

Author: Kureha
Illustrator: Yamigo

The White Cat's Revenge

as Plotted from the
Dragon King's Lap



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Jade

The young and wise ruler of the Nation of the Dragon King. He 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



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.

Ewan

A soldier for the Nation of the Dragon King and a half-dragonkin half-human. He was once at odds with Ruri, but they are now on casual speaking terms.



Celestine

The Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King and a bird demi-human with unrequited feelings for Jade. She is prideful but well-mannered.

Azelda

The Beloved of Cerulanda. She threatens people with her status as a Beloved and is extremely spoiled.

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Prologue

Some time had passed since the war incited by the King and Head Priest of the Land of Nadasha, the kingdom that summoned Ruri to this alternate world, had come to a conclusion.

Directly after the war, the royal castle, where Ruri resided, had been extremely busy and rife with noise and activity. People ran around as if pressed for time, and voices barked orders that echoed throughout the area—it was the textbook example of hectic.

Now, however, things had settled down, as if none of that had ever happened, and the castle returned to a state of peace.

“Ever since the cleanup of Nadasha finished, things have really calmed down, haven’t they?” Ruri commented.

The rulers of the Nation of the Dragon King had always governed their nation wisely. As long as there were no outside factors like the situation with Nadasha, there was nothing to cause a ruckus within the castle walls. In fact, the chaos of people running back and forth, preparing for war and settling the aftermath, was an abnormal sight.

“Now, what should we do to pass the time today?” asked Ruri.

“Perhaps some bathing in the sun?” Kotaro suggested.

“That sounds absolutely divine, but...” While the prospect of using Kotaro’s pelt as a bed for sunbathing in the garden on such a beautiful day was appealing, it had been quite a while since her last visit with Lydia. Ruri was sure she was probably craving a tea party right about now. Knowing Lydia, however, she would probably be ecstatic to have one with Ruri every day.

Unlike Kotaro and Rin who were by her side every day, Ruri could only meet with Lydia in her domain of space. And even though she was bound to a contract with Lydia, extended periods of time in the pocket space could have unknown effects on her mind and body, so she was only making the occasional

visit. That was why Lydia was positively thrilled every time Ruri came to see her. It made Ruri feel as though she at least had to do something for Lydia.

“I know. Maybe I should make cookies or something, for a change of pace, and go have a tea party with Lydia.”

“*Mm, I would like some,*” said Kotaro, a spirit who was occupying the body of a large, fluffy wolf-like creature.

“*Me, too~!*” added Rin. She was a spirit inhabiting the body of a creature that looked like a sea-dwelling clone, but it was really a river-dwelling magic beast.

Upon hearing the word “cookies,” both of their eyes lit up in excitement.

“I’ll make sure to give you two some, too.” However, in order to make cookies, she would need to borrow the castle’s kitchen. “But first, let’s go get Jade-sama’s permission.”

Ruri and her entourage then walked their way to the royal office, where she assumed Jade was. True to her expectations, as soon as she opened the door, she found Jade, the Dragon King, along with Claus, his royal advisor.

The two of them together in the office was a common sight, but there was yet another in attendance—an intelligence operative and Claus’s son, Joshua. Ruri was surprised to see him here since she was told he was away in Nadasha.

“So you’re back from business, Joshua? Welcome back.”

“Yep, ’preciate it.”

“How are things in Nadasha?”

In post-war Nadasha, the King, Head Priest, and the rest of the people who incited the war had their statuses revoked. The moderate nobles, who had been banished from the kingdom by the King and Head Priest, were uniting the people of the nation together and taking command of the reconstruction efforts under the Nation of the Dragon King’s aid. The royal capital wasn’t in any great disarray, but the many towns and villages were in terrible shape due to the mandatory draft, the unreasonable taxation, and the violence against those who opposed any of it. Knowing what several of the towns looked like before, Ruri worried whether the restoration efforts were coming along okay. She was

the one who had prompted Jade to send a large amount of goods to Nadasha, but she hadn't heard much of anything after that.

"The restoration is proceeding just fine," Joshua informed. "We've sent all the conscripted soldiers back to Nadasha, and the refugees who fled are coming back since they heard of the kingdom's restoration efforts. We're also pulling back the troops we had stationed there now that their job is done. We'll still continue to send them aid, but the rest is up to the efforts of the Nadashian people."

Knowing that the reconstruction was going well, Ruri felt relieved. "I see. That's great to hear."

"So, Ruri? I assume you're here for something, correct?" Jade asked, reminding Ruri of what she came to the office for.

"Oh, right. Would it be possible to use the kitchen? I want to bake some treats."

"The kitchen? You're free to do so, but... bake? You, Ruri?" Jade asked with a suspicious expression on his face, doubting whether Ruri was capable of baking at all.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Ruri, we have a staff of chefs for that. You shouldn't push yourself. Let the chefs make whatever it is you'd like," Jade said. His tone sounded sincere, but he spoke as if he assumed Ruri couldn't cook.

Ruri gave Jade a grumpy expression. "How rude. I know how to bake, at least!" she asserted, but her words didn't wipe the dubious look from his face.

"Your Majesty, there is no use in trying to challenge her every move. Why not take the opportunity to kindly watch over her instead?" Claus said in an attempt to back Ruri up, but he just came across like he couldn't believe Ruri could bake either.

"You too, Claus?!" Ruri exclaimed, honestly shocked that she gave off the impression she was incapable of cooking. While a point could be made that she never needed to cook in a castle with a cooking staff, unlike her self-sufficient lifestyle with Chelsie, that *didn't* mean she didn't know how.

“If you say so, Claus, I will grant permission. However, make sure not to get yourself hurt. Also, don’t destroy the kitchen.”

She wanted to ask why he was so concerned about the kitchen when she was just baking cookies. And he wasn’t saying that in jest either; he looked dead serious. She could see that he was actually concerned, which was extremely rude.

“I’m going to make *incredible* cookies and show you *all*, just you wait!” Ruri said sharply and confidently before rushing out of the office.

Chapter 1: The Starting Incident

There were currently three Beloveds known to the public—one of the Nation of the Spirit King, one of the Nation of the Beast King, and one of the Nation of the Dragon King. These three nations had the power to protect the Beloveds even with their existence publicly known. In addition, the Beloveds of the Spirit and Beast Nation were extremely patriotic toward their respective homes, so there was no fear of them moving even if other nations were to persuade them. Granted, the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King was in love with Jade, the Dragon King, and planned on marrying into the Nation of the Dragon King, but it was a sentiment that the Dragon King didn't share in the slightest. Her kinsmen were also intensely proud of their race, so it was unlikely they would move to another nation. Ruri, the Beloved of the Nation of the Dragon King, had no plans of going to another nation either.

In addition to these three, there were also two other Beloveds not revealed to the public—one from the Land of Cerulanda and one from the Land of Yadacain.

The Beloved of Cerulanda was a young girl in her mid-teens. As a child, she was placed into an orphanage at a young age in a town far away from the royal capital, so her Beloved powers were detected only after she reached her teens. The fact that it was a human nation with few people capable of seeing spirits, coupled with the fact that it was in a remote location which barely received news of other nations, was to blame for the late discovery. She just so happened to be called on in a random inspection of the orphanage, and a person capable of seeing spirits approached her and everything became clear. If it weren't for that chance encounter, they probably wouldn't have found out until much later.

Considering that she didn't have any real patriotism toward Cerulanda and that she might jump ship to any other nation with favorable terms, Cerulanda took her into their custody, hiding her away in their royal castle and limiting who she interacted with. From an objective standpoint, it seemed like a cramped lifestyle, but she herself didn't find it inconvenient at all. She wore

dressess she could never wear before, and she ate fancy foods she never could eat before. In addition, in order to keep her interests, she was surrounded by a bevy of attractive young men. In other words, she lived a pampered life.

