Finn was being punished, but once he came back to his senses, he took a step forward. "P-Please, wait, Your Majesty! Why is it that Brother has to be punished?!" Ewan asked, nothing about this sitting right with him.

Finn was about to reproach Ewan for speaking out against the king's decision without considering the circumstances, but Jade raised his hand to stop him. "I made myself clear just now. Hostility toward a Beloved is detrimental for the state. What you have attempted is tantamount to inciting harm toward the kingdom *thrice*. And that is naturally the fault of your superior for not properly reprimanding you. You asked me 'why,' but it is your fault and your fault alone as to why Finn must be held responsible and punished."

"This can't be... But I did that because this girl and Joshua were plotting

against you, Your Majesty...!”

“The Dragon King is replaceable. A Beloved is not. So which of those do you think we’d prioritize for the benefit of the nation? Ruri wanting to keep her being a human secret is not something that would harm the nation. Given that, there is no reason to blame Joshua for keeping a secret at the request of a Beloved. The entire reason that Ruri kept it from us in the first place was because of an error on our part.”

“Yes, but, Sire...!”

“Enough of this foolishness!” Euclase thunderously roared, interrupting Ewan before he could argue further in spite of Jade’s elaboration. “Can you assume the responsibility if your personal outbursts rile the spirits any further? Or do you intend on tarnishing Finn’s reputation even more?”

“...Grk,” Ewan grunted, scrunching his face up in utter frustration.

“Even if Ruri wasn’t a Beloved, your words and actions thus far have been completely baseless. Ruri has done absolutely nothing to you. And even after you came after her, she ‘plotted’ nothing—in fact, she convinced the spirits not to strike back,” Euclase added.

“I am placing you under probation for a few days. Calm down and don’t show yourself until you’ve realized the error of your ways. You’re dismissed,” Jade said in a stern voice.

Ruri watched Ewan’s face as Jade said that. It looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

Without uttering another word, Ewan bowed and took his leave.

Chapter 18: Future Goals

Ewan had exited the royal office. Ruri was concerned for him because of the expression he wore before he left, but she was more concerned about Finn at the moment. She jumped off of Jade's desk and stood in front of Finn as he was about to stand up from kneeling.

"Finn-san, I am so sorry. You didn't even do anything wrong." Ruri actually wanted to ask Jade not to punish Finn, but since she wasn't from this land nor did she know much of how it functioned, she couldn't find it in her to meddle in affairs.

"His Majesty just explained it a second ago, did he not? It is my fault for not being able to completely stop Ewan," said Finn.

Although Ruri understood his reasoning, to her it seemed as though he was simply caught in the crossfire.

Perhaps unable to overlook how down Ruri seemed, Joshua spoke up, devoid of his previous rage and back to his regular self. "Hey, no need to be so torn up over this, Ruri. This 'punishment' is practically no punishment at all."

"What do you mean?"

"We're about to go to war with Nadasha real soon, right?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"Well, as far as I know, His Majesty is going to entrust commanding the front line to his most dependable soldier, which is Finn. But in order to do so, he needs to step away from guarding His Majesty. Since he is being sent from the royal guard to the front line, the most dangerous and critical place on the battlefield, it's *technically* a demotion of sorts, but it's not like it counts as 'dangerous' considering we're up against regular humans," he said with a smile, his tone conveying no real sense of danger.

That alone helped Ruri relax, considering the word "war" by itself made her tense.

“But he was banned from entry to sector one.”

“Once war preparations start, he won’t have time to come to sector one anyway. So, His Majesty is doing this because once the war ends, his achievements will bump him back up to his old rank. I’m betting that everyone else knows that Finn dropping in rank is just a measure for him to participate, too. The only one who thinks otherwise is Ewan, who thinks Finn is being punished because of him. It’s just the right punishment for Ewan and his huge brother complex. Probably hurts way more than if he got punished himself.”

“Oooh, I see.”

Ruri looked at Jade, who had planned that far ahead, and Joshua, who had immediately understood his plan, with reverence. However, she felt a little dejected for apparently being the only one there who didn’t realize that.

“So, yeah, don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“Okay, I won’t,” Ruri replied.

Joshua rustled the top of Ruri’s head before saying, “Plus, under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t be a surprise if Ewan received an even stricter punishment. He’s only been getting away with slaps on the wrist so far because you’ve stopped it from escalating. Despite that, he goes ahead and...”

“But...”

It wasn’t Ruri herself that got angry at what Ewan said; it was her spirit entourage. In fact, she didn’t feel an iota of anger toward Ewan. After all, she had been on the receiving end of hate and verbal abuse because of Asahi for so long that a matter as minor as this didn’t affect her. She had confidence in her ability to tune things out. To her, it was no more than background noises in a crowded city. As a matter of fact, she couldn’t help but admire how well Ewan and Finn got along as brothers.

Punishing someone despite the victim being unconcerned was doing a number on her conscience. It wasn’t as if Ewan really did anything to her either. But when she explained that, Euclase quipped in a combination of exasperation and pity, “My word, just what kind of life *did* you lead in your world?”

From there, the topic shifted to Ruri. Joshua handled explaining her situation

thus far, giving a detailed account of the events from when Ruri was summoned to their world to when she was exiled to the forest and first met Chelsie. Aside from occasionally filling in the blanks where necessary, Ruri listened as she heard what happened behind the scenes—things she herself didn't even know. She grimaced in similar fashion to Jade and the others, remembering her rage back then. It was an emotional cacophony of depression, shock, and other bewildering feelings.

Joshua then added that Euclase so happened to hear his conversation with Ruri and knew her situation too. Although, neither ever thought their conversation would be overheard by not only Euclase but Ewan as well.

“...I see. I more or less understand now. So Ruri was never from this world to begin with, then?” Jade summarized.

“Meaning she *wasn't* ignorant in the ways of the world because she was a *cat*,” Agate commented, nodding his head in affirmation.

“You have gone through quite the tumultuous ordeal. If you hadn't been a Beloved, then you would have been killed by a forest-dwelling beast by now,” Claus said with a furrowed brow, apparently enraged at this news.

Jade seemed to share a similar sentiment as he said, “Seems the King and High Priest of Nadasha will need to be punished.” He then looked over to Finn, who nodded firmly as a sign of confirmation.

Ruri could feel something dark coming from Jade, but she pretended she didn't see it.

“Tell me, that Priestess Princess girl who caused all that ruckus? Was she close with you?”

“I've known her since childhood. Though, if you ask if we're 'close,' I could only answer that if we are, she is the only one to think so,” Ruri said, as she went on to explain all the damage Asahi had caused her back in her world. Everyone gradually started to look at Ruri with pity, but she continued to speak. *“...And there you have it. As much as I'm upset that I was framed for a crime I didn't commit, it was thanks to that happening that I could leave Asahi's side—a fact I have mixed feelings on, in retrospect.”*

“Nevertheless, that doesn’t change the fact that she is someone you know quite well,” Jade said, pausing to think for a bit. “So did you want to go to Idocrase like her and the others? I can’t bring them back to the capital, but if you were to say you felt more at ease with your fellow other-worlders, I could arrange...”

“W-Wait just a second. I know them, but I don’t have any desire to live with them, so I am fine as is.” Ruri definitely didn’t want to be sent back to Asahi after she finally managed to get away from her.

For a moment, relief flashed across Jade’s face, but then it went right back to being serious. “Ruri,” he started, “change of subject, but I’d like you to assist us in the war with Nadasha.”

“Uh, but I can’t fight...?”

“I wouldn’t let you go out into battle. I want you to assist Joshua in some background work.”

“Oh. Well, in that case...” Ruri consented, thinking that even she could handle it as long as it was in the background—though she was still slightly concerned.

“Do you have any requests in regard to Nadasha? You’re a victim here as well. I’ll do anything within my power for you,” Jade invited.

Ruri pondered for a moment and replied, *“If my belongings are still in the castle, I’d like them returned to me. Also, I recall the King and his people mentioning summoning the next batch of other-worlders if need be. I don’t want any more people victimized like we were. So I’d like to wipe their summoning method clean off the face of this world.”*

Stuff like her smartphone was most likely out of power and useless by now. She didn’t have much of importance on her at the time since she was on her way to campus, but they were the few memories she had of her world, so she wanted to reclaim them, if at all possible.

The spirits had told her that the path to her world would open at fixed intervals, but they also said that a hole big enough for a human to fall through rarely opened—most likely *very* rarely considering spirits had a very loose perception of time to begin with.

Even so, while she wasn't able to do anything about people *accidentally* falling into this world, she could eliminate the methods used to *intentionally* bring them over so that they could never be used ever again.

"Also, please allow me to punch both the King and Head Priest," Ruri requested with a stern look in her eyes, paw clenched.

Jade's lips curled into a smile. "Why stop at one punch? I'll let you hit them until you're satisfied. You can even claw at their bare skin, if you feel so inclined."

(Oh, wow, that's a great idea!) Ruri thought as she decided to sharpen her claws as much as she physically could before the battle commenced.

"...By the way, how does a person go about turning into a cat anyway?" asked Jade, abruptly changing the topic again.

The explanations he'd heard from Joshua were broad, general details centered around Nadasha, so they had skipped over the various odds and ends of Ruri being a cat. However, that was probably the detail Jade cared about the most. He wondered about it as he scanned Ruri's body, finding her to be no different from a regular cat.

Ruri held up her arm adorned with the bracelet for him to see. *"Anyone who puts on this slightly shady bracelet ends up transforming into a cat."*

"Even a dragonkin?"

"Yes, anyone," Ruri affirmed, remembering the time Chelsie put on the bracelet as a test and turned into a cat with grumpy-looking eyes. That mental image almost made Ruri burst into laughter, but she pounded her tail against the desk to stifle it and regain her composure.

"I'm in awe that something like that exists," Jade murmured in adoration. "Ruri, let me see your human form."

That was the moment all eyes in the room fell squarely on Ruri. Neither Joshua nor Euclase had any objections since they knew what Ruri really looked like, but the other four present were brimming with curiosity...

"...I'll be remaining in cat form for a while longer."

“Why?” Jade asked.

“It’s hard to turn back to normal with so many people staring at me.”

“I see. Then I’ll make them not look.”

“Still no.” Ruri proceeded to decline Jade’s insistent demands, ultimately bolting out of the royal office.

Ruri had managed to run away... or so she thought. When night fell, she somehow ended up in Jade’s room.

Now that it was known she was a human, she tried to go to her own room without any intention of sleeping in the same room as Jade like she had done in the past. But Jade seized her and brought her to his room like it was second nature.

“Um, so, Jade-sama? Why, pray tell, am I in your room...?”

“Why? You’re sleeping in here like usual,” replied Jade with a confused tone. He said it as if he still didn’t know that Ruri was a human.

But now that he *did* know, things were different.

“That was because it was assumed I was a cat, but now that you know I’m a human, I’m not too sure about a man and a woman sharing the same bed.”

“Cat or not, we’ve already slept together plenty of times, so I’d say it’s too late to care about that. Besides, you’re in feline form right now, not human.”

“I mean, but that’s not really...”

“Ruri, do you dislike being with me that much?”

“Urk...”

(Don’t be deceived. Don’t be deceived), Ruri thought to herself, but she faltered. Sometimes when she was being blunt or when she tried to leave Jade’s side, he would look at her with sad eyes and slightly slanted brows—a look Ruri found hard to fend off. Jade had recently become aware of that and couldn’t help but break it out when the chips were down.

Despite knowing he was using it to his advantage, seeing Jade, who was

normally filled with confidence and an unwavering personality, showing his vulnerable side, Ruri could only say, “...I don’t *dislike* it.”

His lips curled into a smile; he had effectively hoodwinked Ruri.

Ruri sighed, her suspicions of him putting on an act confirmed. “*I’ll go to my own room once you get married, Jade-sama.*”

“That won’t be for *quite* some time,” said Jade with a satisfied smile, reaching out for Ruri’s small head.

She thought he was going to pet her head, but he naturally slipped his hand over to her arm that wore the bracelet...

Instinctively reacting to danger, Ruri quickly jerked her paw back. Jade clicked his tongue in disappointment.

“I see I can’t let my guard down for a second.”

“Since I’m going to see you in human form eventually, don’t you think you should just get it over with already?”

“Yes, and if you keep being so pushy, it’s going to make it even harder for me to show you!”

Although disappointed, Jade seemed to concede, deciding not to touch on the subject any longer as he retired for the night.



It was the dead of night. As Ruri lay asleep, comfortably and silently snoring by Jade’s side, he slowly started to get up. Since the spirits, out of consideration for Ruri, would go away when she slept, the only two beings occupying this room at the moment were Ruri and Jade. In other words, there was no one to interrupt him.

Silencing his breathing, Jade approached Ruri as she slept on the opposite side of him and poked on her cheek to confirm that she was actually asleep. She flinched slightly, but she was indeed sound asleep.

Once he confirmed that she wouldn’t wake easily, Jade softly reached over to Ruri’s side. Then he slowly and carefully plucked the bracelet from her slender cat arm. No longer wearing the piece of jewelry, Ruri reverted back to her

human form. She slept curled in a ball, a holdover from being in cat form just a moment ago. The sight naturally brought a smile to Jade's face.

The room was pitch-black, but dragonkin had great nocturnal vision, so Jade could make out Ruri's form easily. She seemed much younger than he expected. He breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that she didn't resemble someone like Chelsie.

Next, he brushed aside the long hair concealing her face to better inspect her features. However, when he saw her exposed features, he gasped in surprise. Though he couldn't see the color of her smooth, silky hair or the color of her closed eyes, Jade already knew what they were. Her hair was a shiny platinum blonde and her eyes were a purplish-blue. The same as the girl he met only once. He had lost all interest in that girl once Ruri showed up, but he could never forget her face and her uncommon features.

But to think that Ruri and she were one and the same was inconceivable...

He was utterly stunned, but it all made sense now. Ruri visited Claus's house on the day following his run-in with the mystery girl. It was no wonder no one could find her. She had been a cat this entire time.

Jade suddenly remembered what Agate had said. He said the fact that he was so attracted despite exchanging only a few words was because he felt something in her. He said that was how dragonkin operated.

Jade now knew he was exactly right. He could clearly feel his emotions toward Ruri change once he found out she was a human. No, maybe he was only controlling his emotions because she was a cat. The feeling of loss that came from Ruri being away from his side and the uncharacteristic sense of unrest he felt when she ran away from the castle made it all clear.

"Agate is bound to be pleased," remarked Jade, confident that this would stop his incessant bride talk once and for all.

Jade took a tuft of her hair and placed his lips upon it. Then he returned the bracelet and took his place back in bed next to Ruri as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 19: Trial Period

“I’ve said it time and time again, but I’m not a cat, I’m a human. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I understand, I understand,” Jade replied, petting Ruri with a charmed smile.

(You don’t understand at all...!)

Ruri was currently resting on Jade’s lap. Ever since it was revealed that she was human, a combination of hesitation and awkwardness prevented her from getting on Jade’s lap like usual. However, since Jade wasn’t a fan of that decision, he picked her up and put her on his lap in spite of her wishes.

Although she tried to resist, in the end, Euclase told her, “Just sit there or else His Majesty will never get any work done.”

As such, Ruri lived life no differently than when everyone thought she was a cat. Even though her situation became common knowledge among those who worked in the castle, they all continued to look at her like a pet animal—perhaps because Ruri never *showed* them her human form.

If there was one thing that *did* change, it would be the way Jade acted and looked at Ruri. It was almost as if something was spurring his overprotectiveness; he coddled her more so than ever before. Ruri had almost always stayed near Jade’s side in the past, but he was keeping her close even *more* as of late. While that didn’t really bother her all that much, the one thing that did bother her was the expression Jade would give her.

Even now, as Jade was taking a small break from work and she was alone with him, he pulled out a bottle filled with sweets from his drawer. He opened the lid and plucked out a piece of candy, bringing it to Ruri’s mouth. “Here, Ruri,” he offered.