Today was just another day for her as she enjoyed a tea party in the garden while surrounded by exquisite men, all hand-picked from Cerulanda's high-ranking nobility. For the past few years, ever since she started life in the castle, afternoon tea time had become customary. However, as she sipped on tea, she was met with an uninvited guest. It was a short person dressed in a black costume and wearing a bizarre mask. With their face hidden and their body covered from head to toe, it was difficult to determine if they were a human or demi-human, man or woman. If Ruri were there, she would've probably asked in shock, "What is a ninja doing *here* of all places?!"

The costumed individual, who had snuck into the castle all by themselves, focused their sights on the Beloved. The men in the vicinity all stood in front of her, calling for assistance. The guards standing at attention nearby all rushed in, some pointing their weapons and some evacuating the Beloved to safety.

"Lady Beloved, this way, please."

"Y-Yes..."

The Beloved began making her way over to the inside of the castle. The costumed individual calmly kept his sights set on her, unfazed by the soldiers surrounding them.

"Seize them!" yelled a soldier as all the others then rushed at the costumed individual and instantly closed the gap.

At the mercy of dozens of soldiers, they were quickly apprehended... or so everyone thought. The costumed individual, in a feat of superhuman ability, leapt over the soldiers and landed right behind them. With inhuman speed, they evaded soldier after soldier and then ran straight toward the Beloved without a second's delay, tossing a dagger toward her.

Frozen in fear and unable to escape, the Beloved stood as the dagger traveled in a straight line right into her chest.

"Lady Beloved!" Screams sounded from around her as she collapsed where

she stood, her face still locked in fear.

Confirming that the dagger had struck the Beloved in her heart, the costumed individual vanished from the scene just as swiftly as they had arrived.

“A doctor! Summon a doctor *now!*”



At the royal castle of the Nation of the Dragon King, Ruri worked in the kitchen area of sector one, the sector that included the Dragon King’s residence.

“Hm hm hmmm, hm hm hmmm♪” Ruri hummed a little ditty as she sprinkled flour on the countertop, placed her dough atop it, and flattened it with a rolling pin. The spirits huddling around her watched her work in delight.

The chefs in charge of cooking for the Dragon King and the Beloved had been watching on, nervous as to whether Ruri could actually produce something edible. But Ruri found it hard to do anything with a gawking audience, so she kicked them out of the kitchen. Dinner preparation wouldn’t start for a while, so removing them didn’t hinder their work.

She cut the flattened dough into shapes and tossed them into the oven. Then her fire spirit friends came in to provide their assistance. With a fire controlled so exquisitely it would put a top-class chef to shame, Ruri baked her batch of cookies. After a short while, a sweet and delectable aroma started to waft through the air from the inside of the oven.

“Ruri, they’re done~!”

“Yup, they’re perfect! We’re a buncha geniuses!”

Proud of the fine results of their work, the fire spirits pranced and held each other’s hands.

That was when Ewan just so happened to appear in the kitchen as if he’d been waiting for the cookies to be done. Since he reconciled with Ruri, his ban from sector one had been lifted. Nowadays, it was as though their strained and awkward interactions never happened, and the two shared a much more friendly relationship.

“Those sure smell good,” Ewan commented.

“I know, right?! I’ve never used an oven this big before, but thanks to everyone’s help, I managed to bake up some great cookies.”

“*Heh!*” chuckled the fire spirits as they held their hands on their hips in pride—a gesture that the spirit-incompatible Ewan couldn’t see.



“So, you were actually able to bake after all, huh?” Ewan said, inadvertently suggesting that Ruri seemed incapable of baking.

Offended by his remark, Ruri said, “Ewan, even *you’re* saying stuff like that? When I went to ask Jade-sama for permission to use the kitchen, he said I should let the cooks do the cooking because it was too dangerous otherwise. Speaking as if it’s assumed I don’t know my way around a kitchen is just downright rude!”

“I mean, it’s... you know?” Ewan said, implying that Ruri didn’t look the part.

“I would cook meals at Chelsie-san’s place when I used to live with her.”

“And what you made was edible, right?”

“Try it for yourself, wiseguy!” Ruri picked up a freshly-baked cookie and stuffed it into Ewan’s mouth.

After Ewan unwittingly chewed the sudden treat in his mouth, he swallowed the cookie, his eyes wide. His face turned red, and he held his hand to his mouth.

“H-Hey, what’s the big idea?!” Ewan screamed, flustered.

“The big idea? A taste test, of course,” Ruri said, confused at his panicked display. “Well, how is it? It’s good, isn’t it?”

“That isn’t the point here!”

Just then, a deep and angry voice, one that felt as if it resonated from the center of the Earth, interjected, “...What do you think you are doing?”

Ewan turned around in a slow and stiff manner, like someone forgot to oil his joints, to find none other than Jade, who was staring him down with an absolutely piercing glare.

“Oh, Jade-sama. Well? Take a look. I can bake after all, see?” Ruri gleefully showed him her freshly baked cookies, oblivious to the suddenly heavy atmosphere.

However, Jade’s eyes remained peeled on Ewan, not the cookies, as he simply asked, “Ewan, do you wish to be banned from sector one yet again? In fact, do

you wish to be thrown from the castle entirely?”

Jade wasn't yelling at him, but the tone of his voice was enough to induce a cold, terror-fueled sweat to pour down Ewan's brow.

“N-N-N-N-No, my sincerest of apologies!!” Ewan said, bowing with a pale face before quickly fleeing the kitchen like a bat out of hell.

“H-Huh? Jade-sama, are you angry about something...?” Ruri asked timidly, finally picking up on the cold aura emanating from him.

Jade then shifted his ire toward her. “Ruri.”

“Yes...?”

Jade was inching toward her, which triggered her mental alarm. She started backing up. Even though the kitchen accommodated several people cooking at the same time and was far bigger than an average household's, it was still a kitchen, nonetheless. She was quickly left with nowhere to run as Jade slammed his hand on the wall behind her. His handsome features seething in anger was more than a little intense, and Ruri's cheeks tensed.

“Ruri, what were you doing with Ewan just now?”

“‘What’? I was just having him taste test my cookies...” she replied. She had no idea why Jade was making that terrifying face at her.

“You were ‘just’ having him taste test?”

“Yes, that and only that.” She wondered, even though she didn't recall doing anything really out of the ordinary, why Jade's face was getting even more terrifying.

“Oh?” Jade slid his hand alluringly over Ruri's cheek, giving her goosebumps. All Ruri knew was that Jade was in a bad mood for some reason. “Don't ever feed anyone yourself ever again. Not Ewan, not anyone else.”

“But why?”

“Am I *understood*?” Jade said with a frightful, uncompromising expression.

“U-Uh, yes! Understood!” Ruri quickly replied, raising her hand to her forehead for a salute, not knowing if the gesture was understood in this world.

“If it happens again, Ewan’s head will roll,” Jade threatened, not an ounce of humor in his remark.

Ruri nodded her head so hard in response that it looked like she was going to break her neck as she said a prayer for Ewan in her mind.

Giving food to a member of the opposite sex—Ruri would later come to learn—was a dragonkin custom known as “partnerial allofeeding.”

Ruri’s reaction seemed to quell Jade’s anger because he then turned his attention to her cookies instead. Freed from Jade’s extremely intimidating gaze, Ruri breathed a sigh of relief.

Jade took one of the freshly-baked cookies and brought it to Ruri’s mouth. She realized the irony, but she kept the thought to herself and took a bite. After watching her do so, Jade took a cookie for himself and placed it in his mouth.