“I-I can eat it on my own,” Ruri said, refusing.

Jade stopped his hand in front of her mouth. From the wordless smile on his

face, she sensed he wasn't going to be pulling it away, so Ruri reluctantly opened her mouth.

The moment the small ball of candy entered Ruri's mouth, it melted in a matter of seconds, introducing her tastebuds to a taste and texture she'd never experienced before.

"This is delicious!" Ruri exclaimed, impressed.

"A present from my trip to the Nation of the Spirit King. I wasn't sure about giving it to a cat, but I thought it would be alright since you always eat the same food as us. But I see my worries were needless since you were human this entire time. Care for some more?"

"Yes!" Ruri replied. The delicious candy threw all her shyness out the window, and she had Jade feed her another piece, followed by another.

Ruri had buckled to the candy's sweet temptation, but when she came back to her senses, she looked up at Jade to see him smiling back at her—a smile that was brimming with love and affection. A smile with a hint of sweetness unlike the kind you would have toward a pet cat. That was the kind of expression Jade would look at her with as of late.

Ruri actually wanted to ask him if he could stop it as she was starting to misinterpret this as him being smitten with her—even though it was obvious he was smitten with her as a *pet*... At the same time, though Jade had been so persistent with his requests to see her in human form, out of the blue he suddenly stopped asking. It made her suspect his motives.

A few days later, Ruri was about to leave the diner after finishing her part-time shift when someone stopped her.

"Huh? Um, pardon me? Would you mind repeating that again?" she asked the person standing before her, not believing her ears.

"Sure... I said, I'd like to take you out," answered the dog-eared and dog-tailed beast-man, who seemed to be slightly older than Ruri.

This seemingly fine yet bashful young man who had suddenly stopped her repeated the words he uttered a second ago, confirming that she hadn't

misheard him. However, Ruri didn't take his words at face value.

"...So, by that, do you mean... you'd like to 'take me out' to somewhere specific, or...?" Ruri asked, thinking that this could be the stereotypical kind of miscommunication.

The man flusteredly refuted and corrected himself. "*N-No*, not that! I meant it as in 'I like you, and I'd like you to be my girlfriend.'"

That was when Ruri finally realized she was receiving a confession of love.

Some time had passed since she came out about being a human, returned to her everyday life, and resumed work at the diner. According to the young man, he had feelings for Ruri and her energetic work ethic, but he got worried when she stopped showing up for a while. He was probably talking about the period when Nadasha was trying to invade the nation. Apparently, everyone else kept giving him the push, telling him if he was that concerned to just get over with it and confess, which led to today.

Since he was a regular customer, Ruri was acquainted with him and had exchanged words with him on several occasions, so this came as a huge shock to her. It also made her reflect on herself. She saw this person on so many occasions, yet she never picked up on any hints that he felt this way, so she wondered if she was really *that* dense or not.

"Well, how about it? Maybe a date or something?" the beast-man asked, rocked by one part hope and one part indecisiveness.

Ruri replied to his offer and hurried off back to the castle.



"Euclase-san, are you here?!" Ruri called as she bolted into Jade's office to find not only Euclase but the usual members as well. All of their eyes widened at Ruri's dynamic entrance.

"I'm here. Why are you in such a panic? This is still the office of His Majesty the Dragon King. You should enter with more prudence," Euclase said.

"Urk... Forgive me, Jade-sama," Ruri apologized.

Jade simply gave a wry smile and told her not to worry about it. However,

only him and Euclase were behaving normally. Claus, Agate, and Finn all seemed confused and stared at Ruri in wonderment.

“Um, pardon me, but...” Claus said to Ruri as if addressing a stranger.

Ruri looked back dumbfounded, answering, “Yes? What is it, Claus-san?”

Looking somewhat surprised for some reason, he looked at Ruri even more curiously. “Might I inquire as to who you are? You seem to be an acquaintance of His Majesty and Euclase...”

It was only then that Ruri realized she was in human form. “Oh! It’s me, Ruri.”

Once she said that, everyone besides Jade and Euclase stared in bug-eyed shock.

“Oh, I see!” said Claus.

“Yes. Be that as it may...” Ruri turned back to Jade and stared straight at him. “...Jade-sama, you weren’t surprised at all when I came in here. Euclase-san aside, since they’ve seen me in human form, no one else knows what I actually look like.”

Ruri’s observation triggered everyone else in the room to look toward Jade as well, and they too noticed his odd lack of reaction.

Thinking of the only possible opportunity he would have, Ruri then asked, “Did you, by any chance, take my bracelet off when I was asleep?”

Jade neither confirmed nor denied it, but he looked off to the side and avoided direct eye contact.

His behavior said everything she needed to hear. She finally figured out why he had stopped his constant badgering.

“Accosting a sleeping maiden is deplorable, Jade-sama!”

“Such slander. I simply removed your bracelet a little; after, I put it back on just as I found it. I needed to know what you looked like in the event something should happen to you, as the person responsible for this kingdom,” Jade said, doubling down on his lie.

He spoke about being “responsible” and whatnot, but his odd glances to the

side as he said it squandered the entire spiel. Everyone present knew he was simply acting out of his own interests.

Seeing as how he didn't want to keep concealing the fact, Jade offered no more rebuttal and let out a single reluctant sigh. "My actions aside, what is with that hair?"

"My hair?"

Every other aide aside from Euclase was clueless, and they looked at Ruri's brown hair, perplexed.

"Oh, this? This is a wig. My hair color is apparently uncommon, so I wear a wig to disguise myself when I work at the diner," said Ruri as she took off the wig adorning her head.

As soon as she did, her platinum blonde hair spilled out. Agate, Claus, and Finn's eyes were glued to it. She then opened her pocket space and tossed the wig into it.

Claus addressed Ruri in a somewhat timid voice. "Ruri, that *is* quite the unusual hair color indeed, but would that be your natural hair color?"

"Yes, natural as can be," Ruri replied, tugging on her hair. "See?"

Platinum blonde hair and lapis lazuli eyes—Claus, Agate, and Finn all quickly looked back at Jade.

He nodded slightly with a wry smile. "What we seek is often right under our very noses. It seems we didn't need Joshua's help after all."

Jade's aides next turned their attention toward Euclase, asking them if they knew about this as well. Euclase simply nodded and said, "I'm sorry about that. I was bound to secrecy. But Joshua is the greatest victim here. After all, he was tasked with running around in search of her."

"Urk... I see," Jade replied.

Ruri simply cocked her head, unable to follow their conversation. "See what?"

"You needn't concern yourself, Ruri. So, what was it that you needed?" Euclase inquired.

“Right! Well, I thought you’d know the latest trends when it came to hairstyles and makeup and whatnot, so I’d like you to teach me some of them.”

“Of course I know, but why the sudden interest?” Euclase questioned.

Ruri giggled suggestively to herself before excitedly replying, “I’ve been asked on a date!”

Euclase was stunned. “By whom?!”

“A regular at the diner. A dog demi-human by the name of Jet. He confessed to me today. He asked me out on a date on a ‘trial period.’ I suppose that’s a thing in this world.” Ruri remembered being shocked when he told her it would be a two-week “trial period”—it felt like he was talking about mail-order shipping, not romance.

“...Yes, well, the stronger the mana, the stronger you’re affected by your mana compatibility. Among demi-humans with mana, it’s commonplace to establish a trial period to confirm each other’s compatibility. But that aside, since you’ve accepted his trial period, that must mean you’re smitten enough to accept this man... correct?” Euclase asked hesitantly.

“I can’t say I’m ‘smitten’ yet, per se, but Jet-kun is a good-natured, simple, and honest guy, so he might just make for a good husband in the future!”

“H-Husband...!”

“And since he’s a dog beast-man, the children we’d have will likely be soft, cuddly, and oh so cute!” Ruri replied emphatically.

“Children...?!” Euclase exclaimed, clutching their head.

Ruri had no idea why Euclase was reacting in such a way.

“Ruri, there isn’t any need for you to rush that badly to find someone to marry, is there? You are still young, after all,” Claus said.

Agate added, “Y-Yes, remember, a husband is your partner for life. Would it not be best to slow down, take your time, and think things over? If you meet someone, you meet someone. If you don’t, you don’t. You needn’t force yourself to search. Why not let things run their natural course?”

Both were attempting to get Ruri to reconsider. Although, considering Agate

had been trying to hurry Jade off to be wed by pushing boatloads of portraits of marriage candidates this entire time, his words didn't sound very persuasive.

Finn also joined the fray. "If you're not exactly smitten with him yet, then why not wait until someone you do like comes to light, just as Claus and Agate have suggested?" he said in a gentle tone as if he were talking to an adolescent.

Euclase vehemently nodded their head in agreement.

"But it's not unusual for a girl around my age to get married in this world, right? Also, I want to hurry and have a family. A family all my own... A place I can call home..." Ruri trailed off in a melancholy tone, her eyes slightly turned toward the floor.

Seeing her that way, everyone stopped trying to dissuade her. Ruri had been acting chipper and energetic, but once she suddenly remembered the concept of "family," it filled her with a sense of loneliness. That was likely the reason why she placed an inordinate amount of stock into the idea.

After a short pause drew over the room, Jade suddenly stood up and said, "I'm taking a short break." He then took Ruri by the hand and walked out of his office with her.



Once Ruri and Jade exited the room, the air among everyone grew thick.

"Perhaps it was a mistake to allow Ruri to keep working at that diner?" questioned Claus.

Finn and Agate remained silent, but the looks in their eyes said that they agreed.

They had just recently learned why Ruri would occasionally go missing for long stints on end. Once the truth was revealed, Claus and the others, including Jade, tried to convince her to quit, but Ruri staunchly refused.

Knowing there was no way to limit a Beloved's actions, they decided to take a wait-and-see approach. But seeing how things turned out, they should've stopped her, even if it meant breaking down in tears to persuade her.

"Our hands were tied," started Euclase. "Ruri said she wanted to work, so

that's it. And it was *your* son who set her up with that job in the first place. Besides, no one could have imagined that even if someone fell for Ruri that she'd actually reciprocate!"

Logic prevailed and Claus and the others agreed—in a somewhat reluctant manner. While Ruri worked in disguise, no disguise could hide her natural good looks and her Beloved-grade level of mana. It was only natural that men would show up interested in her. However, they had slightly underestimated the situation, thinking it wouldn't be a problem even if she were approached by such suitors.

Ruri and Jade had very compatible mana. Jade was likely hesitant in choosing a queen out of consideration for his compatibility to Ruri. Likewise, Ruri was likely being careful about picking a partner out of consideration for Jade. Therefore, it was unlikely someone suitable would show up for quite some time—or so everyone thought.

But much to their chagrin, Ruri was *not* of their world. It shouldn't have come to anyone's surprise that she wouldn't know that mana compatibility was the most important criteria for a marriage partner. If Ruri were to enter into a romantic relationship with that beast-man, then...

"Heads might just fly..." Euclase deduced.

Jade's doting nature toward Ruri was beyond normalcy. While they were still not officially "mates," Jade was starting to show signs that he practically thought of her as such. It was safe to assume that he was furious Ruri had found a man.

"Yes, that man's head might fly. Quite *literally*," Agate added, causing an awkward silence to befall the room.

Finding the silence unbearable, Euclase barked out, "Finn! *Joshua*! Summon *Joshua*! Have him investigate that man at once!"

"R-Right away."

Claus and Agate proceeded to talk among themselves in a somewhat solemn manner.

"We should take him into protective custody and send him outside the nation

if the situation gets dire,” Agate suggested.

Claus replied, “If we’re trying to aid his escape, perhaps we should leave him with the Beast King, since he has the power to oppose His Majesty if need be? No, perhaps the Spirit King is more suited toward mediating this...?”

Agate rebutted with, “Hmm, but one bad move and this might turn into an issue of *national* priority...”



As the royal office descended into chaos, Jade led Ruri to the garden. There wasn’t a single cloud in the sky as the sun shined bright on the flowers, making them appear to glimmer and sparkle. A comfortable breeze blew between the two, rustling Ruri’s hair.

Jade released Ruri’s hand, walked a short distance away, and transformed into his dragon form. The color of a dragonkin’s dragon form depended on the individual. However, since their bodies would essentially mimic their hair color, it meant that Jade was jet-black as a dragon.

Jade’s scales, glistening in the sunlight, were beautiful enough to make anyone fall in love with them at first sight, leaving no room for doubt that he was the king of all dragonkin.

Considering Ruri had no idea why he transformed into dragon form, she curiously decided to see where all of this was going.

“What is going on, Jade-sama? I see you’ve taken dragon form, but are we going out somewhere?”

“*There’s something interesting I want to show you, Ruri,*” Jade replied, pointing his gigantic wings upward and flapping them.

“Whoa!”

Jade lifted off of the ground with a huge gust of wind. At the same time, small items began to fall off from Jade’s body. They fluttered around but quickly rained down to the surface. They reflected in the sun, descending down like glittering snowflakes.

“Oh wow, so pretty.” It almost looked like pieces of rainbow sprinkling down

from the sky above. Ruri frolicked like a child at the whimsical sight she beheld. “This is incredible! Simply amazing!”

Jade looked on in satisfaction as Ruri smiled in delight.

She had never seen such a beautiful sight before. The glittering rainbow fragments retained their luster even while on the ground, making the flowers of the garden shine beautifully.

She watched as all of them fell. Then she stooped down and picked up one in her hand. “What is this? A... scale?” Ruri asked as she held it up, letting it reflect the light and sparkle.

The transparent and colorless item was in the shape of a scale... but instead of being thin like a fish scale, it had thickness and, at first glance, resembled a gemstone.

Ruri had quickly identified the things that had fallen off of Jade’s body as scales, but she was puzzled at their transparent nature—it was hard to believe they were the same jet-black scales Jade possessed.

“Yes, they’re scales. Dragonkin will periodically grow new scales and shed their old ones. I suppose you could liken it to humans ‘shedding hair.’ The old scales lose their color and are pretty much trash to a dragonkin, but to other races, they are heralded as treasures and sell for a high price. They’re processed into weapons and armor or turned into jewelry, among other things. It’s a way for dragonkin to make pocket money.”

Surprisingly, it wasn’t enough that the Dragon King position could change hands at any time by someone more powerful, it was also a *salaried* position. Apparently, he would make money by selling his scales.

The stronger the dragonkin, the better the quality and the higher they sold. The scales of dragonkin like Jade or Finn were so popular that people had to be put on a waitlist. They garnered enough that calling it “pocket money” was a misnomer.

“A dragon’s scales sure are pretty. They seem like they’d make for good jewelry.”

“If you like them, then take as many as you’d like.”

“Really? Then, I think I will,” Ruri replied, picking up a few of the scales near her feet.

“Are you sure that’s enough?”

“Yes, thank you very much, Jade-sama.”

“If you want them processed, then take them to the city. There are shops that will do it for you.”

“I’ll do just that. I wonder what I should make out of them.”

As Ruri thought about what to do with the jewel-like scales, another strong gust blew around her, kicking up a dust devil. The glittering scales on the ground piled up and gathered in one spot. Finally, Jade returned back to human form, picked them up, and placed them in a small bag.

“Jade-sama, please show me the next time your scales regrow, okay?”

“Caught your fancy, has it?”

“It has. It’s so beautiful,” Ruri said, this experience making her eagerly await the next time it would happen.

Chapter 20: Date

There wasn't a cloud in the blue sky overhead. Ruri's presence had brought along a mass of spirits, allowing the royal capital to experience an unprecedented streak of fine weather. Not only that, but Kotaro and Rin, the supreme-level wind and water spirit respectively, brought docile waters, calm climates, and suitable winds to move sailboats. They were invaluable assets to the port city since it hinged on the good graces of the weather to survive. Thanks to that, the popularity of the royal capital's Beloved went through the roof.

The fair-weathered capital was literally the perfect place for a date.