“These are better than I suspected.”

“...Jade-sama, you just used me to check for poison, didn’t you?” Ruri said, glaring at Jade.

“Just for insurance.”

“Like I’ve said a million times, I can cook!” Ruri shouted, stuffing her freshly-baked cookies into a bag. She was pissed off. “Listen, my mother is absolutely terrible at *any* housework. My father would cook for us when he was at home, but since he’s a diplomat, he would often be off in another country. When that happened, I would have no choice but to learn to cook in order to avoid eating terrible food.”

Even though her mother would cook while looking at the recipes in her cookbooks, her skills ended up changing any dish into something strange and indistinguishable—a true mystery. When she would try to clean, she would always destroy something. When she would do the laundry, the clothes would always discolor. Ruri ended up learning how to cook and clean out of sheer necessity. Fortunately, since her mother worked as a model, she was rarely at home either. Her grandfather would frequently stop by the house when Ruri was young, which most likely kept her mother’s damage to a minimum. By the time Ruri grew up and didn’t need her grandfather’s help anymore, she was

capable of doing everything around the house.

“Though, thanks to that, I had a smooth transition into living on my own once I moved out.”

“That might also explain why you’re so grounded and organized. Also, your father is a diplomat, you say? I would love for him to work in the castle. When will your parents be arriving?”

“They apparently have some unfinished business in the other world, so I don’t know for certain. I need to make preparations so that I’m ready whenever they *do* arrive... Alright, all done,” Ruri said as she finished packing her cookies into a big bag and a small bag respectively. She then looked back at Jade. “Alright, I’ll be stepping out for a bit.”

Jade’s face then took a dissatisfied turn. “What, you weren’t making those for me?”

“That’s quite a line considering you didn’t even think I *could* in the first place,” Ruri replied, turning her nose up.

“I’m confident I could eat anything you make, no matter how hazardous it might be,” Jade said with a look of smug assurance, despite his brazenly rude comment.

“That isn’t something to brag about. These are for Rin, Kotaro, and Lydia. I will make some for you next time, so you’ll have to forgive me, Jade-sama. I’m going to be having a tea party at Lydia’s, but since Rin and Kotaro can’t come into the pocket space, they would get miffed at me if I didn’t leave them some cookies before I went in.”

Kotaro wanted to follow Ruri into the kitchen, but she barred him from coming in since having a furry animal in there would be hygienically unsound. His body may have been the sacred beast of the Nation of the Spirit King, but no one wanted a fuzzy cookie. Rin was awaiting Ruri in the garden with a sulky-looking Kotaro in attendance.

“By Lydia, you mean the Spirit of Time, right?” Jade asked.

“Yes.”

Jade thought for a second before proposing, “Why don’t I come along with you into the pocket space?”

“Huh? You come along, Jade-sama?! Um, well... it should be fine if you’re in there a little bit. But not even Chelsie-san has really gone in there.”

“It’s settled, then.”

Chapter 2: Tea Party with Lydia

Per his request, Jade was allowed to follow Ruri into Lydia's domain. He exited the kitchen for the royal office, saying that he was off to inform the others that he would be stepping out. Ruri decided to head to the garden ahead of him.

Waiting there patiently was Kotaro with Rin perched atop his canine head.

"Ruri, are the cookies done?" asked Rin.

"They sure are."

"I patiently awaited your return," Kotaro said, wagging his tail and relaying with his entire body that he couldn't wait any longer.

Ruri smiled and chuckled at this humble display. *"Sorry for the wait. Here's your cookies."*

Once Ruri placed the cookies in front of them, Kotaro wagged his tail even faster and Rin did a flip of joy in the air.

"Thank you, Ruri," said Rin.

"I absolutely love the cookies you bake," Kotaro added. He remembered the times that Ruri cooked back when she lived with Chelsie—not just cookies but other dishes and confectionaries, too.

"Thank you, guys," Ruri said with a pleasant smile, even though their frank praise made her think they had her confused with someone else.

Just as Kotaro and Rin were finishing up their snack, Jade finally showed back up.

"You're awfully late, Jade... sama...?"

Ruri was only expecting Jade, but behind him was an entourage composed of Euclase, Finn, and Agate.

Looking at the confused look painted on Ruri's face, Jade awkwardly grinned,

asking, “Sorry, Ruri, but would it be okay if Finn and the others joined us?”

“Everyone else, too? Well, I don’t think there should be a problem so long as it’s not an extended stay, but how did this even come about? Finn-san I understand, him being your royal bodyguard, but will things be okay with both the king of the nation *and* its chancellor absent? Well, Euclase-san?”

“Claus is staying, so everything will be fine. We had actually planned to leave Agate behind as well, *but...*” Euclase intentionally trailed off, peeking over at Agate by their side.

“You expect me to work with a chance to meet the legendary Spirit of Time right in front of my face?” Agate said, his eyes filled with the most expectation out of anyone present. He was bouncing up and down like a kid excited for a field trip. Perhaps it was his way of dressing up for his visit to Lydia, but the ribbon tied to his beard looked even fancier than usual.

“Well, it is pretty spacious there, so there isn’t any kind of capacity limit, but I advise you all to be careful; I was told that staying there for too long can cause psychological damage.”

Jade and the others all looked surprised. Ruri’s warning was news to them.

“I-Is this really okay...?” Jade asked, pensive and grimacing.

“So long as it isn’t an extended stay, as I said,” assured Ruri, but the extremely worried expressions on Finn and the others’ faces remained the same.

Turning away from everyone, Ruri created a portal to her pocket space—one that was bigger than usual to accommodate for the increase in people.

“Okay, time to go,” Ruri said, quickly entering the portal ahead of Jade and the others.

They were all slightly hesitant. Euclase seemed to be looking at Agate and wondering about their course of action, but Jade started walking toward the entrance. “Ruri said it would be fine as long as we keep our visit short, so it should be fine,” Jade announced to the still-hesitant Euclase and Agate before disappearing into the entrance. He turned to Euclase and the others and prompted them to come, causing Finn to follow. Once they saw Finn move, Euclase and Agate made up their minds and headed toward the entrance

themselves.

The inside of the pocket space was a place for storing your belongings, so the concept of entering it yourself never crossed any of their minds. They were all equal parts curious and concerned about venturing inside. In fact, they most likely never would have done so if Ruri wasn't around.

The domain past the entrance was more vast than any of them imagined. It was an indication of how much mana Ruri possessed. However, instead of being drawn by the vastness, Jade's attention was drawn to the mountains upon mountains of treasure that filled the area. Once Finn and the others arrived after Jade and saw this sight, they froze in place, dumbfounded.

Jade had many questions in his mind as Ruri stood in front of him, yelling into the empty air, "Lydia, I'm here to *plaaay!*"

Suddenly, a transparent, specter-like figure floated into existence out of thin air. "*Welcome, Ruri,*" Lydia greeted with a warm smile before noticing Jade and the others behind her. Her eyes widened. "*Oh my, what is this? We have quite the amount of guests today.*"

"Jade-sama and the others wished to see you, Lydia. They're not bound by a contract with you, but they should be fine in here for a short while, right?"

"Yes, for a short while, at least."

Jade and the others relaxed upon hearing those words.

"Hmm, with this many people, our usual table is going to be too small, huh? Is there a bigger table around here?" Ruri asked.

"In that case..." Lydia held out her hand to an empty spot in the room and a large table instantly spawned there. Lydia was capable of teleporting any item in this space at will, even items from different pocket spaces as well.

While Ruri gathered enough chairs for everyone, Euclase and Agate eyed the mountains of treasure haphazardly piled up around them. Euclase, the capable chancellor with feminine charm and a sizable gemstone and jewelry collection, started discerning what was real or fake and tabulating the values. Meanwhile, Agate, the elder among the long-living dragonkin, used his keen eye to spot items that resembled lost treasures. He was practically a living encyclopedia,

full of knowledge accumulated from his long years walking the planet—far longer than any human.

Totally oblivious to their reactions, Ruri finished setting the table with chairs and sat down herself. Lydia took physical form and sat beside Ruri.

Normally, a spirit needed to take someone's body to take physical form, like Rin or Kotaro, but Lydia could materialize herself within the confines of this space. Now that she had form, her features looked practically identical to a regular human, the only difference being the clearly inhuman aura exuding from her. Even in human form, she generated an ethereal majesty that came across as anything *but* human.

"Here you go; I brought cookies," Ruri said, handing the cookies off to Lydia, who could eat now that she was in physical form.

"Thank you, Ruri," Lydia said, delightedly.

Pleased with her reaction, Ruri started prepping the tea next. There were not only cups and dishes in this space but hot water and tea leaves as well. They were for tea parties like the one today and for Lydia to enjoy a meal whenever she felt like.

As soon as there was enough tea for everyone, Ruri kicked off the introductions. "Lydia, this is Jade-sama. He is the current Dragon King."

"It is a great honor to be in the presence of a spirit who shared a contract with the First Dragon King," Jade said, attempting to show respect to a superior, an uncommon display for the young Dragon King.

However, Lydia stopped him. *"No need for stiff greetings. Spirits have never had any interest in human-crafted etiquette, and both of my contract-bearers have been frank and sociable, so I'm not used to being treated like that. My previous contract-bearer was especially devoid of such behavior..."* Though technically complaining, Lydia's expression was gentle as she spoke of her prior contract-bearer.

"Were you romantically involved with The First?" asked Jade.

The picture of the woman next to the First Dragon King in the castle's treasure room had been a long-standing mystery to all, but once Jade and the

others took one look at Lydia, the mystery was solved.

“No, we were never once romantically involved,” Lydia said with a melancholic smile. Ruri was going to interject, but Lydia soon chuckled it off in an unaffected manner. *“I heard that from Ruri in the past as well. She said she saw a portrait of me.”*

“Yes,” Jade replied. “Apparently, The First said that he would never marry because he had the person in the picture, but since he was never seen with anyone who fit the description, their identity has always remained a mystery. I would have never guessed she was actually a *spirit*.”

“Indeed...”

“I’m sorry to mention it,” Jade apologized, sensing something from Lydia’s forlorn expression earlier.

However, Lydia stared at him blankly for a second before smirking. *“Tee hee hee, why are you apologizing? It’s pleasing news since I don’t know much of what he did on the outside. Would you mind showing me the picture he drew of me? I want to know how it was he saw me.”*

“Yes, I will give it to Ruri next time.”

It was probably safe to say that Lydia’s pleased-looking smile lightened up the awkward mood slightly and introduced a more friendly breath of fresh air.

After regaining their composes, the others introduced themselves. Once finished, Ruri brought up why she had come today.

“Hey, Lydia, do you have anything I could possibly sell?”

“Well, almost everything is collected in here, so feel free to take whatever you’d like, but is there something you plan on buying by selling something else off?”

“Yup, I want to buy a house in the capital. My parents and grandpa are all coming to this world, so I want to make sure I have all the essentials for daily life and a house ready so they can live here. I know there’s furniture and household goods in here, but I’m not going to have enough money to buy a house in the capital off of my wages from the diner alone.”

As expected of the royal capital of a large nation, the price of land was expensive. Far too expensive for someone who worked at a diner, hence why Ruri was asking Lydia for something worth selling.

“If it’s money you want, why not just use the money Weidt left?” Lydia said, looking over to the mountain of coins piled up in the room.

Those coins were the fortune that the First Dragon King, Weidt, left behind—bequeathed to Ruri according to his wishes. While she *could* very well use that money if she wanted to...

“But that’s all old money of the Nation of the Dragon King and it might not line up with the modern day currency.”

“Oh, really? Well, in that case...”

“Hold on just a second!” Euclase interjected, cutting off Lydia before she could suggest something else.

“What is the matter, Euclase-san?”

“Would you mind if I were to ask a question?”

“Feel free.”

Jade and the others looked on with stern expressions, grateful that Euclase decided to speak up.

“This pocket of space is one you’ve made, correct? Which means everything in here belongs to you, right?”

“Yes,” Ruri replied with a nod.

Next, Jade asked a question himself. “How did you amass this much of a fortune? You’ve only been in this world for a few years, so how did you gain a treasure greater than the castle’s treasure room?”

“The majority of what’s here is from Lydia’s prior contract-bearer, the First Dragon King. He left in his will to bequeath everything to the next contract-bearer, which would be me,” Ruri explained with an awkward expression. She wasn’t exactly jumping for joy over this stroke of good fortune. A part of her was happy, but she was more bewildered over coming into possession of such a vast fortune all at once.

“An inheritance from The First?!” Agate leaned over and exclaimed, being the most surprised out of everyone.

“Although, Lydia *does* often bring in things from other pocket spaces, as well,” Ruri said under her breath.

Picking up on that, Jade asked, “Care explaining?”

“A pocket space can only be opened by its owner, so when that owner passes away, Lydia will erase them in sequential order. That being said, she’ll either bring anything that seems useful into here or throw them into other people’s spaces.”

“You can enter another person’s pocket space?” Jade asked, seemingly composed but secretly terribly surprised.

“Not just anyone can. Only me, the Spirit of Time, and my contract-bearer are capable of that.”

“Basically, Ruri can enter other people’s pockets of space?”

“That’s correct. I assist Lydia with erasing pocket spaces on occasion,” Ruri elaborated. She thought of that spiral staircase floating in the dark void that led to the spaces of people all over the world, which only Lydia and Ruri could enter.

There were many items among Weidt’s inherited goods that Lydia had salvaged from spaces she erased after Weidt’s death, but nowadays, there were several items here that Ruri brought in herself. At first, she was opposed to the idea of bringing in stuff from another person’s room, but she was now used to it.

“Are you also able to tamper with the spaces of those still alive?” asked Jade.

“I am... but, oh...! I would never dream of taking something from a room that still has an owner!” Ruri feverishly elaborated as Jade and the others pondered with grimaces.

While she was capable of entering anyone’s space by opening any of the doors on the sides of the spiral staircase, she never crossed that line. However, Jade and the others had something different on their minds. Stepping into

another person's pocket space essentially meant that she could acquire the assets of all of those with a pocket space of their own, and even if she were to pilfer something, it would be the perfect crime since there would be no evidence. Since a pocket space could only be opened by the individual who made it, many people stored their valuables in them. If she had the ability to interfere with those spaces, then there would be no shortage of people looking to take advantage of that.

"Ruri, have you told that to anyone other than us?" asked Jade.

"I've told it to Chelsie-san. I assure you that I'm no fool. I would only tell something this dangerous to trustworthy people."

Jade's face took a very relieved turn. At the same time, since Ruri did all sorts of outlandish things like becoming a cat and whatnot, he made sure to emphasize, "I see. Good, in that case. Just be absolutely sure not to tell anyone else. We'd be in a situation if those clouded by greed set their sights on you."

"Yes, duly noted," Ruri said, nodding to Jade's warning.

Euclase then resumed their questioning. "Now then, I'd like to get back to the subject of our nation's older currency you mentioned earlier..."