Ruri, excitement running high despite it being so early in the morning, stood before her mirror. She was in the middle of doing her final check on the outfit Euclase had bought her during a shopping trip—a dark blue one-piece dress with a lace floral pattern, a popular style among the people of the capital. With her preparations all set, Ruri went to Jade's office to tell him she would be stepping out.

"How do I look? Does anything strike you as odd from a male point of view?"

"No, you look absolutely adorable. That outfit looks great on you," Jade answered.

Ruri was pleased with his compliment, oblivious to the dangerous-looking glint in his eyes as he said it.

Behind Jade stood Euclase, Claus, and his aides, all looking as if they wanted to speak up.

"Okay, I'll be off now!" declared Ruri as she left for her date. For the sake of convenience, she was letting Rin and Kotaro stay behind and castle-sit.

The diner where Ruri had met Jet was in a neighboring town, but they were meeting up in the royal capital today since it was a date. The royal capital of the Nation of the Dragon King was also a stopover for other nations. Because of

that, it had a wide variety of things for sale. Ruri had never had a chance to casually look around the capital before, so regardless of whether or not she had a date, she was ready and raring to go spend her wages from the diner.

Ruri headed to where they were supposed to meet, but it seemed she arrived earlier than planned. However, it wasn't long before Jet came walking up. He arrived with a smile, out of consideration for Ruri, but his expression looked a tad stiff—or it could have been Ruri's imagination playing tricks on her. In spite of the tension, Ruri approached him with a sweet smile.

"Afternoon. I see you've changed it up from usual. Your outfit is adorable," said Jet.

"Oh, thank you."

"S-So, about the date..."

"Something the matter?"

Jet looked about as pale as a ghost, his expression somewhat nervous. "Sorry, Ruri, but I'm going home for the day. Forget I ever confessed to you."

"Huh?"

"If you had such a scary partner, then you should've just turned me down in the first place. See you later."

"Huh? Where are you going?!"

After bringing an end to an issue only he knew of, Jet ran off as if something, or someone, was chasing after him. Ruri reached out to stop him but ended up fruitlessly swiping at air.

"Huh... Huh?" Ruri was left all by herself, standing alone in the middle of the meet-up spot, dumbfounded by the extreme turn of events.

(What? What?! What just happened? Wait, wait, I have to calm down! Deep breath.) Ruri inhaled deeply and then exhaled slowly—to no avail. She was just as confused as ever.

Jet was the one who'd invited her out—the same person who just said something incomprehensible and walked off. *(Huh? Does that mean I just got dumped...? But why?!)*

Confused and alone, Ruri wandered the streets of the royal capital aimlessly, deciding that was better than going right back to the castle. After all, she left in such a joyous mood that going straight back would feel more than a little pathetic.

(I don't get it... Why did he dump me? Did I do something?!) Ruri asked herself. While it was possible she could have done something unintentionally to Jet, she didn't have a clue what that could be. (I'll try talking it over with Euclase-san.) Euclase was probably just the person to explain what had happened.

Ruri decided to switch gears, hoping to use this information for the next time. *(Thinking over something I don't know isn't going to do me any good, after all. Yeah, might as well forget about the bad and see the sights. Sounds like a plan.)*

It could be said that Ruri's ability to change gears on a dime was because she was so naturally bold. In actuality, she only said yes to this date because of impulse, mood, and panic. While she was acquainted with Jet, she didn't know much about him. So it could also be said that she didn't have enough affection for him in the first place to feel down about this.

Ruri proceeded to look around the various shops the royal capital had to offer, but she occasionally felt like someone was watching her. When she scanned around her, her eyes met with those of a man clad in all black.

The suspiciously dressed stranger definitely looked familiar. *(Hey... That's the person I ran into when I was being chased by those thugs!)* Unprepared to run into this man *yet again*, Ruri became frightened. *(I've got to run!)* She remembered that when she ran into those thugs before, that man had said he was looking for her. Although she was wearing her brown wig right now, there was a chance he'd recognize her face.

She subtly turned around and then quickly walked through the crowd, slipping between people. She walked for a little while, making turns in random directions where possible, and then checked behind her. She saw the man following behind her, unperturbed. This sent Ruri into a frenzy. *(Grk, is he trailing me?!)* She suddenly picked up the pace. However, she couldn't create much distance between them, perhaps because of the difference in the length

of their legs.

She walked for a while more, but the man remained behind her. At this point, Ruri was convinced she was being trailed, but she had no idea why he was chasing her. The man was keeping a certain distance away, possibly because he was in public, but Ruri had set her resolve anyway. She intentionally went down an empty alleyway, pulling out the same odor-emitting ball she'd used on the street thugs.

Ruri turned around. "Take this, you perverted stalker!" she shouted, ready to throw the ball right at the man tailing her.

"W-Wait, Ruri! It's me!" the man said in a panicked tone, taking the cloth off of his face.

Out from the wraps came a familiar face, one which made Ruri pause, eyes wide.

"Jade-sama?!"

"Yes, it's me."

"What are you doing here?" Ruri questioned, shocked.

Jade seemed to have difficulty answering. "I was trying to check... I mean, I was walking. Just a little stroll. I need to check the lives of the people, as their king, so I sometimes take walks around town."

"I think that's commendable, but why are you in that suspicious outfit? It's so sketchy."

"These clothes have a light magic seal on them. If I went into town normally, I'd end up naturally intimidating those around me. I need to go incognito so as to not expose myself."

For Jade, the strongest of the dragonkin, that was most likely a measure he needed to take to walk around town in secret. Nevertheless, Ruri wondered if he could do it in a *slightly* better way than that.

Since he was dressed just like the suspicious man she ran into before, Ruri asked, "So, Jade-sama, does that mean you saw me before I first went to the castle?"

“Yes. I wanted to talk more, but you ran away at full speed,” Jade said with a wry smile, admitting it was indeed him.

“Well, I think anyone would be cautious if they met a suspicious person in an empty back-alley like that. In fact, even just now, I was afraid because you were following me.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Wait, don’t tell me you came to peek in on my date?”

“I would never!” Jade replied, his slight lack of composure suspicious. As soon as Ruri focused her eyes on him, he blatantly changed the subject. “Anyway, what became of your would-be date?”

“Urk.” It was Ruri’s turn to be shaken. Jade’s question stabbed her deeply, and the air grew thick around her. “He went back home, for reasons I don’t fully comprehend. And *he* was the one who invited *me*! How does that make sense?!” Ruri said, venting her rage—albeit too little, too late.

As Ruri fumed with anger, Jade gave her a couple of light pats on the back as if to calm her down. “So did you have any plans after this, Ruri?”

“Well, I did, but not anymore,” she replied, seeing as how she was *supposed* to be on a date with Jet right now.

“I see. Well, why don’t we go around the capital together?”

Ruri had no other plans. She had intended to take in the sights of the royal capital to begin with, and since another person would probably make for a more fun experience, Ruri nodded her head in consent.



Ruri strolled around town together with Jade. She had never been with him outside of the castle walls, so it felt a little peculiar.

They came upon the royal capital’s commercial district, a district close to the port and home to a variety of foreign and domestic goods. There, a bevy of shops and stalls all packed together lined the roads. Merchants called out to advertise their wares, and shoppers walked around in full force—the whole area was bustling with activity. Since it was at its most crowded in the

afternoon, it was difficult to walk through without bumping into someone along the way. Jade grabbed Ruri's hand without a moment's hesitation—possibly to prevent them from getting separated.

"There are quite a lot of shops here, aren't there?" Ruri asked.

"Yes, many merchant ships come to the royal capital from other nations, so there is a great variety. Since people come to buy those imported goods, this district is always packed. However, the more people visit, the more problems occur. Which is why seeing them occur as they happen is key."

"Do you come to town often, Jade-sama?"

"When I have a free moment from my duties, yes."

Ruri suddenly remembered the incident with the thugs. "That reminds me. I ran into the two men who chased after me before. They said that they'd reformed, and they thanked a generous benefactor who set them both up with work. I assume you're that benefactor, Jade-sama?"

Jade suddenly smiled, pleased. "Ah, yes," he started, but his eyes turned a little stern. "So, Ruri, what are your plans from now on?"

"Plans?"

"You're in this nation at the moment, but since you're not really a resident, you needn't be bound to the Nation of the Dragon King. If you decide to go to any other nation, then I'll negotiate something with the people there. So, what do you want to do, Ruri?"

Ruri quickly replied without a second guess. "If you and the others say it's okay for me to stay, I would like to stay in the Nation of the Dragon King—in the castle." At first, she'd planned on going back to Chelsie's house once she educated herself a bit in the royal capital, but when she came back to the castle from Chelsie's before, she felt as if she had come "home." Somewhere down the line, the castle had become Ruri's home. If she could, she wanted to remain right where she was.

Jade clearly looked relieved upon hearing Ruri's answer and chortled to himself.

“*You* were the one who asked, Jade-sama.”

“I had no choice. I did say I wouldn’t limit your range of activities when we first met, so I can’t say ‘don’t go.’ And by principle, I wouldn’t be able to limit a Beloved’s actions anyway. I’m sure the Beast King has been having a tough time thanks to that...”

“There is a Beloved in the Nation of the Beast King, correct? What are they like?”

Despite the innocuous nature of the question, Jade didn’t answer right away, which caused Ruri to peer into his face. Based on his expression, he seemed hesitant to say anything. But after a short pause, he finally spoke up. “...You’ll see them sooner or later if they’re in the Nation of the Dragon King.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“That aside, I had been brainstorming how to stop you if you decided to leave, so I’m relieved that the need for that is over.”

“Brainstorming what exactly?”

“Well, let’s see... I thought of preparing all sorts of sweets you like and clothes and jewels popular with girls, but you could get those things even outside our nation. In the end, I came to the conclusion that perhaps leaving it up to Chelsie would’ve been the best option.”

“Makes sense considering Chelsie-san has been sort of my caretaker in this world. I think I would find it hard to leave if Chelsie-san asked me not to. Oh, but if I were to get married, I would *have* to leave the castle, yes? Once that happens, I would need to search for a home somewhere in the capital.”

“You needn’t worry about that.”

Ruri wondered why she “needn’t worry,” but it wasn’t as if she was getting married right away. She figured she would think about it after she found a partner, so she kept her question to herself.

Ruri proceeded to explore all the shops around town with Jade. That was when a certain shop caught her eye. It was a jewelry shop, but one that made their products by processing dragonkin scales instead of gemstones.

She looked at the scale-crafted items decorating the storefront. “So this is how they process and use them. I see,” Ruri said. They truly looked no different from regular gemstones. “Is it possible to process the scales you gave me into jewelry like this?”

“Yes. Why don’t we ask, if you’d like?”

They entered the shop and asked for scale processing. After pondering over what she should make, she decided on a versatile hair clip and handed the scales to the clerk. She tried to pay the fee for the processing, but Jade put out his money first.

“Oh, I’ll pay for it since this is for me,” she said.

“Don’t worry, just pay with this.”

“No, but...”

As Ruri hesitated, the clerk was all smiles and said, “Young miss, you should let him treat you. I’m sure he just wants to give his girlfriend a nice present.”

“Excuse me, but we’re *not* a couple!” Ruri quickly corrected her, trying her best to stay civil.

“Oh, is that a fact? I just naturally assumed since dragonkin give their romantic partners scale-crafted jewelry to symbolize giving their mate their dragonheart.”

Ruri found herself shaken. Of course, Ruri knew that Jade hadn’t given her his scales with that in mind.

Unlike Ruri, who was shocked speechless, Jade was the picture of calmness.

The processing went faster than expected. When it was completed, Jade took the hair clip, reached over to Ruri, and set it in place. “It looks great on you,” he said with a soft smile as he touched Ruri’s tresses, causing Ruri to suddenly blush.



After receiving her new hair clip, Ruri bought presents for Rin, Kotaro, and Chelsie for taking good care of her so far and Euclase for buying her so much on their shopping trip. They followed up their shopping with a snack from one of the local food stalls.

As Ruri enjoyed walking around the capital, they came up to a bridge. It was made out of stone and was more than wide enough to allow horse-drawn wagons to enter the flow of traffic. They came in all shapes and sizes, but since the royal capital was a port city, it had plenty of these kinds of bridges.

Ruri crossed the bridge as she chatted with Jade. Suddenly, her eyes trailed away and stopped on a person standing at the midway point of the bridge—a familiar-looking person.

“Ewan?”

Ewan looked contemplative as he gazed over the sea below the bridge. His overly gloomy expression brought the worst-case scenario to her mind.

“No, be rational about this!” Ruri shouted, running over to Ewan and grabbing his body on the off chance something might happen.

“Gwah!” Ewan yelped from being abruptly tackled from the rear and almost toppled over from the impact. Out of reflex, he managed to grip the handrail of the bridge to avoid a fiasco.

Patting down his chest in relief, Ewan then glared sharply at the bothersome intruder who bum-rushed him. “What the hell are you doing?! I could have fallen!”

Looking at the frantic expression on Ewan’s face, Ruri finally realized that she had been under an egregious misunderstanding and scrambled to let go of him.

“Huh? Oh, I’m sorry. I was convinced that you were ready to jump off the bridge...”

Ewan stared at Ruri with an accusing eye, asking, “How do you know my name? Do you work at the castle?”

Ewan’s question reminded Ruri that while he knew she was a human, he didn’t know what she looked like in human form.

“That reminds me, you haven’t seen me in this form, have you? It’s me. Ruri.”

Ewan grimaced, turned his back to Ruri, and started to run away like a bat out of hell.

“Oh! Wait a...” This was the second time today she had to engage in a chase with a guy; it made her well up with frustration. Ruri clenched her fist and chased after Ewan.

Jade cried out, “Wait, Ruri!”

“Why are you running away?!” Ruri yelled.

“Why are *you* chasing after me?! I told myself that I wouldn’t get involved with you anymore! Stay back!!”

Ruri disregarded his plea and used her magic to capture Ewan in a matter of no time. “I gotcha, you li’l scamp,” she said, slowly chuckling under her breath.

“Eek, don’t come near me!” Ewan shouted, backing away with a face frozen in fear like he had seen a ghost.

“What? I don’t think that’s any way to speak to the generous person who stopped you from taking a fatal plunge.”

“I wasn’t planning on taking a *fatal plunge*! Just leave me alone! Nothing good comes from getting involved with you!”

Ruri wasn’t the type to nonchalantly brush off a comment like that. “Humph. So why did you look like you were about to jump back there, then?”

“Listen to what I’m saying!”

“Yes, yes. Alright, I’ll listen, so let’s move somewhere we can have a nice, long chat.”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant by that!”

“Oh, there you are, Jade-sama. Would you mind if we take a seat in a cafe?”

“Huh? Your Majesty?!” Ewan exclaimed in surprise, finally noticing Jade who had quickly caught up to them.

Ewan’s body was at Ruri’s mercy as she wrapped him in wind, surged the gusts to control his movements, and forced him into a nearby cafe. Ewan had

no aptitude for spirit magic, so he quickly gave up trying to resist. He knew he was no match for Ruri and her Beloved powers.

“So, tell me what happened.”

“I’ll tell you a thousand times; it doesn’t concern you. Why are you interacting with me so casually anyway? I made some terrible accusations against you when you didn’t even do anything, so you should be furious at me, right? Even if something did happen, you’d ignore me, wouldn’t you?”

“You realize it yourself, don’t you?” asked Ruri.

Ewan found himself stuck for a response and awkwardly looked away.

“For starters, why are you so hostile toward me? You wouldn’t be saying stuff like that if you didn’t have *some* sort of reason. Your relationship with Finn-san or whatever isn’t the only reason, is it? I think I have a right to know considering all the abuse you’ve been spewing at me.”

Ruri sensed it every time he’d hurled insults at her—he would momentarily look sad. Whenever she would see that, Ruri would be less angered and more curious over what his expression meant.