Ruri stood from her seat, picked a few coins from the tall pile, and placed them down, hitting the table with a jingle. "Here they are," she said as Jade and the others glued their eyes to the older money of the Nation of the Dragon King set before them. "Is it possible to exchange or redeem these older coins for current money? If so, I could turn it into the capital I need to buy a house."

In Ruri's world, there were people who collected money, and she recalled money not commonly in circulation selling for high prices. Or maybe she could go to a bank and exchange it for new money—she had various ideas.

"Maybe, worst case scenario, I could have the fire spirits melt them down and bring them to a weapons shop in the capital as raw material." She didn't know what mineral the old coins were made from, but they were subtly different from a regular gold coin.

However, once she proposed the idea, panic struck the faces of Euclase and all the others, culminating in Euclase screaming at the top of their lungs, "I

forbid it!”

Euclase’s sudden shout caused Ruri to jump in surprise. Lydia, right by her side, was also startled by the noise.

“Why are you startling us like that, Euclase-san?”

“Because you suggested melting these down! How could you think of melting down something so valuable?!”

“Huh? Valuable?” Ruri asked, taking a look at everyone’s faces and stopping at Jade, who flashed her a wry grin and a nod.

“The old currency of the Nation of the Dragon King was crafted from a certain mineral back in the days of the First Dragon King. But that mineral suddenly dried up after his death, and by the time of the next Dragon King, they switched to the currency made out of the current materials. That mineral could also be used for weapons and armor, which meant people steadily processed the coins to the point where, nowadays, the mineral is scarcely seen still in coin form.”

“Then, if I bring them to a weapons store, I can sell them for a high price.”

“Didn’t I just tell you that I *forbid* such an endeavor?! If you’re selling to anyone, sell it to the nation! This is a valuable piece of our nation’s history!” Euclase stated, their eyes bulging in frustration.

Since Ruri didn’t really care where she sold the coins so long as she could get the money for a house, she handed the coins on the table over to Euclase. They seemed expensive, so Ruri figured Euclase could find out how much the few coins she gave them would fetch and then sell off any extras if it wasn’t enough for the cost of the house.

“But, why did the mineral suddenly dry up? Given they were making it into coins, I’d assume they used it as a material because they figured they’d have enough to last,” pondered Ruri.

“You’re speaking about the First Dragon King. There’s no way I would know,” Euclase replied.

“Good point.”

The tale of Weidt’s mystery sweetheart had been passed down along with the

portrait, so it survived all the way up until now, but not even Euclase, and all their wisdom as a chancellor, knew what set off the natural phenomenon at the time or why they used the mineral to begin with.

However, there was one person in attendance who did know about the time during the First Dragon King—Lydia.

“Pretty sure it’s because Chi left once Weidt died.”

“Chi?”

“The supreme-level Spirit of Earth who Weidt made a contract with. Since Chi served to protect Weidt, he affected the land of the Nation of the Dragon King, the kingdom under Weidt’s protection. That was probably why they could gather such a superior mineral. But once Weidt was gone, Chi also left the kingdom, leaving the supply of the mineral to dry up.”

Aside from Ruri who replied with a nonchalant “wow,” the others latched onto Lydia’s story with serious interest.

At any rate, Ruri had raised the money to buy a house in the capital. She threw up a victory pose and celebrated her accomplishment—mentally, of course.

Next up was going into town and looking for a suitable house.

Chapter 3: Begging

Ruri and Jade were currently having a verbal disagreement in the royal office.

“No.”

“Whaa?! But why?”

“No means no.”

“It’s just for a little bit, though?”

“And what if something happens?”

“That’s why I’ll be bringing Joshua and Ewan along.”

The point of contention here was Ruri going to the city to purchase a house. There were no objections to the task itself, but once Jade heard that she would be going to the diner she worked at on the way, he firmly opposed.

Ruri had taken an extended leave from work due to the Nadashian war. And even before that, the diner had suddenly closed when Nadasha began their invasion on the Nation of the Dragon King. Between Asahi escaping from captivity, Ruri’s visit to Chelsie, and all the other things that happened afterward, she hadn’t been able to make time for the diner. She felt terrible for being such an irresponsible employee, so she decided to quit. Technically Joshua, who introduced her to the establishment in the first place, broke the news of her resignation, but given her tenure there, she wanted to apologize in person for suddenly quitting.

Yet, for whatever reason, Jade was trying to stop her and wouldn’t listen to her reasoning. Which, of course, Ruri wasn’t going to take lying down, but...

“You are to go only to the royal capital,” Jade said as if making a final ruling, starting his work without so much as looking up at Ruri.

Ruri pouted her lips in discontent. “Hmph...”

She decided to use her last-ditch effort to get through to the hard-headed Jade. She pulled her bracelet out of her pocket space and put it on. Turning into

a cat in the blink of an eye, Ruri jumped on Jade's lap and proceeded to look up at him with big doe eyes.

"Urk..." Jade faltered from the cuteness.

Seeing his reaction, she piled on the pressure while chuckling to herself on the inside. "Myaaan," Ruri said in her cat voice. The sad cry resembled a "pretty please," which rubbed against Jade's ears. She could feel Jade's fluffy-animal-loving heart starting to stagger as she stared at him with her adorable round eyes.

"Oh, please, Jade-sama?"





Ruri triumphantly sauntered out of the royal office with Joshua and Ewan in tow. Finn and Claus, who had witnessed the whole thing, stared in disappointment at Jade. Jade realized that he had unintentionally succumbed to Ruri's cuteness and clutched his head in shame.

"Well, Joshua and Ewan will be with her to keep her from being scammed, so I don't see any harm in letting her have her way," Euclase said to console Jade, but it didn't seem to have much effect.

His aides all knew why Jade was so averse to Ruri visiting the diner, making them feel equal parts sympathetic and exasperated. It had to do with the young man named Jet who confessed to Ruri before. While Jade's aides dreaded the possibility of Ruri and this young man being romantically involved after seeing how elated she had been, the first one to take action to prevent that from happening was Jade himself. Before Jet could meet up with Ruri, Jade made contact with the young man. At which point, he managed to break up their relationship with flying colors. Despite their relief, all of the aides were sympathetic to Jet's plight and the fear he must've felt.

Seeing as how not long had passed since then, Jade was trying to keep Ruri from visiting the diner today because he remembered that she'd mentioned Jet was a regular customer. He had been so relieved when Ruri announced she was quitting her job and they would drop out of contact. However, realizing there was a chance of them meeting, Jade couldn't help but worry.

"Might I ask, why not just make her your mate already?" Agate asked, his eyes filled with anticipation.

Recently, Agate had suddenly stopped suggesting brides for Jade to marry. It wasn't because he had given up. Quite the contrary, he was more motivated than ever. The reason he wasn't suggesting brides was, naturally, because Jade already had a partner set. However, seeing Jade and Ruri's relationship not blossom at all only served to exacerbate Agate's impatience. He was doing all he could to *not* meddle around in their affairs. Well, to an extent, anyway. He would occasionally slip here and there, but it was an improvement. That was Agate's form of "restraint."

Jade replied, "...It's still too early. I'm waiting until Ruri opens herself up to me more."

Given his response, it was hard to tell him there was still a chance a random commoner would steal his potential partner. A man's heart was a complicated thing.

Noticing that the two of them were far from becoming mates, Euclase provided Jade with a warning. "I, too, am a dragonkin, so I can understand why you wouldn't want Ruri to meet with a man who had feelings for her even once. However, Ruri is *not* dragonkin; she is a regular human. It is not wise to so bluntly force dragonkin feelings onto her. And since she isn't even your mate, if she were to dislike your excessive restraining of her freedoms, things could turn out ugly." Although it was a tough pill to administer, Euclase was still the chancellor of the Nation of the Dragon King and they needed to consider and cope with any and all worst-case scenarios.

A dragonkin's mana was so strong it made other demi-humans marvel in fear and awe. It was not uncommon for even humans with scant mana to be acutely aware of a dragonkin's strong mana and become their mate. At the same time, there was no shortage of examples of humans being unfaithful, much unlike dragonkins, who were devout until the day they died. In those cases, dragonkin had little recourse. There were those who would not only kill their cheating mate's partner after running amok, they would kill their mate and take their lives right after. Past examples of this showed it was far from uncommon.

They weren't officially mates as of yet, but if Ruri were to choose another over the Dragon King, mightiest in all of the land, and he were to succumb to his heartache and go berserk, then...

Euclase needed Jade to show a little self-restraint, to make sure Ruri wouldn't be put off by his behavior.

"You raise a good point. However..." Jade started.

"Besides, Ruri does not hail from this world, which means she lacks knowledge about dragonkin. Considering the fortune we saw in her pocket space, she could easily live on her own without anyone else's patronage. Restraining her too much might result in her cooping herself up with Ms.

Chelsie in the forest.”

“That would be a problem. Let’s handle this with discretion,” Jade gallantly agreed.

However, his aides stared at him with dubious looks, wondering if he could keep control when it really counted.



Meanwhile, with her cat-begging tactic effectively cracking Jade into giving her permission, Ruri triumphantly walked toward the diner in the town over with Joshua and Ewan in tow. She was wearing her wig since she stood out too much with her natural hair.

“Tee hee hee hee, Jade-sama is such a pushover,” Ruri commented, knowing just which buttons to push since she was a fellow lover of fluffy animals herself.

It was Ruri’s theory that if a person could ignore a cat with big doe eyes looking at them and “pretty pleasing” them, then they weren’t a real fluffy-animal lover. Not to mention, since Jade sat at the top of the food chain as a dragonkin, he’d lacked any interaction with anything soft and fluffy up until now—a full-on fluff deficiency. There was no possible way he could endure that.

“This woman is terrifying. She uses her cat form when she needs to,” Ewan commented.

“Less of a femme fatale and more of a femme feline. Pretty novel, if ya ask me,” added Joshua.

The two of them were both talking up a storm about Ruri.

“Good afternoon!” Ruri greeted cheerfully as she stepped into the diner. It was past lunchtime, and the patronage was sparse.

Once the wife, the daughter, and the son-in-law of the owner all caught sight of her, they approached Ruri in joy, surprised to see her.

“Well, if it isn’t Ruri!” the wife said.

“Oh my, what brings you here?” asked the daughter.

“I wanted to apologize for suddenly quitting without any prior notice. I am so sorry for any inconvenience I may have caused.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that at all. It was unfortunate since you were such a big help around here, but you have to do what you have to do,” the wife said, happily greeting her without an ounce of resentment.

“Since you’re here, have something to eat.”

“Yes, of course.”

After Ruri sat at the empty table and waited for a bit, the daughter brought over a plate of food. She placed it on the table and then flashed a suggestive smile toward Joshua and Ewan sitting on the other side.

Ruri cocked her head in confusion and asked, “Is something the matter?”

“So, tell me, which of these strapping gentlemen is yours?”

“Huh...?” Ruri blurted out, not understanding what she was being asked. But after processing it for a bit, she wrapped her head around the question and vehemently refuted, “N-No, you have the wrong idea. I don’t have that sort of relationship with *either* of these two!”

“Oh my, is that so? But Jet told us that you were already seeing someone, so I just assumed.”

“Huh?! Jet said that?” She hadn’t seen Jet ever since he ran off before their date—something Ruri still didn’t comprehend. She had no idea why he would have thought that. “If I was already seeing someone, then I wouldn’t go on a date with someone else. How did he get things so mixed up? Was that why he suddenly went home?” Ruri asked. She couldn’t think of anyone she knew who would have given him that wrong of an idea.

“Oh my, so, you’re not dating?”

“No, we’re not. Please, just listen,” Ruri said as she explained that Jet had turned tail as soon as they saw each other.

“That sounds like a real disaster,” the daughter said sympathetically. “Well, you ended up quickly giving up on Jet as a result, so it all worked out. You shouldn’t go after men like that.”

“What do you mean?” The daughter sounded pretty dismissive of Jet, leaving Ruri to wonder what she meant. From what Ruri saw, he was an extremely impressive young man.

“I don’t think you knew this, but Jet has two wives to his name.”

“Huh...?” Ruri’s mouth twitched.

“Not only that, but he already found his next girl after he found out you were taken. And, from what I’ve heard, he’s going to be marrying his third wife next month. Then again, polygamy is common in Jet’s race, so I suppose it’s not too scandalous. But as a woman, I think I definitely prefer someone like a devout dragonkin over someone who has a ton of wives. Don’t you think?”

Ruri’s mental image of Jet being an honest young man was crumbling.

“I think it’s good you gave up on a girl-chaser like him.”

“Seems that way...”

“Well, enjoy your meal!” the daughter said before returning back to work, leaving Ruri to sit in shock.

Ruri was so shocked, in fact, that Joshua addressed her to check on her.

“What are you so down in the dumps for? Did you really like him that much?”

“No, that’s not it. I guess I’m just taken aback that a guy so innocent he wouldn’t hurt a fly ended up being a married man. To *two* people, might I add! That means I was a potential *third* wife, doesn’t it?! A third... I couldn’t do that.”

“Well, as a dragonkin, I agree with you on that,” Joshua admitted.

Ruri lamented this news since she thought Jet would make for a good husband. That wasn’t to say she was entirely against the concept of polygamy, but being raised in a monogamous society, she could never be open to the idea in her own romantic relationships.

“Is monogamy the standard where you were born, Ruri?” Ewan asked as he ate his food.

“Yeah. There are other countries that practice polygamy and polyandry, but I was never exposed to it.”

“I see. Here, marriage systems are usually dependent on the race, not the nation. Especially for demi-humans. There are also races that practice polyandry, but polygamy is particularly common among the races with four-legged beast forms, so make sure to keep that in mind.”

“Oh wow. Then, it’s commonplace to have three or four wives?”

“That’s a pretty low number for polygamists. The Beast King of the Nation of the Beast King has nineteen queens, after all.”

“Grk, *nineteen*?”

“Nineteen at the moment, and even more if you include the ones that were presented off or divorced.”

Ruri grimaced in disbelief.

Joshua joined in as he stuffed his face with the meat on his plate. “Well, I’d say that’s an extreme example. Still, unlike the dragonkin who value life-long devotion, there are races who consider the number of wives to be a symbol of power and authority.”

“If I’m marrying anyone, then maybe I should marry a dragonkin instead,” Ruri said with earnest. At least that way there was no chance of them cheating or having another wife. Although dragonkin could be quite jealous, they would never be unfaithful, which made them a safer bet in Ruri’s mind.

“Don’t say that like it’s nothing. If you’re going to be a dragonkin’s mate, you need to be ready,” Ewan said with a stern face.

“Care to explain?” asked Ruri.

“My father killed my mother. I told you my mother was human, right? Unlike dragonkin, humans don’t necessarily have to love the same person forever. Of course, there are humans who are devout lovers. As for my mother, there was apparently a human gardener who worked at the house, much to the dismay of my father and his jealousy. She fell in love with the gardener and tried to elope with him. Once my father realized that, he killed my mother, along with her lover, and then died himself,” Ewan said in a detached tone.

After a short silence, Ruri took her fork and stuck it into a strangely-colored

mystery vegetable of this world. “Oh wow, that sounds rough,” she said casually, as if asking him to pass the salt.