Ewan peeked at Ruri like a child checking their parent’s reaction after being scolded. Then he awkwardly opened his mouth. “...You know I’m half-human, half-dragonkin, right?”

“I’m aware.”

“I don’t know if my mother being human is to blame, but I have never been able to see spirits. Even though other kids born from demi-humans can see them. Because of that, I was bullied to hell and back. It’s not like I *chose* to be born with this inability... That’s why I tried to pull you away from Brother once I found out you were human. I didn’t want Brother having a child like me. I didn’t want Brother’s child to go through the same hell I went through... I thought that if I spoke up, they’d all lose faith in you. Once a dragonkin chooses their partner for life, they settle on no one else. That’s why I wanted to stop things before that happened. It was a selfish desire. I can safely say now that I’m sorry for unjustly badmouthing you this whole time. But I needed to stop things at all costs.”

“Uh-huh... But that only explains your conduct *after* you figured out I was a human, no? What about before that?”

“...I was just snapping at you. But even though I did, you were way too nonchalant about it, so I kept on doing it. I can’t see spirits no matter what I do... No matter how much I call, no matter how much I listen, no matter how long I wait, they never show up for me. Then some cat comes along saying they’re a Beloved and adored by the spirits. You obtained what I wanted without exerting an ounce of effort. I couldn’t let that stand,” Ewan said, hanging his head and looking as if he was trying to contain something inside of himself. “Not only that, I was forced to spend less time with Brother because he had to bodyguard some cat on their aimless strolls through the castle...”

It seemed it all led back to Finn in the end... Ruri looked on with a sense of exasperation.

“Brother has always protected me. He’s always treated me like we’re real brothers, encouraged me despite being unable to use spirit magic, shielded me from everyone’s abuse, and taught me how to fight without spirit magic. I owe my brother the world, and yet... And yet, I just drag him down... I’m a worthless excuse for a little brotherrrr!!” Ewan yelled at the top of his lungs, sprawling out on the table and crying.

Ruri and Jade looked on, eyes wide, as the cafe patrons all curiously glanced their way. Ruri hastily put up a barrier around them, soundproofing their voices.

“I don’t deserve to be his little brother! In fact, I don’t even deserve to face him... Those thoughts stew in my mind, and I always find myself running out of the castle and to the bridge, uhghh...”

“Jade-sama, it seems he’s endured more from that punishment than we expected...” Ruri whispered.

“Hmm...” Jade whispered back. Jade was the one who had administered the punishment, so he seemed to be in a somewhat awkward position.

Ruri patted Ewan on the shoulder to console him. Listening to his side of the story, she couldn’t find it in her to hate the boy. He was someone who knew pain. Although he seemed a *smidge* too biased over a certain individual, he was capable of doing things for others. And just as he said, she didn’t have to exert

an ounce of effort; she started off with the spirits protecting her. She most likely couldn't understand his struggle, but he did think back on what he did and apologized, so Ruri thought of making it water under the bridge.

Figuring out what to do with the young man before her, Ruri went into action.



Through repeated trial and error, Ruri successfully managed to get Ewan to divulge his true feelings. He formally apologized to her and she accepted, which put her more at ease because she ultimately wanted to get along with Finn's little brother.

Ewan's face no longer held any malice toward Ruri nor was it weighed down like it was a few moments ago—he looked somewhat free and refreshed. But while it was great he was in a better mood, a new issue arose...

“—So yeah, there was that. Well? Don't you think my brother is incredible? Oh and there's also...”

“Uh, yes, yes. I get the point; Finn-san is amazing,” Ruri said, rushing to cut him off. It felt like he was going to continue bragging about Finn indefinitely.

Sampling the various dishes that Ewan ordered as an apology for his actions up until now, Ruri spoke of her experiences from her time in her world, from her time after being summoned, and from her time spent as a cat.

Both Ruri and Ewan gradually opened their hearts to one another as they talked. Unexpectedly, she meshed well with Ewan, who wasn't one to mince words. Perhaps Ewan felt the same way because he was becoming more relaxed and friendly.

She regretted that she didn't try to reach out to him a little sooner. Although, she wished he would cool it with the endless bragging about his brother. Even in front of Jade, he didn't know when to stop with his brotherly love.

Jade focused on his meal and let his talk slip in one ear and out the other, looking rather unamused the entire time.

“You went through a lot yourself, huh...?” Ewan said in a reflective manner, possibly relating to her experience.

Jade stopped eating and looked up. “Ewan,” he said, addressing him directly. Ewan’s face tensed up. “I presume that you have realized you were wrong about Ruri. That is why I won’t be saying anything. Judging from your current attitude, I know you won’t try to do anything else against her. If Ruri allows it, I will lift your probation and reinstate your access to sector one.”

“That would be fine by me,” Ruri said, absolving him of his prior actions without the least bit of concern.

“I apologize for inconveniencing you,” Ewan said with a deep bow.

Jade nodded. “Just so long as you understand. Don’t worry your parents like that. Once they heard about your rudeness toward Ruri, they sent a rather lengthy apology letter via Finn,” Jade said, referring to Ewan’s aunt and uncle who served as his adoptive parents and not his actual deceased parents.

Upon hearing that, Ewan looked even more apologetic.

“Oh, did they?” asked Ruri, completely unaffected. “They didn’t have to concern themselves with this,” she remarked under her breath.

“You should show a little more care. Even if you weren’t a Beloved, anyone would be in a bad mood after taking that much verbal abuse straight to their face. But it *was* toward a Beloved. It apparently made the lord and lady of the land scream in distress.”

“If they are in that much pain, I can only suggest someone get them some stomach medicine. But I would never complain over something so minor. Sure, it put me in a semi-bad mood. But it was pretty much like a child throwing a tantrum, and it felt as though I was actually getting through to him as opposed to someone like Asahi, where communication doesn’t work. On that merit alone, that makes him more than likeable.”

Jade smirked. “If you’re comparing him to her, then you must find most people extremely likeable.”

“Naturally,” Ruri responded.

Besides, though he was probably older than Ruri in terms of dragonkin age, the baby-faced Ewan looked younger than her. His features tickled her motherly instincts. There was also the fact that from her point of view, as someone

without siblings, the situation didn't upset her as much as it charmed her to see someone who loved their older brother that much.

"A child's tantrum... Well, you're not wrong about that, but... At any rate, I'm sorry for how I treated you," Ewan said, apologizing to Ruri once again.

On that note, Ruri was able to safely reconcile with Ewan.

Chapter 21: Invading Nadasha

Preparations to invade Nadasha were making steady progress. Jade and the others were swamped with work as they headed into the final arrangements, leaving Ruri with nothing to do.

As she sunbathed in the garden in cat form with the spirits, Joshua came up to her. “Heya, Ruri.”

“What’s up, Joshua?”

“We’re all ready to start invading Nadasha, so I’m here to give you a rundown on our plans.”

The time had finally come. Ruri stood up straight and listened.

“First, you’ll be infiltrating Castle Nadasha along with me.”

“Right.”

“Finn will lead the army to Nadasha’s royal capital. Naturally, they’ll likely return fire, so they’ll probably cross swords before getting a chance to enter the city. Nadasha will, of course, send in troops, weakening the security at the castle. That’ll be our break to apprehend the King and his priests. After which, we’ll retrieve the belongings you asked for and destroy the summoning spell.”

“That’s fine, but I don’t know where my things or the summoning spell are being held.”

“No worries. I’ve already investigated that. All you need to do is come along.”

“Oh, wow! A diligent intel op as always!” Ruri said, looking at Joshua with respect.

“Didn’t you want to sock it to the King and the Head Priest while we’re at it?”

“Oh, right. I’ve got to sharpen my claws, then,” Ruri said, clenching her paw and ejecting her currently dull claws.

“Damn right. Scratch the hell out of ’em and leave a scar or two.”

“Heh, heh, heh, that King and Head Priest better get ready because here I come!”



Outside the royal capital of Nadasha, Finn and the dragonkin from the Nation of the Dragon King commenced their attack. A large number of Nadashian troops retaliated in an attempt to stop their charge. And just like their last conflict, there was a clear power gap between the dragonkin and their human opposition.

Seizing the castle by brute force with so much of a clear advantage would be quick work, but that would only cause needless bloodshed. This entire war would come to a close as soon as they apprehended the King and the Head Priest, anyway, since they were the only ones pushing for any kind of war efforts. Because of that, Finn and his troops’ mission was to draw attention toward them in order to make it easier for Joshua’s group to infiltrate the castle. If they were to go to the castle with a huge amount of hot-blooded dragonkin in tow, then they might just overthrow it—literally *and* figuratively. Since plans were set to use the castle in the future, the Nation of the Dragon King wanted to leave it as intact as possible.

As the dragonkin fought, being careful not to go overboard, Ruri was commencing her infiltration of Castle Nadasha according to plan. Ruri and Joshua talked while concealing themselves in a vacant patch of shrubbery outside of the castle.

“Alright, you wait here, Ruri.”

“Aww, what? But I want to go too.”

“No dice. If anything happens to you, I’m dead meat,” said Joshua as he eyed Kotaro and the other spirits around Ruri. Rin was accompanying Finn since anyone using Spirit Slayer on them again would mean big problems. “So yeah, you stay put for now. Besides, you’re not able to fight, right? Leave it to the pros.”

“Yes, sir. As you wish, sir,” replied Ruri, reluctantly following orders. She had her claws all sharpened for the King and Head Priest, but this took the wind right out of her sails.

Joshua gave orders to the soldiers standing to the side of Ruri. She had been certain it would just be her and Joshua infiltrating the castle, but she was told that two people wouldn't be enough. The plan was that after the operatives infiltrated Castle Nadasha and gathered all the soldiers and castle workers in one location, they would give the signal and the soldiers waiting on the outside would storm the castle.

"Hmph, seems they're a tad confused in there," Kotaro said, opening his eyes. He had been sitting silently with them shut this entire time.

"You can see inside?"

"I am the Spirit of Wind. Wherever the wind reaches, so do my eyes."

"Ooh, you're incredible, Kotaro. So what does it look like right now?"

Kotaro started to speak with a proud tone, perhaps delighted that Ruri had complimented him. *"There are indeed few soldiers within the castle. The King is sitting on the throne. The people wandering around inside belong to the Nation of the Dragon King. There seems to have been a sudden and rather drastic change in the enemy's stationing, so your men are scrambling to correct their course of action, but it seems that everything is going according to plan."*

As Ruri listened to Kotaro's report, Joshua came to stand next to her, and the other soldiers looked their way and listened in as well.

"Hey, did you get that? Everyone, get ready to storm the castle," ordered Joshua.

Although there was a general plan, it wasn't proceeding exactly to the letter. Their men on the inside were actually taking longer than scheduled, but they couldn't afford to go in and check. Even when they tried to, the wind spirits didn't seem to want to go inside the castle for some reason. They were forced to believe in the operatives and wait, which was making everyone involved worried and restless. But upon hearing that the plan was being executed on the inside, a wave of relief settled over everyone. However, it wasn't long before their expressions tightened and they focused on sieging the castle.

"Hm?"

"What's wrong, Kotaro?"

"I don't see the Head Priest within the castle."

"Is he at the shrine, then?" Joshua questioned, pointing at the structure next to the castle.

Kotaro focused his attention over to the inside of the structure, but it seemed to be only occupied by low-ranking priests—not a single high-ranking priest was inside.

"There are hardly any priests inside there either. I don't see the high-ranking priest anywhere within the Land of Nadasha."

"Wha?! What do you mean by that? He ran away?! No, wait, I never got any reports about that..." Joshua said, his voice cracking. He was in a huge panic because they'd come this far but the most significant set of people besides the King were missing. He now needed to consider if they should still execute the strategy. He also needed to chase after and apprehend them if they indeed made a getaway. However, that wasn't going to be a viable option if they weren't within Nadasha.

"Calm down. I simply said I do not see them, not that they aren't around."

Both Joshua and Ruri cocked their heads at Kotaro's turn of phrase. "Um, I don't get what you're trying to say," said Joshua, confused.

"There is one location that is difficult for even me to see. That unpleasant presence... That's..."

Just then they received the signal that they had been eagerly awaiting.

While Kotaro's observation was concerning, Joshua decided to prioritize carrying out the plan. "Alright, charge!" With Joshua's cry, the soldiers all charged into the castle at once.

However, Ruri held her position with Kotaro and the other spirits. By the time she finally entered the castle, everyone was disarmed, the King had been apprehended, and everything was over. However, the Head Priest was still apparently nowhere to be found.

"Joshua, what should I do now?"

"First, we secure your belongings and destroy the summoning spell. So, about

that place Kotaro mentioned, the one that was hard to see..." Joshua trailed off, shooting Kotaro an inquisitive look.

"It's below ground. It's hard for spirit power to reach there."

Joshua tensed his brow and squinted his eyes.

"Is there something there?" asked Ruri.

"You bet there is. The place we're heading to right now holds the room they summoned you into."

Ruri remembered the events of that time and felt confusion arise. *"Huh? But the room we arrived in once we were summoned wasn't below ground."*

"There's a magic circle located directly below the spot the summoning took place. Say, Kotaro, about the spirits' power not reaching? Does it have anything to do with why the wind spirits didn't want to check the castle's inside when I asked them? Why is it hard to reach to begin with? Is that even possible?"

"It's impossible. There is no place devoid of a spirit's presence and no place a spirit can't go. Under normal circumstances, that is. But if Spirit Slayer is being used, then that's a different story. We cannot use our powers anywhere that is being utilized."

"Which means they're currently up to something in the basement."

"Then, the chances of them causing another explosion like back on the battlefield are..." Ruri started.

"Quite real," Kotaro finished.

They continued to walk toward the room Ruri was first summoned in while being vigilant, but soon every spirit aside from Kotaro stopped in their tracks and wouldn't take another step further.

"What's wrong, guys?" asked Ruri.

"We can't go any longer..."

"Feeling weak."

Confused, Ruri looked at Kotaro.

"All of you, stay there," Kotaro said.

They all seemed like they wanted to follow along, but they couldn't find it in themselves to advance any further, so they disappointedly watched as Ruri walked off without them.

As they picked up the pace, Kotaro looked over to Joshua. *"I feel a power bigger than I expected. It might be best to seek reinforcements. If the spirits won't approach this place, it means that the magic is in use at this very moment. Seeing as how that magic absorbs both spirits and mana, you dragonkin won't be able to use your magic either."*

"Seriously?!"

"I'll be busy protecting Ruri, so I might not be able to get around to protecting you as well."

Joshua scrambled to strengthen his forces. The fact that the magic was in use naturally meant there was someone there using it. He had the bare minimum of his men guard the prisoners while the rest went with him. Now all assembled, they opened the door to the room Ruri had been summoned to.

However, contrary to their expectations, no one was inside. Joshua, along with everyone else, investigated the room for clues. They discovered a thin gap set in the wall, and Joshua used his draconic strength to kick the gap at full-force, destroying the wall and revealing a staircase leading underground.

"Ooh, a hidden staircase!" Ruri was unexpectedly impressed at the ninja-esque setup.

"Alright, let's do it. What about you, Ruri?"

"I'm coming along, of course!" She probably should have waited to be safe, but she didn't want to be left behind after coming all this way.

Joshua smiled knowingly, possibly understanding the intentions behind Ruri's answer. For insurance, Joshua put Ruri in the middle of the group, and then they descended the dim, torch-lit staircase.

Ruri's cat body was small and prone to being stepped on by accident, so Joshua carried her in his arms as they gradually walked down the hidden staircase. The rest of the men around him stared at him with envy. He could feel the tension in the air instantly deflate as he saw where everyone's priorities

lay at the moment.

Once the party reached the bottom of the dim, damp-smelling staircase, a thick metal door revealed itself. Ruri jumped from Joshua's arms and went over to Kotaro's side. Joshua then signaled with his eyes to one of the soldiers, prompting him to open the door. Once he did, they rushed inside all at once.

Ruri and the others could hear a violent uproar from inside. Amidst the noise, Joshua could be heard nervously saying, "Oh crap, I really can't use magic!"

Ruri hesitantly peeked inside the room. The interior was brightly lit and everything was visible, unlike the dim exterior. Since magic wasn't an option, Joshua and his men were knocking people out one after another with their weapons and hand-to-hand combat. Even if they couldn't use magic, they were still dragons. They were so agile that humans didn't stand a chance at landing an attack on them. The priests tried to retaliate with their "Spirit Slayer" magic, but since they were all opposed to physical labor, the old men lacked stamina and started to collapse to the ground like flies.

There were more inside the room than they expected, so it seemed like it would take a while before they finished clearing it, but Ruri was relieved to see that Joshua and the others would be fine. She instead focused her attention on scanning the room. It was more pristine than she'd expected—a hall about as wide and built about the same as the room above. However, the one difference from the room above was that there was a gigantic magic circle drawn on the floor, emitting light.

"Kotaro, is that Spirit Slayer magic too? If I remember correctly, the summoning magic is located here, underground, right?"

"Aye. It's the summoning magic that called you here. It takes a considerable amount of mana to widen the path. I assume they're compensating for the mana they lack by pulling from the world around them. I can feel power coursing into that magic circle. An unpleasant presence, indeed."

Even Ruri could feel the power flowing into it. Once she comprehended that, a terrible inkling ran through her mind. *"Say, would the reason there's power flowing into that magic circle be because they're trying to use it to summon people again?"*

“Most likely.”

Ruri immediately lost her cool. They were trying to victimize *more* people? All for their own self-conceited reasons? They had no idea how much pain and sorrow she went through, having her family and home stripped away and being forced against her will to come to an unknown world without any clue how to survive. The fear, the sadness, the confusion—it was so painful. And every time she remembered her world, it was probably going to be just as painful. These people had absolutely no consideration for the feelings of the people whose lives they ruined.

Ruri was filled with an uncontrollable rage. She was past the point of no return. She looked around the room, running her eyes over the area to find the Head Priest. The entire room was in chaos as Nadashian priests tried to flee from the dragonkin soldiers trying to capture them. Amidst that, Ruri spotted a face she could never forget—the mean-spirited codger and the root of this evil, the Head Priest.

Once she found him, she leapt in. In Ruri’s mind, the dangers of jumping into a battle in progress went clean out the window.

“Wait, Ruri!” Kotaro desperately cried from behind her, but it was to no avail. Ruri was so enraged that his voice didn’t reach her ears.

Slipping in between the people in the heat of battle, she beelined straight for the Head Priest. A priest that had either been punched or kicked would occasionally come flying her way, but she skillfully dodged their bodies and reached her destination.

Carrying her momentum, Ruri pounced at him at top speed. *“You no-good bastard!”* She used her claws, which she’d sharpened specifically for this day, to scratch the Head Priest’s cheek, leaving a wound.

“Wh-What is this cat doing here?!” the Head Priest questioned, falling over on his rear. He held his cheek and looked at Ruri in fear.

“Don’t think I’m through yeeeet!”

“Eeek!”

The moment Ruri tried to pounce at him once again, the Head Priest took out

a transparent stone from the box behind him and tossed it toward Ruri. It was immediately followed by an explosion.

“Nyaaaaa!”

At the very last second, Kotaro stood in front of Ruri to shield her. The barrier of wind that Kotaro deployed protected everyone, including Ruri, from harm. However, the blast from the explosion sent her small body tumbling on the floor.

“Are you alright, Ruri? You shouldn’t push yourself, darn it,” Joshua scolded in a disappointed tone, rescuing her from the floor.

Still slightly groggy, Ruri said, *“Thank you, Joshua... Was that explosion from the Spirit Slayer?”*

“So that’s what they used in the war, huh?”

While the blast was smaller than the one on the battlefield, the stone caused the exact same explosion. Ruri looked around the room to see that it had singed the ceiling and damaged several places.

Almost all the priests were laid out on the floor, and Kotaro was constricting the Head Priest with his wind magic.

“Kotaro.”

“Are you okay, Ruri?”

“Yes, how about you, Kotaro?”

“I’m fine. This is the same kind of magic item, I suppose, as the bracelet you’re wearing. Just like Spirit Slayer magic itself, it absorbs power into the stone and causes an explosion soon after. I never would have imagined they’d constructed something so devious...” Kotaro uttered in disgust.

Once Joshua checked the box behind the Head Priest, panic seeped into his face. Inside was a mountain of explosion-causing stones of all shapes and sizes.

“We gotta do something about these stones,” Joshua warned.

“We could always put them inside my pocket space, but are there any more? If there are any around the castle, they could likely explode...”

Ruri and Joshua both turned pale. One stone was enough to cause an explosion, but if there was a large amount of stones elsewhere and something caused them all to explode, then it was quite possible that the entire castle would come crumbling down. And if that happened, they would be buried alive, so it was extremely dangerous.

Joshua barely knew anything about Spirit Slayer himself. No one even knew what triggered them to activate. They wanted to ask if there were any more stones around, but the priests in the room had all been knocked out by Joshua and his men, leaving the Head Priest as the only one who could provide answers. However, even he had fallen unconscious, foaming at the mouth in shock. While everyone was initially worried that he might be dead, he was apparently still breathing for the most part.

That was when Kotaro interjected, *“Ruri, place what we have now into your pocket space for the time being.”*

“You’re right, I’d better hurry and put them in there before they explode,” Ruri said, agreeing.

“Yeah, please do,” said Joshua.

Ruri threw the dangerous items into her pocket space and breathed a sigh of relief.

Joshua repeatedly slapped one of the priests awake and threateningly asked if there were any more stones in the castle. To their great relief, he informed them that there weren’t. In the meantime, he split everyone up—one group was to transport the priests out and the other group was to search for anything pertaining to Spirit Slayer magic.

Ruri immediately stood before the summoning circle, asking, *“But how are we supposed to destroy this thing?”*

“Simple,” Kotaro replied. He used a razor-sharp gust of wind and chopped up the stone floor. The light that had been emanating from it this entire time dissipated, taking any sign of the mana flow with it.

“Well, that was anticlimactic. But even if we destroy the magic circle, they can remake it so long as they still have a written record, can’t they?”

Joshua nodded. “Yeah, they can. That’s why we’re going to search every nook and cranny.”

Some time passed, and the spirits who parted ways halfway reconvened and made their way downstairs. Everyone then split up and searched the castle and temple. The group of spirits wasted no time; locating the Spirit Slayer spell was a matter of grave importance to everyone, including the spirits themselves. Thanks to their help, their search wrapped up sooner than expected.

It was then showdown time.

In order to have her little talk with the King and Head Priest before they were hauled off to the Nation of the Dragon King, Ruri asked Joshua to isolate them in a separate room.

Castle Nadasha had already been placed under the control of the former Nadashian moderates, who were under the Nation of Dragon King’s care. The only ones in the room were the ex-King and ex-Head Priest, two individuals stripped of any social status. However, both had brazen expressions, almost as if they didn’t comprehend the turmoil they themselves had caused.

It was time for Ruri to bring their cocky attitudes down to size! These two old fogeys had no more authority, no more royalty. Even if Ruri roughed both of them up a little bit, she wouldn’t be charged with treason. No one would chide her for going at them as much as she wanted. In fact, people would most likely thank her for a job well done.

“Joshua, take off my bracelet.”

“Aye, aye. You enjoy to your heart’s content, now,” Joshua said with a devious smirk, taking off Ruri’s bracelet as instructed.

Ruri reverted to human form, leaving the King and Head Priest stunned. However, their reactions were due to a cat turning into a human and not them recognizing Ruri herself. She pulled out her wig and glasses from her pocket space and put them on. When the King and Head Priest saw her like that, their shock turned into full-blown astonishment.

“Y-You’re...” they both stammered, pointing at Ruri as if they had seen a ghost.

“Glad to see you *scumbags* doing well!” Ruri greeted, slowly walking up to them with an ear-to-ear smile. “Are you two ready? Well, it’s okay if you’re not. In that case, it’s time for you to feel the wrath of a girl who can *never go home ever again!!*”

Both of the men had not only abducted Ruri and the others by summoning them to this world but were planning on summoning more victims without ever learning their lesson. Needless to say, Ruri showed *neither* of them any mercy. It was just what a couple of people who nonchalantly incited a war with no regard for people’s lives deserved.

Ruri balled her hand into a fist and, in the next instant, the screams of the King and Head Priest echoed throughout the castle and beyond.

After the cries had settled, a very refreshed-looking Ruri came out of the room, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Oh, are you done?”

“Yup.”

Joshua took a peek inside the room, but he seemed surprised by what he saw. “What? I thought you were going to pay them back harder—like really rearrange their faces. Are you sure this is enough?”

“Well, I’m just an average girl; I’m not strong enough to rearrange anyone’s face, really. Besides, it’d end up hurting me, too. So, yeah, it’s fine. I’ve gotten more than my fill.”

Considering what the King and Head Priest did, Ruri’s revenge was a pretty light punishment. However, she was able to take out all of her pent up rage, which took a massive load off of her shoulders.

Jade and the Nadashian people would be administering their real punishments. Both would need to make amends for everything they helped incite.

Chapter 22: Post-War Cleanup

Several birdcages big enough to easily fit a human inside were lined up in front of Ruri. “What are these?” she asked.

“They’re for transporting the King, the Head Priest, and all the rest back to the royal capital,” Joshua explained.

Just then, they were all brought out with their hands tied behind their backs, and each was escorted to a birdcage of their own. The soldiers transformed into dragon form, grabbed the cages with their feet, and flew in the direction of the Nation of the Dragon King. According to Joshua, it was faster to carry them in dragon form than transport them via land. If the King or any of the others had acrophobia, it was bound to be a terrifying ride—something Ruri secretly hoped to be the case.

“Oh, Ruri, we collected all the belongings from the people summoned to this world, so give them a check,” Joshua said, pointing to the cargo ready for transport to the royal capital.

Among that haul was a wooden box which held Ruri, Asahi, and her classmates’ things. The King had informed Joshua and his men that Asahi had taken custody of Ruri’s belongings, but since they didn’t know what in Asahi’s room belonged to whom, they gathered everything into one container. It didn’t just contain the bag she was carrying to campus; it contained a bunch of other things thrown in because they weren’t sure of the owner.

Even so, there wasn’t a lot of extra stuff, so Ruri quickly found her bag among the other things. She opened it and checked the contents, taking a trip down memory lane. Inside were her textbooks and notebooks that she barely got to use, along with the pocket watch her parents gave her to commemorate her getting into college. They all filled her with joyful yet bittersweet memories of days past. It had only been two years and some change, but it felt even longer since she’d experienced the excitement of being accepted into college. She had come so very far from all she knew.

As she shut her eyes tight and let these unfocused emotions pass, she felt a soft sensation against her cheek. When she opened her eyes, she was met with Kotaro's face, who once again nuzzled against her forehead.

"Are you sad, Ruri?" Kotaro asked with a concerned look in his eyes.

Realizing she accidentally made him worry, she petted Kotaro's head as if to convey she was just fine.

"Don't fret. Rin and I are here for you."

"Thank you, Kotaro. I just got a little sentimental for a second," Ruri said as Kotaro laid down in place and wrapped his fluffy body around her. His warmth helped to soothe her nerves.

She was brought to this world against her will, but she never would've imagined she'd meet people who cared for her so much. Meeting them caused her to think differently about her experience—it made her more grateful that she was brought to this world.

Regaining her composure, Ruri resumed checking the contents of her bag. Her textbooks, notebooks, writing utensils—all of these seemed fine, but she grimaced as she pulled out the pouch that held her makeup products and over-the-counter medicine. (*Makeup products... I guess usable? Depends on the item. Medicine, on the other hand... Yeah, not going to fly.*)

She then pulled out her smartphone, the item she'd been looking for—and immediately slumped her shoulders in disappointment. "I figured as much. No way it would hold a charge this long... *Sigh...*" Her pocket watch was fine since it was a windup model, but her smartphone couldn't possibly still have power after years on end. And there was no way to charge it in this world since electrical appliances didn't exist.

Holding her smartphone with the pitch black screen in one hand, she breathed a sigh, accepting defeat... or so she thought.

One of the spirits that had been around Ruri the longest called out to her, *"Ruri! I can charge that for ya."*

"Huh? Oh, right. Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment," Ruri said as a courtesy, not believing the spirit at all.

"No, I can really do it!" the spirit asserted, unwilling to accept no for an answer. He put his hand on her phone and after a moment said with an accomplished smile, *"You can turn it on now."*

Ruri then turned on the power, half in disbelief, and to her great surprise, it successfully powered on. "It turned on! How?!" she exclaimed with eyes wide.

"Eheh, coz I'm a lightning spirit. I practiced a lot so I could do this. Give me praise~" the spirit bragged, hands triumphantly on his hips.

Ruri was going to praise him, but she was still absolutely floored. "'Practiced'? But this world doesn't have electrical appliances, right?"

"I'm a spirit from the world you originally lived in, so I know about cell phones and computers too!"

This was a shocking revelation. "Wait, what do you mean?!" Ruri asked.

In addition to the lightning spirit, all the other long-time spirit companions who had hung around her since she was first able to see spirits started to raise their hands one after another, saying "me too" in various tones of tiny voices.

"Yeah, we've been by your side the whole time, so we followed you along when you got summoned, Ruri," one of them explained.

"Yup!" said another spirit.

"Huh?! The whole time?"

"Yup, the whole time."

"From the moment you were born~"

Ruri looked at the spirit, her mouth agape, unable to form words.

As she was reeling from this news, Joshua interjected from the sidelines. "If you were with her when she was summoned, couldn't you have made sure she never came here to begin with?"

Ruri heard those words and quickly shot her gaze back up at the spirits.

"Yeah, but, Riccia always said never to spoil Ruri when it came to her education. That we should only help her when her life was in danger. At least, until she was able to see us, that is."

“Riccia?” Joshua asked, looking to Ruri for answers.

Ruri covered her face with her hands and awkwardly said, “...My mother.”

This proved Ruri’s hypothesis of whether or not her mother was able to see spirits. However, because she had hypothesized that to a certain degree already, it wasn’t nearly as shocking as the last revelation.

“Why didn’t you tell me something before?”

“Because you never asked.”

“Yup!”

Ruri’s shoulders slumped. She cursed the fact that she didn’t ask sooner. She knew ever since she became able to see the spirits that they were indulgent with her. They would try to grant any wish she had within their power. Asahi had been fawned over by everyone around her, getting anything her heart desired. As a result, she was spoiled, which ended up warping her personality to an unrepairable degree. Ruri’s mother probably saw that, feared for Ruri going down the same path, and told the spirits not to help her. In that regard, Ruri was thankful. Although, her mother probably didn’t imagine that Ruri would be summoned to a different world. Because of that, she wound up here because the spirits deemed that her life wasn’t in danger and never intervened.

It was just plain bad luck. Being summoned to another world despite having individuals by your side with the power to prevent it from happening was bad luck incarnate.

“I don’t get it, but hang in there, alright?” Joshua said in an attempt to console the downtrodden Ruri.

“Grr, that’s not going to help me now! Let’s just say I’m grateful I’m getting to experience life in a fantasy world and leave it at that!” If she were still in her world, she never would’ve been able to use magic or see people who could transform into dragons. This was all an invaluable experience. That was her positive spin on it, at least.

“Alright, that’s the spirit!” Joshua added.

After regaining her composure yet again, she did a complete check of her bag

and placed it into her pocket space. Joshua also placed the cargo set for the royal kingdom into his pocket space. Then he transformed into dragon form and took to the skies.

Ruri, still in human form, saddled herself on Kotaro's back, and they followed after Joshua in the air.

"Sigh... So fluffy. It's so healing~"

"Don't fall off, now."