“That’s taking it too lightly, darn it!” Ewan sharply quipped in reply. “Don’t you have any sympathy or comforting words to give?”

“But you’re not particularly sad about it, right? What do you expect me to say?” Ruri said, causing Ewan to look like he just got blindsided.

Having heard the whole conversation unfold, Joshua suddenly began to laugh. “Ahaha! Ruri, you’re a riot. Most people who heard that would feel sympathetic or be left speechless.”

“I mean, compare that to how enthusiastically he talks about Finn-san. He told that story with barely any emotion, like he was telling a story he’d heard from a third party.”

Seemingly right on the money with her assumption, Ewan scratched his head and let out a sigh before saying, “Well, you got me. This incident occurred before I was old enough to understand. My earliest childhood memories are of me living with my aunt and uncle as my parents and with Finn as my brother. In order to protect my feelings, they told me what happened after I grew up, but even if they were my birth parents, I can’t get emotional over a story about two people I’ve never met before. The only real comment I could muster up at the time was, ‘Oh, okay.’ In fact, my brother was so concerned over the fact that I wasn’t depressed that he stayed with me for a while, which made it a fond memory in the end... That’s why whenever someone offers me sympathy, it puts me in an awkward situation.”

There were those who heard the story from elsewhere and offered Ewan words of consolation, but being consoled when you’re not sad just left him at a loss as to how to respond. And it seemed to have happened to him on several occasions in the past. However, Ruri felt something from the way Ewan spoke, so she felt compelled neither to sympathize nor offer condolences. Ewan seemed to like that, but his story was quickly swept aside as Ruri enjoyed her meal with Joshua.

“This is some damn good food,” Joshua commented.

“Right? This is their signature dish. Try some of this, too.”

“Ooh, this is great!”

Seeing Ruri and Joshua smack their lips and ignore his story made a vein pop on Ewan’s forehead. “Hey, listen to me!!”

“Okay, okay. We’re listening, geez. Basically, you love Finn-san more than your actual parents, right?”

“That’s not what I mean! I mean, you’re definitely not wrong, but that’s not my point!! My point is that if you’re going to be a dragonkin’s mate, you need to study up on their traits beforehand. A human may be able to divorce if they’re unhappy with their relationship and move on to the next person, but dragonkin don’t work like that. If you don’t seriously commit yourself, then both parties will end up getting hurt.”

“I get your point, but even if you tell me that now, there’s no way I could wrap my head around it,” Ruri said.

“Uh, pardon?”

“Even if I committed myself to being someone’s mate, that doesn’t guarantee that our love will last forever. After all, I’m not a dragonkin; I’m a human. No one knows what the future really holds... so there’s no point in thinking about any of that right now. I’ll think about the what-ifs when they come to me. Then again, that depends on if I date a dragonkin.”

Ewan sighed and muttered under his breath, “...I’m warning you because it’s likely that *will* happen.”

However, his words were too low for Ruri to hear, and she added, “There’s no point in racking my brain over what may or may not happen, right?”

“I’m with Ruri!” Joshua said, cheerfully raising his hand.

“You’re a lot more serious than I expected, Ewan,” said Ruri.

Joshua nodded. “You should really learn to take it easy a little more, ya know?”

“And you take it *too* easy!” exclaimed Ewan. “You have no idea how much stress you put on Lord Claus’s stomach on a daily basis. You need to straighten up a little bit more.”

“But I don’t *wanna*. ’Sides, I do my job just fine. How many different countries do you think I’ve had to traverse? They work me to the bone. I mean, do you know how many times I thought about just flying the coop completely?”

“I’m saying there’s a problem with your *attitude* toward the job!”

Their squabble seemed like it could drag on forever. Considering their personalities, they would never see eye to eye with each other, making the whole thing pointless. Even though the diner was relatively empty, there were still a few customers inside. Feeling the silent pressure from the owner’s daughter to quickly stop the fight, Ruri reluctantly intervened.

“Okay, okay. Once we’re done eating, we’re going to go back to the capital to go house hunting, so hurry and eat up, Ewan,” Ruri said in an attempt to quell their arguing.

“Why are you singling *me* out?!” Ewan barked, thinking that Ruri was being unreasonable.

“Well, because you were the one who got all angry.”

“Sure did. Now, c’mon, hurry,” Joshua added.

“Grr...”

The two of them spoke to Ewan as if trying to soothe a child in the midst of a tantrum, which made him want to snap. However, perhaps because he realized that getting angry wasn’t very mature of him, he reconsidered it and suppressed his outburst as he resumed eating his meal.

Chapter 4: Home Purchase

With their meal finished, Ruri promised the people of the diner that she would stop by again. Then the party of three all headed for their next destination, the royal capital. They could've easily made it there in a few minutes if they took dragon form, but they decided to go back by road to burn off their meal. As such, it only took a little over an hour to get to the gates of the royal capital.

When they arrived, Finn, who should've been by Jade's side, was standing right there, much to their surprise. As soon as Ewan saw him, a gigantic smile spread across his face. If he were a dog demi-human, then he probably would've been wagging his tail clean off his rear right now.

"Brother!" Ewan shouted in glee.

"Why is Finn-san here? Joshua, did you know?" asked Ruri.

"Nope. Wonder if something's up?"

Feeling doubtful, they walked up to Finn.

"Ewan, have you been carrying out your duty?" Finn asked.

"Of course! No one suspicious will be getting to Ruri so long as I'm around."

"That's reassuring to hear," Finn said with a kind, brotherly smile, which brought an even bigger smile to Ewan's face. "I'm relieved to see you're getting along with Ruri, too."

There was a period where Ruri and Ewan's relationship was at an all-time low. If Ewan's relationship with the nation's Beloved got any worse, they debated sending him away from the royal capital. Since word of that had spread among the king and the aides of the castle, Finn was relieved to see them getting along so well. So well, in fact, it would make Jade jealous.

"So, why are you here, Brother?"

"Ah, yes. I'm here to guard Ruri."

Ruri was confused. She already had two fine bodyguards in Joshua and Ewan. If Finn was going to guard her, he should have come from the very start.

Finn continued, "After you've purchased your house, I'd like you to take off your wig and walk around the royal capital as the Beloved. Also, I'd like you to take the spirits along with you as you do."

"But won't it cause a huge commotion if I do that?" Even in the town that Ruri went to with Chelsie, which was by far smaller than the capital, it caused a huge commotion at first. It was obvious what kind of massive uproar would come about from a Beloved parading around the capital with no forewarning.

"That is why I'm here to guard you. I have other men posted throughout the capital as well, so you needn't worry."

"If you're going through all that trouble, I can just go back to the castle..." Ruri suggested. The thought of sending out that many people just to protect her made her feel awkward. Even though she was a "Beloved" in this world, on her own, she was just a regular person. She'd never had any experience with people "protecting her."

"No, we'd like you to walk around the capital, Ruri."

"And why is that?"

"For the prestige of the Nation of the Dragon King. The Beloveds of the Nations of the Beast King and Spirit King frequently walk the streets of the city, so the fact that the Beloved of our nation doesn't show herself is being construed by some as us lacking the power to protect her. Also, there is no shortage of people skeptical whether there is Beloved here at all, so I'd like to finally squash their skepticism."

"Who?" Joshua asked. "The inept nobles of the Imperial Nation? The only thing *those* guys have in spades is pride. They're the only one out of the entire Alliance of Four Nations that doesn't have a Beloved, so they're just jealous. All that talk about us 'lacking the power to protect our Beloved' is just a bunch of venom they're spewing," he said, voicing his hunch aloud. He was no stranger to talking to Imperial Nation nobles. His hunch seemed to be right, however, because Finn made an awkward expression in response.