"Don't worry; I'm clinging on tight," Ruri said, leaning forward and holding on as she nuzzled her cheeks up against his comfy fur. It seemed to be healing the shock she took a few moments ago.

Joshua chuckled at the sight, and after flying for a while, he expressed his gratitude as if he'd forgotten to do so earlier. *"Oh right, Ruri. Thanks a lot."*

"For what?"

"For this time and last time during the war. It's thanks to you that everyone managed to come out safe and sound even though they busted out that Spirit Slayer on us. If it weren't for you, a whole lot of us would have gotten wiped out back on the battlefield."

"But I didn't really do anything. Rin was the one who saved Finn-san and the others, and Kotaro saved us all this time around. If Asahi had never heard that the King and Head Priest were dangerous, then she wouldn't have had any incentive to participate. Luck just worked in our favor."

"But if you weren't around, then we wouldn't have high-level spirits allied with the Nation of the Dragon King, right? Spirits are usually neutral and don't take sides for anyone. Plus, that Spirit Slayer magic put us in a situation where the spirits wouldn't lend us their aid. It's definitely thanks to you that when all the other spirits wouldn't help us, we had a supreme-level spirit step in. So yeah, you may have never wanted to come to this world, but I'm personally glad we met you. Well, I think His Majesty probably thinks that the most. He does dote after you a ton, after all. But I share the same sentiment for sure."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I appreciate the thanks, but you should be thanking Rin and Kotaro since they put in the most work."

“Well, of course. Still... those two were real low-life pieces of work.”

Quickly realizing he was talking about the King and Head Priest, Ruri nodded.

The King and his attempted invasion on the Nation of the Dragon King wasn't without consideration. They conducted it under the presumption that the Spirit Slayer magic would allow them to fight toe-to-toe with dragonkin. The Nation of the Dragon King's forces would have taken a huge hit in the last conflict if Rin hadn't been there, so their plans weren't half-cocked by any means. However, their methods were the worst. The majority of the soldiers who invaded the Nation of the Dragon King were peasant farmers, powerless moderates, and nobles related to them. The King and Head Priest had given them stones as good luck charms without informing them of Spirit Slayer's potency, setting them up to activate in a chain reaction once Asahi's stone was activated.

No one who held a stone could have possibly imagined what would happen. Asahi's stone meant they could penetrate the very core of the Nation of the Dragon King's forces. Their plan was to set off those explosions to deal damage to the dragonkin, using their own men as disposable pawns—from the nobles earnestly hoping to do well enough in the war to restore their houses to the impoverished citizens conscripted as soldiers—as well as the Prince and Asahi. Then, with the current Priestess Princess deceased, the priests would evoke their summoning magic to conjure up a suitable replacement. This seemed to be the reason why the inside people shifted positions and took some unplanned measures. However, due to Ruri's presence and the supreme-level spirit's work, all their designs went belly-up. From the King and Head Priest's perspective, it was probably the biggest form of retribution anyone had ever taken against them.

The party soon returned to the castle, landing on the large terrace. There stood the large birdcages holding the King, his cohorts, and a mass of the nation's soldiers.

The awaiting dragonkin soldiers began clearing out the cages, but once they caught sight of Ruri, they couldn't keep their eyes off of her. Every one of their faces was asking, “Who is this?”

Though it was well-known by now that Ruri was a human, how she looked in human form wasn't common knowledge yet. So when the dragonkin soldiers just back from Nadasha whispered who she was, the awaiting soldiers all looked at Ruri in shock.

"I'm starting to feel like some mythical beast," remarked Ruri.

"Well, a Beloved is way rarer than any mythical beast, that's for sure," Joshua counter-remarked. Considering she was standing right next to the sacred beast of the Nation of the Spirit King, that was probably doubly true.

"Alrighty, shall we give our report?" Joshua suggested.

"Sure thing," Ruri said, and together they headed toward the royal office.



In Jade's office stood the main members of Jade's court along with Finn and Rin, who had returned before Ruri and the others. Once Rin saw Ruri enter the room, she flew from Finn's shoulder over to her.

"Thank you, Rin."

"*You're very much welcome,*" she said as she perched herself atop Kotaro's head.

"So, how did it go, Ruri? I presume you scratched a lasting scar on the King and his cronies?" asked Euclase with a smirk on their face.

Ruri flashed a complacent smile and replied, "But of course. I really made them weep. They didn't ever guess I'd be back, so it left their stupid jaws right on the floor."

"I see. Well done, Ruri. Come here and tell me the whole story," Jade said, beckoning Ruri over with a wave of his hand.

Ruri put on her bracelet, shifted into her cat form, and jumped up onto Jade's lap as he sat in his chair.

Jade furrowed his brow in clear displeasure. "...Why did you turn into a cat?"

"Force of habit?"

Jade was right, however. Now that her human form was public knowledge,

there was no need to take the extra effort to turn back into a cat. But old habits die hard. She had put on her bracelet without even thinking about it.

“Oh well, there’s nothing wrong with this, is there? My cat form is lighter anyway.”

Jade seemed slightly miffed, but Ruri had already settled down in his lap.

After that, Ruri, Joshua, and Finn each gave their own account of what happened during the operation.

“So they still had magic items imbued with Spirit Slayer after all, eh?”

“We collected all records pertaining to the Spirit Slayer magic, Your Majesty,” Joshua stated. Since the spirits helped them conduct such a widespread search, they found a majority of the records, but there was still one avenue they hadn’t checked as of yet. “Just to be sure, I believe it would be best to interrogate the priests in custody and collect and investigate all written records from the shrine.”

Jade nodded in agreement, saying, “Yes, let’s employ the Nadashians as well.”

Many of the written records of the shrine were historical documentation about Nadasha. While they had talked to the man in charge and brought back anything that could remotely pertain to Spirit Slayer magic, Joshua and the others hadn’t scanned over all of it. The rest of the work was being handled by the troops still in Nadasha, but checking all the written records there would take some time. And even if they found anything, they couldn’t just take another nation’s possessions back without permission, so they needed to cooperate with Nadasha.

However, the only people currently running Nadasha were the conservative nobles who had been expelled from the kingdom, picked up by Chelsie in the forest, and put under Jade’s care. Jade had lent his aid to these people who wanted to be free of the clutches of their king, a king selfish enough to incite a war with no regard for his own nation.

Since Nadasha was usually the nation to incite war first, there were even talks at the Alliance of Four conference that Nadasha should be absorbed into the Nation of the Dragon King. It made perfect sense. There were a large number of

refugees in the Nation of the Dragon King already, and with a King and Head Priest who continuously used politics to line their own pockets, the nation wasn't being properly run.

Despite that, Jade denied that proposal and made an executive decision that after winning the war he would give back Nadasha to the Nadashian people. Not only that, he promised the moderate nobles that he would even help fund the post-war restoration efforts. Since they owed the Nation of the Dragon King and Jade so much, the Nadashians would likely happily cooperate.

"I'd like you to incinerate the records recovered," Jade ordered.

"Very well," replied Joshua.

"What should we do about the Spirit Slayer stones?" asked Ruri. The stones collected from Nadasha were temporarily in her pocket space. On top of that, they still had the stones recovered from the battlefield stored in Finn's portion of pocket space. *"If they aren't necessary, then should I dispose of them?"*

"Can you?" Jade questioned.

"Yes, I can. I'll toss them into the part of my pocket space for unneeded items and have Lydia erase them along with the entire room."

"I'm not sure I follow, but if you can safely dispose of them, would you mind doing so?"

"Not at all. In that case, I'll dispose of them all, including what we collected during the war the last time."

"Please do," Jade said, nodding. He turned to Finn and Joshua. "You went to battle with the Nadashian forces, but I assume you didn't produce any more casualties than necessary?"

They both nodded, and Finn answered, "Yes, Sire. We engaged them outside of the royal capital, but I instructed the soldiers to hold back, so we managed to keep any damage to a minimum." Finn's main job was to distract the soldiers, not defeat them, so there wasn't much damage to be had.

"The troops infiltrating the castle ran into a few scuffles themselves, but once we apprehended the King and his priests, the people of the castle peacefully

complied—meaning no serious damage.”

“Were you able to sort things out with the moderate nobles?”

“They were originally the largest faction and the ones responsible for keeping the King, the priests, and all of his war-hungry cohorts at bay. Even the nobles who were for the war have lost their say in the nation now that the King has been apprehended, so right now, Nadasha is starting to get back on track with the moderates running things.” There were still dragonkin troops stationed in Nadasha, so there were few to oppose the moderates now that they had a huge backing from the Nation of the Dragon King in place.

“Good. However, it’s going to be tough to rebuild all on their own. Euclase, start preparing aid for them at once.”

“As you command.”

Hearing the word “aid” reminded Ruri of the town in the midst of a food shortage due to all their male workers being stolen away. *“Jade-sama, please send them plenty of food! There are so many people going hungry in the towns and villages away from the royal capital,”* Ruri strongly suggested.

Jade simply smirked and petted Ruri’s head. “You’re right. Be sure to send food post haste. Nadasha is likely lacking in other provisions aside from food as well. Also, manpower... They probably have a number of people injured, so deploy doctors over there, too, right away.”

“At once, Your Majesty,” Euclase replied.

Once Jade finished listing off some other things that seemed essential for rebuilding Nadasha, Euclase took a short bow and exited the office. The other aides all returned to their individual work.

(So it’s finally over...) It had been a little over two years since Ruri had been summoned to this world. The scheming King and Head Priest had been arrested, Asahi and the others were starting their new lives elsewhere, and the method that summoned them all here in the first place had been eliminated.

At last, one chapter had come to a close.

Chapter 23: Victory Celebration

With the war at an end, the prisoners in custody at the castle returned back to their homeland of Nadasha. There was still an influx of refugees coming into the nation, but it would peter out once the restoration of Nadasha took shape.

One day, after all the post-war cleanup was starting to wrap up, Euclase charged into the royal office. “Today is the celebration! Your Majesty, if you’ll excuse me,” Euclase said as they picked up Ruri, who was in cat form in Jade’s lap, by the scruff of her neck and walked out of the room with her.

“Euclase-san, what are you doing out of nowhere?”

“I said we’re celebrating, did I not? We’re going to publicly reveal your human form at the victory celebration tonight. Otherwise, every worker in the castle will mistake you for an intruder whenever you walk around in human form. Not every person who works here can see your spirit entourage, after all.”

Euclase brought her to a room full of dresses all lined in a row. They were all the dresses Euclase had bought for her when they last went shopping. Ruri had thought she’d never have a chance to wear them, but it seemed that the time had come.

Euclase prompted her to change. Returning to human form, Ruri was about to undress herself in front of the several maids that came to assist her, but then she noticed that Euclase was still in the room. “Eeek! Euclase-san, you can’t be in here! Please, get out!”

“Silence! My heart is that of a pure and chaste maiden. Now quit your complaining and change.”

Ruri wanted to quip back that a “pure and chaste maiden” wouldn’t go to the training ground to see the nude male body—but she kept it to herself. She tried to get them to leave, but she was no match against Euclase, who had the heart of a maiden but the strength of a man.

Once she finished getting dressed and had her hair and makeup done by the

maids, Euclase stood before her with an enormous smile. “Ohohoho, I am simply *brilliant*,” they said, singing their own praises in utter delight.

Ruri wanted to give them a piece of her mind as she watched their boastful display, but the dress Euclase prepared was indeed a stunning selection on their part. Made from a light pink fabric, it had an A-line skirt covered in small lace flowers along with an eye-catchingly big deep-blue ribbon on the back. The hair clip made out of a pink pearl-like stone matched the ensemble and also went well with Ruri’s platinum blonde hair.

Euclase then ran her out of the room, stating that they had their own preparations to tend to, so Ruri headed toward Jade’s office.

As soon as Jade laid eyes on her, he found himself frozen, completely caught off guard.

Jade’s lack of reaction, however, started to worry Ruri. “Does something look off? Euclase-san said it was fantastic, and even I have to admit I think it looks good on me, but maybe...”

“...H-Huh? Uh, no, that’s not what I meant. I was just fascinated by how *stunning* you look, Ruri,” Jade replied with a smile, having come back to his senses. Ruri’s face flushed, and Jade chuckled and reached for her cheek. “You’re cute as a cat, but I think I prefer this form more. I can better see your expressions.”

Ruri’s heart was sent into a frenzy as she shouted from the corners of her mind, but they were then interrupted by someone conveniently informing them that the preparations for the celebration had been set. Jade clicked his tongue under his breath, but Ruri breathed a sigh of relief, unaware of Jade’s displeasure.

It wasn’t as if Ruri *wasn’t* used to receiving simple compliments, but Jade’s were bad for her heart and she found herself clueless as to how she should react. She didn’t know whether to be happy or sad that he was treating her the same as when she was a cat, even while in human form. While she was grateful there were no sudden shifts in his behavior, there was a part of her that figured that meant Jade only saw her in one light, which actually disappointed her.

Escorted by Jade, Ruri proceeded to the reception hall where the victory celebration was starting.

The hall itself was huge and could easily hold three hundred people. A chandelier shimmered gorgeously from the ceiling high above as an instrumental accompaniment played down below. From ladies dressed to the nines like Ruri to soldiers immediately identifiable by their uniforms—there were already a ton of people partaking in the victory celebration ceremonies.

Since this celebration was being held in a castle, she imagined a refined party on the upper crust of society filled with posh and sophisticated people exchanging witty banter. In reality, it was a rowdy shindig filled with drinking and singing. There was nary a soul modestly sipping from their glasses. Stalwart soldiers lifted and drank straight from barrels of booze as large as themselves, while those who failed to keep up formed a pile of drunken bodies on the floor. The entire hall was wrapped in the smell of alcohol and boorish laughter. The sights were a far cry from the upper crust and more similar to a downtown pub.

Thanks to that, Ruri's tense shoulders immediately relaxed. "This sure is something..." Ruri commented, her cheeks stiff from a different kind of pressure in the air.

Jade simply smiled awkwardly as he scanned over the familiar sight unfolding before him. "Dragonkin tend to get fired up and love to party. When other demi-humans get roped into their antics, things end up like this. But today is a good day. There are fewer people here because we still have men out handling the aftermath of the war, which means fewer fights. Normally, they would decimate the castle." It became somewhat customary on the following day to see the ones recovering from their hangovers mending the damage they did.

"This is a *good* day...?" Ruri mused.

The second that Ruri walked into this wild ruckus of a party, the booze guzzling came to a halt and everyone looked in surprise at the mysterious young girl holding hands with their ruler, the Dragon King. She had a sacred beast from the Nation of the Spirit King in tow and a tiny magic beast riding on her shoulder. Her uncommonly colored platinum blonde hair and purplish-blue eyes were enough to turn heads, and her appearance perfectly complemented the

enchantingly handsome Dragon King as she stood by his side. This girl stood out so much that even the drunkards had their eyes fixed on her.

On the other hand, the same spirits that were always by the white cat Beloved's side were floating next to this mystery girl. For many of those in attendance, this caused some confusion. However, when they were informed by the people who had seen Ruri in her human form prior to this, it didn't take long for word to spread that this mystery girl was none other than Ruri.

Despite it being a cocktail party, Ruri and Jade had seats prepared for them, which both of them took. There was also a table prepared for them nearby, which was where Rin could be seen—bringing her head toward a glass of wine twice her size and filled to the brim. Although Rin was merely using the body of a magic beast that resembled a clione, her head split open in clione-like fashion, revealing a host of tiny tendrils wiggling out like Medusa's hair, which she then stuck into the glass as if they were straws and slurped up the wine.

The shock from witnessing this gruesome sight before was still etched into Ruri's brain. She wanted to think that the reason Rin's body was gradually turning a faint shade of red was because she was tipsy from the alcohol and not because the red wine was showing through her skin.

Turning her attention away from Rin, she felt something push up against her lips. When she focused her eyes, she saw that Jade was holding a bite-sized tart against her lips.

"Jade-sama, it's fine. I can eat it by myself!"

"What? Not a fan of these?" Jade asked as he picked up another sweet and brought it to Ruri's mouth.

She wanted to object that the choice in sweets wasn't the issue, but it seemed he liked the act of personally feeding her, and she knew from experience that no amount of persuasion would sway him once he decided on something. She reluctantly opened wide, now convinced that Jade only thought of her as a cat.

Unlike the dissatisfied Ruri, the reaction of the onlookers spelled a different story.

“Ooh! His Majesty is feeding her himself!”

“His Majesty finally has someone.”

“This will put the advisors in a better mood. And to think that the girl he picked was the Beloved. My, what a joyous turn of events!”

Dying of embarrassment and oblivious to the celebrating spectators, it would be a little longer before Ruri learned the true meaning behind Jade’s behavior.



The celebration approached the wee hours of the night yet showed no signs of slowing down. In fact, it only seemed to be getting more intense.

Ruri slipped out of the party hall to take a little break, walking off into the garden with Kotaro and Rin. She breathed a well-deserved sigh and looked up at the millions of glittering stars. As she gazed at the beautiful night sky, she was reminded of her world. She had been holding on to a tiny sliver of hope that analyzing the magic circle that had brought her here would uncover a way for her to return, but she pretty much knew it was impossible. It wasn’t that big of a shock since the spirits had told her it was definitely impossible beforehand, but that wasn’t to say she didn’t feel *anything* as a result. She was actually pretty sad about now being completely cut off from her original world.

However, what was done was done. She could complain all she wanted, but it wouldn’t change her situation, so it was best to find happiness in this world—that was the sentiment Ruri came to terms with. Given that she was bold and quickly picked herself up after being knocked down, she would probably be just fine living in this world going forward.

Just then, footsteps came from behind. She turned around to find Jade.

“Tired?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m fine,” she replied as she once again looked toward the sky.

After a short stint of silence, Ruri said, “I was just thinking about my world. I’d hoped I could find out a way back there if I investigated Nadasha, but it turned up nothing. I had just started college. I had planned on making friends, getting a boyfriend, and enjoying my college life, but that’s all dead in the water now.

Plus, my family is back in my world, and I won't be able to see them ever again..."

"I see," Jade said, placing his hand on Ruri's head to comfort her. "This might anger you to hear me say this, but I'm glad you came to this world. Thanks to those events transpiring, I was able to meet you. If you no longer have a home to return to, you can consider this place a home to call your own."

"Thank you so much, Jade-sama. I am sad, but I'm also glad. Whether I can return or not, I would end up parting ways with everyone I met in this world, and if that meant I'd no longer be able to see you as well, then I'm extremely uncertain which world I would choose. Which is a good reason to give up choosing one over the other and put my mind at ease."

She had a place where she belonged here. That was her one saving grace. If she didn't have anyone to rely on, Ruri would undoubtedly have fallen into despair.

"...Or, at least, I think so. I know that is the right call, but I have to say it. Why is it I could come from over there, yet I can't go back from here?!" Ruri launched her rage-filled question into the sky like a spoiled child. She couldn't think of any other way to relieve this frustration but to yell.

Rin, on the other hand, was the picture of serenity. *"There's no use crying over spilled milk. That is just how things are. This is something not even the spirits can do anything about. Why not just think of this as you coming here to get married or something?"*

"Married... I mean, I do want to get married eventually... So you're saying I should just think of this as me coming to marry from somewhere far overseas...? Considering that I might have the chance to have fluffy children of my very own, that might not be such a bad idea. But it'd be nice if we could at least contact one another..."

"Why, I can deliver messages for you, if you'd like."

The moment Ruri heard Rin's reply, she turned her head at breakneck speed and looked at her. "Wait, *you can?!*" she asked, snatching Rin, who was fluttering overhead, with an iron grip and bringing her in front of her face. Her expression was rife with desperation, and the look in her eyes was both intense

and terrifying...

"I can, I can! But before I do anything, let me go. I can't... breathe...!" Rin escaped from Ruri's clutches and settled herself on top of Kotaro. She let out a sigh of relief before continuing, *"Paths to your world from here open in irregular intervals. They can open up anywhere and at any time. But generally, they aren't big enough for humans to travel through. If you were wondering, the 'summoning' that Nadasha employed was a matter of designating a path in this world as a gateway, widening the hole, and dropping people through it. That path is a one-way road from the other side. As long as you have a physical body, that won't change. However, we don't have physical bodies like people do."*

"Then you mean a spirit could..."

"Yes, as long as a path is open, we can travel to and fro. Which includes going to your world and delivering verbal messages back and forth."

The news that she could at least get in contact with people on the other side flipped Ruri's frown upside down.

However, Jade interjected. "But Ruri's parents are human, aren't they? Unless they have enough mana to see spirits, I would assume you wouldn't be able to relay anything to them."

"In my current form, I can be seen by those with scant mana, can I not?"

Jade nodded in comprehension. If she acquired a body after she went over to the other side, she could communicate with humans. "The rest depends on if Ruri's parents are willing to believe. In their world, what we know as spirits and magic aren't commonplace, correct?"

"I believe my parents will be fine on that front," Ruri said with confidence. Her parents had nerves of steel. She was sure they'd accept even a far-fetched story about her being summoned to a different world. Plus, she had recently learned the truth. If her mother was able to see spirits, she most likely already knew that Ruri had been summoned off.

"Okay then, do you mind? Could you tell my parents that I'm safe? And I'd appreciate it if you could ask how things are going over there, if possible."

"Of course, no problem."

“In that case,” Kotaro said, joining in, “we’d best be off quickly. The path that the priests opened in Nadasha should still be around.”

“But I thought you destroyed that magic circle, Kotaro,” Ruri asked.

“That magic circle was simply to widen the path and pin down the entrance. I destroyed it so that no people could fall through, but it still has a small connection with the other side. We can pass through it before it shuts completely. However, since it’s not clear when it will close, we must make haste, Rin.”

“Understood.”

Kotaro and Rin laid their bodies down and escaped from them as balls of light that then took off into the skies.

“Safe travels!” Ruri called.

The balls of light swiveled around as if bidding their goodbyes before flying off toward the direction of Nadasha.

“This is great news, Ruri,” Jade said.

“Yes, it is.”

Jade gently stroked Ruri’s head as she gazed off into the sky while Kotaro and Rin disappeared into the distance.

Chapter 24: Letter

Kotaro and Rin returned from their trip to the world on the other side shortly after. According to the spirits, the path opened to Nadasha disappeared soon after they went through, so they wouldn't be able to come back home until the next path opened up.

However, one day, late at night as Ruri lay asleep, a presence woke her. She opened her eyes and was met with Jade's sleeping face, so close to her that she could feel his breath. It startled her, but she contained her scream. She slowly moved her eyes, scanning around her. The room was pitch-black, but she could see the spirits floating around her with their index fingers over their lips going "*shhh*," insisting she didn't raise her voice. The spirits normally would never enter the bedroom unannounced, so Ruri's eyes widened in surprise.

After the spirits waved their hands for her to follow them, they pointed their fingers toward her actual room in the castle. Now wide awake, Ruri looked at Jade's face to confirm that he was sound asleep. Once she did, she slowly got out of bed so as to not wake him and ran out of Jade's bedroom.

In Ruri's room rested the bodies of Kotaro and Rin, currently just empty vessels. Their occupants, the real Kotaro and Rin, were off in a faraway land, the world where Ruri was born and raised. They had gone there in order to give her parents a status update on her.

There was only one reason why the spirits would come to wake her in the dead of night—Kotaro and Rin had returned. She had the spirits take off her bracelet, and she quickly ran into the room next to Jade's. Just then, Kotaro and Rin's bodies started to stir and slowly rose up.

"Kotaro! Rin!"

"Mm... we've returned, Ruri," said Kotaro.

"We're back, Ruri~" said Rin as she flew into Ruri's arms. Rin in tow, she went over to Kotaro's side and stroked his soft fur.

They were originally corpses to begin with, but seeing their physical bodies cold and lifeless had been tough to look at. Seeing both of them now energetically moving about finally brought her mind relief.

“Were you able to meet my parents?”

“We found them right away. They were famous among the spirits in your world, you see. Once we asked some of the local spirits, it was a straight shot to them,” Rin answered.

“Quite. Their gathering of spirits made locating them light work, as well. They happily greeted us once we said we came on your orders. You resemble your mother so much that we instantly knew who she was.”

“I see... I knew they could see them...” Despite knowing this, hearing it again made it difficult to process her feelings.

“I must say, there were some intriguing things in your world, Ruri. I was shocked to see humans flying in the sky in large vehicles. I believe they called them ‘airplanes’?” commented Kotaro.

“There wasn’t anyone in that world who could see us either. That came as a shock, as well,” added Rin.

Kotaro and Rin excitedly talked about their experiences on the other side as Ruri listened with a smile on her face. Now that she was capable of seeing spirits, she’d probably see things in her world in a whole new light. It broke her heart to know that she wouldn’t have the chance to see it ever again.

“How did my mom and dad react when you told them about me?”

“They had been worried that you suddenly up and vanished. Although, the spirits apparently filled them in, for the most part, that you went to a different world.”

“I see...” Ruri said, trailing off into silence. She felt guilty for worrying her parents over her sudden disappearance. In her eyes, she felt like a daughter without a scrap of filial piety. Regardless, she couldn’t do anything pious to make it up to them anymore.

“Your mother gave us a letter to give to you,” Rin said, presenting a single

envelope.

Breathless, Ruri took a seat on the floor and anxiously took the envelope, opened the seal, and unfolded the letter inside. There, on the paper, was her mother's all-too-familiar handwriting—big, bubbly letters more becoming of a middle schooler than a grown adult. Ruri smiled slightly at her characteristic script as tears of relief rolled from her face. “She hasn’t changed at all...”

The letter itself, in stark contrast to the childish handwriting, was the typical note from a concerned mother. “Are you making sure to eat properly? Are you getting enough sleep? You’re not hurt, are you?” To each and every question, Ruri silently whispered, “I’m fine,” even though she knew her mother would never hear it.

However, the letter was also somewhat casual—it seemed like she was worried over her child on vacation, not her child who she’d never see again—so she read on. It was definitely a letter from her optimistic mother.

Ruri’s tears flowed freely down her cheeks and dripped onto the paper. She scrambled to wipe the water off the blotted letters on the page, but the tears flowed one after another, blotting her vision.

“Ungh, *hic*...”

She thought that just getting in contact with her parents, even if she couldn’t see them, would be good enough, but a simple letter didn’t seem to be good enough after all. On the contrary, it made her want to see her mother’s face even more.

Ruri covered her face with her hands to stifle her whimpers and cried. She knew crying wasn’t going to help anything, but her tears fell regardless.

Suddenly, someone embraced her from behind, catching her off guard. Reflexively, she tried to shake free, but the arms around her were tight and wouldn’t budge. When she turned around, she saw Jade looking back at her with a sorrowful frown.

“Jade-sama... Why...?”

“The spirits came to wake me, saying that you were crying.”

When Ruri looked around, she realized that Kotaro, Rin, and the other spirits that had been with her just a second ago were nowhere to be seen. They were the only ones there.

In the silent room, Ruri's heavy sobs echoed throughout.

"You needn't cry alone," Jade said.



“Jade-sama...” Ruri said in a pitiful tone, turning her whole body around and clinging to him while audibly crying. “As I read the letter, I started to get sad... I started to realize that I’ll actually never make it back...”

“It’s natural to feel that way considering you’re unable to go back to your homeland. Cry as much as you need,” said Jade as he patted Ruri on her back consolingly.

The gentle warmth of his hand instilled a sense of security in her.

“I know I can’t serve as a replacement for your parents, but I’ll support you to make up for their absence. I will stay by your side so that you’ll never be sad.”

“Ngh... Thank you so much...”

Jade’s kindness permeated throughout Ruri’s body. She lifted her head and smiled at him as she felt the tears trailing down her face.

Jade hugged Ruri tightly and continued to pet her head until she finally settled down.



Ruri’s eyes were beet red and puffy from crying for so long. Jade tried to stay by her side the entire time, but work called, so Ruri showed him out. In his place, Kotaro and Rin spent the morning cuddled by her side while the other spirits clung to her and floated around her as if to say they were there for her as well.

Everyone collectively watched over Ruri, worried for her well-being. When one of the spirits brought her a ring of beautiful flowers, she smiled delightedly. Because of that, all of the other spirits followed suit, bringing flowers of their own and practically forming a flower bed within her room. On top of that, more spirits came from parts unknown, making the considerably spacious room feel a tad cramped from the influx of newcomers. Euclase and Joshua came in to check on her, but once they took a peek inside, they grimaced and left without saying a word. Even though there was an abnormal amount of spirits in the room, they helped alleviate Ruri’s anxiety and cure her loneliness.

Amidst the lively crowd, Ruri read the letter back again.

“You’re reading the letter again?”

“Yeah, I feel like I’ve calmed down enough to actually read it now.”

At first, she was overcome with sadness and loneliness, but she was in a much better mood now and capable of reading it clearly. That was likely proof she was able to accept her current situation.

“Well, I think you should just talk to them in person when you eventually can instead of reading that letter over and over.”

“...Huh?” Rin’s suggestion was met with a deafening pause, and soon after Ruri’s eyes shrank to dots of confusion.

Just then, a spirit who was touching the envelope the letter came in spoke up, *“Huh? Hey, Ruri? There’s still another page to the letter in here~!”*

“Huh?” What the spirit cheerfully presented to her was less of a letter and more of a small note. Ruri took the note in hand and nervously turned her eyes to what was written on it. “Wha?!”

The note read...

“P.S. I’m working on getting my affairs in order, so doing this might take a little time, but I’m going to get everything sorted ASAP and come over there with everyone, so hold tight.”

Her hands trembling uncontrollably, Ruri ripped the memo clean in half. “You’re going to WHAAAAT?!” she yelled, echoing throughout the entire room.

“Your whole family is apparently going to migrate over here. Makes sense. You can’t go to them, but they can come to you,” Rin explained.

“Quite so, even your grandfather said he would be tagging along,” added Kotaro.

“Whaaa...?” What did she shed all those tears over her family for? Ruri wished Rin had filled her in on that sooner.

She wondered if they understood the ramifications of coming here—once they came over, there was no going back.

“Mom is definitely the one who proposed this,” Ruri whispered to herself in

confidence. One would normally have reservations about going to a different world, but knowing her mother's personality, she probably made this decision with the same level of care as planning a vacation. She was worried for her poor straight-laced father's stomach, seeing as he was at the mercy of her oddball mother and grandfather.

It would be some time, however, before Ruri's parents actually came to this world.



Seeing as how the reconstruction of Nadasha would take time, Jade resumed his regular duties for the time being. Ruri, as a cat, vacantly watched Jade work as she lay curled up in the small bed prepared for her in the office.

Now that Kotaro and Rin had helped solve the issues with her family, she was free of anxiety. Right now, Ruri's mind was as clear as the sky outside.

After some time, Euclase entered the office. They had a letter in their hand. "Your Majesty, it's a personal letter from the Land of Cerulanda. I would appreciate it if you read it right away," Euclase said, handing the letter over to Jade.

"Cerulanda?" he responded with a doubtful expression.

"I wonder what them sending a personal letter could mean? We don't have much in the way of diplomatic relations with them, if I recall," said Claus, who was also doing work in the office.

"True," Jade said as he opened the envelope with a paper knife, pulled out the letter, and scanned it. The further he read, the more pensive his expression became. It was easy to infer that the letter held news that was none too pleasing.

Once he finished, Jade emitted a single sigh.

"Your Majesty, what did it entail?" Euclase questioned.

Jade simply passed them the note, silently inferring that they read it themselves.

As soon as Euclase ran over the letter, their face also took a puzzled turn.

They passed the letter to Claus once they were done and said, “You should read this, too.”

“Is something troublesome afoot?”

“Read and find out.”

Claus read the note as instructed and said under his breath, “My, this *is* troubling.”

“You can say that again. Just when we think we have matters with Nadasha squared away, *this* drops on our doorstep,” Euclase replied.

Claus looked up from the paper and turned his attention toward Jade, asking him, “How might you be handling this, Your Majesty?”

“I’m declining, naturally. We have Ruri here, and if we carelessly accept and let them come face-to-face with her, it will be an even bigger mess.”

Catching wind of her name in conversation, Ruri lifted her head. “*Does this have to do with me? You said I shouldn’t meet someone face-to-face? Is someone coming?*” She got up from her small cat bed, walked over to Jade, and jumped onto his lap.

Jade took the letter from Claus and unfolded it in front of Ruri so that she could see it as well, but Ruri still wasn’t used to the written language of this world and couldn’t understand a word of what was scribed on the page.

As she tilted her head in confusion, Jade giggled, knowing that she couldn’t read the note, and explained. “It’s a letter from the king of the land of Cerulanda, a kingdom with few diplomatic ties to the Nation of the Dragon King. Cerulanda houses a Beloved. Are you aware of that?”

“I’ve heard there are four Beloveds excluding me, but are they one of them?”

“They are. This letter is asking us to keep their Beloved at the castle since they want to come to our nation for sightseeing—well, more or less.”

“Wow, then I’ll get to see a Beloved other than myself,” Ruri said, slightly excited over the prospect of meeting another Beloved. However, she noticed something was amiss and looked up at Jade. *“Huh? But you mentioned something about that being trouble. Why would that be?”*

“A Beloved is an individual that makes a great number of spirits their allies. They serve as the controllers of this world, and there is no one who can oppose them. It’s not their own power which is tremendous but the influence they hold. If two Beloveds were to oppose one another, what do you think would happen?”

“It would cause huge problems, yes?”

“Indeed. It would have immeasurable effects on the world. Plus, the strength of a Beloved’s power can vary. By letting Beloveds meet, you let any gaps in power between them be known. And suppose the Beloved of a smaller nation was stronger. As I said before, there’s no one who can oppose a Beloved with spirits on their side, no matter how big the nation may be. In other words, if you possess a strong Beloved, you could bring even the biggest nations under control. However, if one were to do that, governments would be in chaos. Therefore, between the Alliance of Four Nations—the Nations of the Dragon King, Beast King, Spirit King, and the Imperial Nation respectively—there is a rule that states that Beloveds shall not be allowed to meet nor be used for political gain.”

“I see. And that’s why you can’t allow them to meet me?”

“That would be why. To avoid any kind of trouble in the foreseeable future.”

The reason made sense, but it also brought about a concern. *“Huh? But didn’t you say something about me being able to see the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King in due time? I thought that Beloveds can’t meet one another?”*

“Two Beloveds of the Alliance of Four Nations are fine. The code states that we can’t involve Beloveds in politics, and even if a Beloved conflict were to occur, the Spirit of the Trees, a supreme-level spirit in the Nation of the Spirit King, would act as a mediator. Even if things did devolve into a fight, the spirits wouldn’t go berserk. However, since we haven’t come to such an arrangement with Cerulanda, we must prevent you from meeting them in order to avoid potential strife.”

“Does that mean you’re declining the request?”

“That’s correct. Taking in another nation’s Beloved would just be a cause for concern.”

“Not only that,” Euclase interjected, “but I’ve heard that everyone spoils Cerulanda’s Beloved, so they are quite self-centered. Honestly, I wouldn’t want to deal with them. Who knows what kind of unreasonable demand they might come asking?” Euclase was just as opposed to having the Beloved from a different nation come as Jade was.

“I’ll write them a reply this moment. They’ll likely comply if I tell them that we house Ruri,” Jade said, taking up his pen in order to write a letter addressed to Cerulanda.

As such, Jade refused the request from Cerulanda on that day. However, a few days later, Jade received a certain report.

“Your Majesty, there is some news about Cerulanda I believe you should know,” Euclase notified.

“What is it?” asked Jade.

“Reports state that Cerulanda’s Beloved has been assaulted by a raider.”

“What did you just say?”

Trouble had arisen in Cerulanda—trouble that would bring about immense turmoil to the Nation of the Dragon King in the future.

To be continued...

Bonus Short Story

Memories of the Ray of Sunshine

No one knew for how long, but there she resided.

In the midst of the pitch-black void was a dimly glowing spiral staircase. No one knew when they came into being, but there were a multitude of doors to rooms of varying sizes.

Outside of the space she inhabited, there were highly intelligent people who possessed mana. Those people opened up her space, where time didn't exist, and stored all sorts of items. Her job was to look over the myriad of doors made for each person who opened a rift into this space and to erase the doors that no longer had living owners.

That was the reason for her existence—the spirit who governed time and space. She was neither taught nor ordered to do so, but there she was, in the mind-numbingly long flow of time, doing the same set of tasks over and over without question.

That day was like any other as she silently erased doors that lacked owners—the same, unchanged routine. However, that was the day a stone disrupted the still lake of her daily existence.

She suddenly felt a disturbance coming from the largest room.

(What...?)

The size of a room was determined by how much mana one possessed, and this one was much larger than all the others. So much so it had shocked her when it came into being.

Something had entered that room, and it wasn't inanimate—there were signs of life.

She rushed to the room, her eyes widening in surprise. There she saw a single man staring back at her.

“Hey, you the Spirit of Time?”

“... *And who are you?*”

That was the start of the first conversation she had with someone other than the spirits on the outside. Although her heart was beating a little fast, she spoke with composure. “Spoke” in a loose sense, of course, since her preferred method of speaking was telepathy.

“Me? Name’s Weidt. Nice to meet ya!” the man said with a big, toothy smile.

That smile was like a ray of sunshine, bringing light and color to her flat, dull life.

This was how the Spirit of Time, later rechristened as “Lydia,” and Weidt, later known as the First Dragon King, first met.



Weidt entered the rift in space with a heave-ho and yelled into the vast area, “*Heeey! I’m here to plaaay!*”

A few moments passed with no response. He took in a deep breath to belt out another call, but then a girl with long, flowing snow-white hair appeared.

“*You’re here again?*”

“You betcha!” Weidt said with his trademark toothy grin.

She breathed a deep sigh for what felt like the umpteenth time. Weidt had been visiting frequently since the first day he came here. Even though she’d warned him that she didn’t know how this isolated zone would affect a living being, he still came in spite of the consequences. Reluctantly, she decided to make a contract with him in order to minimize the effects on him. However, she honored her brethren’s requests to make it a normal contract, one that could be annulled at any time.

“Say, can I give you a name?” Weidt suddenly proposed out of the blue.

Her eyes flew open and she angrily replied, “*You obviously can not!!*”

“Spoilsport...” Weidt said disappointedly, pouting.

As soon as she glared at him, he quickly averted his gaze. To a spirit, allowing

a person to name them meant subjugating themselves to said person. It wasn't something you'd casually suggest like Weidt assumed. No one could just ask a spirit, "Mind if I give you a name?" and receive a jolly reply of, "Oh, hey, sure!"

"C'mon, it's not something you really have to rack your brain over. Just because I give you a name doesn't mean I can give you any orders, seeing how you can't leave this space. It's just that you *not* having a name is inconvenient. It's way better if you have one."

"I don't feel it's inconvenient. Besides, no spirit would just let someone name them for a reason so trivial."

"Well, tell that to Chi. He consented with no fuss."

"Don't lump me in with them..."

Chi referred to the Spirit of Earth, one of the twelve highest-level spirits, who Weidt had already named. Unlike her, when he was casually asked, "Mind if I give you a name?" he swiftly replied with, "Yeah, sure thing!" He was a fool who lived based solely on mood and instinct. In fact, the only reason Weidt knew that the Spirit of Time resided within the pocket space was because Chi had told him. She cursed him for opening his big mouth, but she wasn't going to say that aloud.

During his frequent visits, Weidt brought all sorts of items from the outside world under the pretense of them being "gifts." When she would ask what an item was, Weidt would recall a tale surrounding it, and she would listen enthusiastically. Spirits had a special method of mutually understanding one another's thoughts, which the Spirit of Time used to learn about the outside world from the spirits that resided there. But since her information was always secondhand, it was often skewed by the likes and dislikes of the spirit it came from. In that regard, Weidt would give her detailed, objective accounts instead of subjective spins. Also, as long as she was within her domain of space, she could form a solid body like Weidt's. Thanks to that, she could give and receive sensations that couldn't be conveyed through sight alone.

The Spirit of Time became very busy trying to express emotions—anger,

enjoyment, loneliness—ever since Weidt came to her realm. Although she would sigh and gripe every time, a part of her definitely awaited his arrival each and every time.

“Say, can I name you now?”

“No.”

“Spoilsport.”

That was the back-and-forth they shared every visit. She made it known she wished he would give up on the idea, but Weidt was persistent and asked every time he came to see her.

Then, one day, after hundreds upon thousands of visits, he asked once again in jest, “Say, can I name you now?”

That was when she finally said, “*Fine.*”

“Spoilsport—Wait... *Huh?!*” Weidt was in the middle of his usual retort, but after actually catching her response, his eyes widened and he gasped in shock.

His extreme surprise made the Spirit of Time chuckle to herself. “*You look awfully surprised considering it was your idea.*”

“Uh, well, yeah, I guess you’re right. Still, you really sure?”

“*I am.*”

“Alright. Then, from today on, you’ll be ‘Lydia’!” he said as if making a grand announcement.

However, he didn’t get the ecstatic reaction he was expecting. Instead he was met with her furrowed brows and perplexed expression.

Slightly worried, Weidt asked, “You don’t like it?”

“*No, that’s not it. You just kind of blurted out a name, so I’m just worried if you actually put any consideration into it. You didn’t decide with the same lighthearted approach you usually take with everything else, did you?*”

“Heck no! I’ve been thinking about this name just in case you gave me the okay.”

“*I’m relieved to hear that.*” Lydia repeatedly whispered her new name in her

mind so she wouldn't forget it. Then she looked at Weidt with the biggest smile ever. *"Thank you, Weidt."*

"N-No problem," he replied, cheeks red. He nervously looked away from her as she flashed a genuinely happy smile his way.

From then on, Weidt would come visit Lydia even more than before, sharing many hours with her—like following her when she would erase rooms that had lost their owners.

"Hey, you mind if I take these?"

"But that belongs to someone else."

"But you're going to be erasing them anyway, right? Don't you think it's kind of a waste to just erase things that are perfectly usable? In that case, I'd say it's better I make practical use out of 'em."

"Well, I don't really mind. Not like I'll be using it."

"Score!"

Another time, Weidt gave Lydia a jack-in-the-box under the guise of a gift. It scared her out of her wits, and he doubled over laughing at the sight—something Lydia strongly reprimanded him for.

"Sorry, okay. Don't get so upset."

"If you ever do anything like that again, you're banned from here forever!"

"Right... I apologize, really..."

Sometimes, Weidt would air out his complaints and Lydia would console him.

"I'm fed up with work! I didn't want to become some stinkin' king anyway! I'm gonna just hole up here!"

"Okay, okay. Stay here for however long you'd like. Once you've rested, try getting back to work, okay? You have a lot of people depending on you."

The time she spent with Weidt was enjoyable—blissful. That was exactly why she had forgotten that her time with him wouldn't last forever.

One day, he brought a portrait set in a frame about half the size of his body. Depicted on the painting was Weidt himself—a much more regal and gallant depiction than real life.

Lydia couldn't help but giggle, saying, *"Why are you suddenly lugging that thing in here for?"*

"...I figured I'd bring it so you wouldn't get lonely."

"Oh, please. You come to visit so often that there's no possible way I'd get lonely."

Once he finished installing the frame on the wall, he turned back to face her. One look at his expression was enough to make her grimace in uncertainty. The portrait hanging from the wall was of Weidt when they first met—a youthful individual brimming with exuberance. However, the man before her had graying hair and deep wrinkles covering his face and hands.

She wondered why she never noticed any of that before now. While it was harder to notice since he aged more gracefully due to being a dragonkin, he had most definitely grown elderly.

Once she *did* notice, terror struck. It had almost slipped her mind completely, but even though dragonkin lived longer than other races, they were subject to aging—unlike spirits. Meaning their lives would one day come to an end.

"Oh no..."

"Say, Lydia. Once I die..."

"No!" Lydia screamed, not wanting to hear that. She covered her ears with her hands and turned her eyes away from Weidt.

Weidt awkwardly smiled, took Lydia's arm, and brought her into a tight embrace. "Please, even if I die, keep this room as it is and don't erase it. And once you gain your next contract-bearer, give everything over to them, will you? Over to the next person who cares for you as much as I do."

"...No one like that will ever show up."

“Rest assured, they *will*. I’m living proof people like that exist. I don’t know how long it might take, but there’ll be someone else who’ll bring a smile to your face. A girl, if possible. I’d get jealous if it were a guy.”

“You’re such a goofball...”

“Lydia, just hold out for a bit. I know you can do it,” Weidt said with the utmost confidence, smiling.

Although his face was much older, his smile was just the same—a ray of sunshine that warmed her heart.

Eventually, in what felt like the blink of an eye, Lydia sensed grief and sadness coming from her brethren, the Spirit of Earth. After him came the Spirit of Flowers, who was contracted after Lydia. A host of spirits who loved Weidt were weeping.

Lydia dropped to her knees in the room packed with all the memories she shared with him. She wanted to go to his side right away, but since she couldn’t leave this domain, her wish remained ungranted.

Through her brethren’s vision, she saw Weidt lying peacefully in eternal slumber. Then he disappeared before her eyes...

His smile, his warm smile that illuminated her life like a ray of sunshine, was gone, and the only way she would ever see it again was through the portrait hanging from the wall.

Her flat and dull life resumed once more. However, she couldn’t go back to how she was in the past. The second Weidt’s face popped into her mind, her heart ached.

Lydia fulfilled her duties in order to distract herself, going to rooms that had lost their owners and erasing them. But she never forgot to check the contents of said rooms and take out anything useful beforehand, just as she had learned from Weidt. She would take what she salvaged and either throw it into someone else’s room or bring it back to his.

Nevertheless, the sadness and loneliness that had taken stay in her heart

wouldn't go away.

Left without recourse, the sadness proving too much to bear, she stood in front of the portrait of Weidt and gazed upon it. Wanting to be as close to it as possible, she removed it from the wall and hugged it tight. That was when she felt something strange on the back of the frame. She turned the portrait over and found a green stone embedded in the top of the frame. When she touched it, it easily popped out and rolled into the palm of her hand.

Lydia looked at it, perplexed. *“A gemstone... or maybe not. Scales? Wait, could this be... is this a dragonheart...?”*

Lydia's knowledge of it was limited, but a dragonheart was the symbol of matrimony dragonkin gave to their mate. The gemstone-like item, the same shade of green as Weidt's eyes, was undoubtedly Weidt's dragonheart. And since it was painstakingly chiseled into the frame, there was absolutely no way Weidt brought it in by mistake.

That only meant one thing. What she was holding was Weidt's feelings—feelings he was unable to convey right to the very end.

A single tear trailed down her cheek. Then, with the intensity of a broken dam, tear after tear spilled from her eyes.

“What were you doing, putting it here of all places? I wouldn't have ever noticed it... You big dummy...”

She gripped onto the dragonheart and continued to weep until she had no tears left.



A considerable amount of time had passed, even from a spirit's loose perception of time. Up until then, only Weidt had ever stepped foot into this domain. But now there was another.

“Lydia, I've got a gift for you~!”

A contract-bearer—one Lydia thought would never appear. She thought she would have to endure this sense of loneliness for the rest of eternity, but just as Weidt said, another contract-bearer surfaced and put a smile on her face.

“Welcome, Ruri,” Lydia said with a sweet smile, greeting the bearer of her new contract—the girl known as Ruri.



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by Kureha

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