“Hmm, well, I don’t mind, I suppose...” Although Ruri wasn’t very privy to political matters, she wasn’t going to refuse lending a hand if she could be of help.

“In that case, before you walk around the capital, let’s go looking for a house,” Finn suggested, even though the decision had already been made.

Finn showed Ruri two houses in a district filled with dragonkin households under the premise of not letting the family of their Beloved live somewhere in disrepair. True to the nation’s name, many dragonkin held jobs pertaining to the nation itself, and there were many dragonkin soldiers living throughout the district they were currently visiting. Even if they weren’t soldiers, dragonkin were great fighters regardless. Few dared to be foolish enough to commit a crime here. At worst, there was some drunken commotion from time to time—all in all, this was the safest district in the royal capital.

The first place Finn introduced Ruri to in this district was a house close to the castle. The second was a house close to where Claus lived. Both of them, however, were too big for just her and three other people—her parents and her grandfather. They were meant for stereotypical millionaire-types instead. Ruri hated the thought of her mother making her father and grandfather clean this huge place because she was horrendously inept at household chores. Plus, knowing her grandfather’s personality, he would likely push all the work onto her father.

Ruri hummed and hawed to herself until Ewan noticed and asked, “What are you pondering over?”

“Well, I was thinking it’s a little too big for just me and my family. Cleaning it seems like a lot of work and so does maintenance...”

“No need to worry about that. We’ll be dispatching servants and security detail from the castle to maintain the house,” Finn assured in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Huh?!” Ruri cried in shock. “I couldn’t let you go through that much trouble. If the house was just a little smaller, we could all get by even without help.”

“No. These are necessary measures for the nation. It is possible your mother and grandfather are also Beloveds, isn’t it?”

“Yes, from what the spirits told me, at least,” Ruri said, recalling that her mother had asked the spirits not to lend any help until she could see them.

Since their behavior was directly tied to their emotions, spirits wouldn’t consider anyone’s requests unless they gained something from it. However, presenting the benefits to them, with their radically different way of life compared to humans, was a difficult task. Given that, the only people who the spirits complied with were Beloveds. Even Rin and Kotaro had told her that they saw a slew of spirits around her mother and grandfather during their trip to the other world, so it was probably certain that both of them were Beloveds.

“Beloveds are supposed to be protected by the state. Normally, we would want them to live in the castle, but from what you’ve explained, they are averse to a cramped lifestyle. In which case, it is a request of the state to allow us to at least provide security detail and servants so that they live in comfort.”

Ruri felt obliged to take care of her parents since they were coming to live here, but from Finn’s explanation, it seemed her idea didn’t mesh with the Nation of the Dragon King’s top brass.

“I understand what you’re saying,” Ruri said, “but knowing my mother and grandfather’s personalities, they would be very much opposed to living in a castle, so please don’t.”

“Would they dislike living in the castle *that much*? You know, we usually don’t try to restrict a Beloved’s conduct,” Joshua said, confused as to why anyone would be opposed to a life of being waited on hand and foot with all the amenities.

“How do I put this? My mother and grandfather are kind of... free-spirited. I feel like they’d be thrilled at first, but they would probably get bored quickly and want to live in town. You said you guys don’t put restrictions on conduct, but you would put a stop to any conduct that would endanger others or was unbecoming of a Beloved, right?” Ruri recalled how Jade had tried to stop her when he learned she was working at the diner.

After pausing a moment, Ruri continued. “Well, you’re not wrong. I can just picture those two feeling tied down and running off. They’re just free-spirited individuals, and I don’t think they’d listen if you told them to stay put.” She

pictured her mother and grandfather running amok, not listening to reason, and her poor father clutching his stomach, unable to contain their rampage.

Ruri also didn't like living a constrained lifestyle, but seeing as how she went to Chelsie's house on occasion, or went out to town in disguise, she didn't feel all that restricted. The others would interject from time to time, like when she worked at the diner, but it still wasn't that big of a deal to her. However, she assumed that her grandfather and mother would feel hampered by living in the castle with people nagging over their every move.

"In which case, it might be better for Finn-san and the others if they lived *outside* the castle from the start..." Ruri trailed off, her eyes drifting toward Finn.

If they were Beloveds, naturally spirits would cling to wherever they were. Things would go by much smoother if they treated her mother and grandfather as if they would go berserk right off the bat rather than just suddenly out of nowhere.

"Very well. I will have a house prepared, and I will at least try to negotiate with them about living in the castle. Will that do?"

"Yes, I will leave that to you."

With that settled, Ruri ended up picking the house close to Claus's, figuring it would be better being closer to someone she knew.

Transfer of the house was quick, and Finn passed the keys over to Ruri. She was worried that the money Euclase would give her for those old coins wouldn't be enough for such a big house, but she seemed to have more than enough to cover the cost. Those coins were apparently valuable as cultural assets and raw materials, so just thinking about the amount she had stored in her pocket space made her shiver with fear. The price of the house would be deducted after Euclase exchanged the coins for cash, so Ruri walked into the new house and started setting up living accommodations. While she did, Finn and the others inspected the house for damage.

She was cleaning so that the house could be used right away, but they were in a world with magic. She collected the trash not with brooms or washcloths but with wind magic instead. Then she burned it with fire magic as she cleaned the

windows and flushed the watering hole with water magic.

“Cleaning, cleaning~”

“I’m gonna collect the garbage~”

“Then I will burn it away~”

“Lastly, I’ll use water to make it sparkle!”

The spirits that Ruri called upon left the large, multi-room house spotless in the blink of an eye. As a final touch, Ruri furnished the rooms with pieces of furniture out of her massive pocket space collection. Overall, cleaning took just a little over an hour, which made her appreciate the convenience of magic... or rather, the capabilities of her spirit friends.

“Thank you, guys.”

“No problem!”

Ruri thanked the spirits by imparting mana to them, which made them all huddle delightedly around her. This was something Rin and Kotaro had taught her when she asked them for advice on how to give back to the spirits that always helped her out.

One normally presented mana in compensation whenever utilizing a spirit’s magic, but that wasn’t necessary whenever the spirits acted on their own volition. Of course, in the case of more complicated spells that reflected one’s mental image, like Ruri’s bathhouse at Chelsie’s, mana was required if it involved Ruri herself. However, the spirits used their power on their own this time simply out of good will. Although she wanted to thank them for it, she couldn’t very well give the spirits sweets like Rin, Kotaro, and Lydia since they lacked physical bodies. In which case, she learned that giving them mana would work.

Normally, when a person used spirit magic, their mana was mostly consumed by the magic in question. It would only provide the spirits with a small drop of mana, which wasn’t very beneficial to them, but even that small drop was almost like a “luxury item” to them. That was the reason spirits lent their services to those with mana that suited their palate and wouldn’t to people with mana they disliked. It was the same principle as people who wouldn’t

spend money on something they didn't enjoy. By that consideration, it meant that something like Ewan's mana was detestable. On the other hand, Ruri's mana, which gave them comfort just by being by her side, was a regular feast to them.

Even though the spirits didn't quite consume this "luxury item" as a human would, from the looks on their faces, they seemed to be in bliss. Ruri smiled in satisfaction, glad that her token of thanks was appreciated. She then took her wig off and headed toward the center of the royal capital with her spirit entourage in tow.

Chapter 5: A Stroll Around the Royal Capital

Ruri walked along with her crowd of spirits, and the people of the royal capital stopped dead in their tracks and gazed in astonishment. Even though they didn't have a grasp on the situation, people naturally made way for her like some sort of imperial procession. Despite it being close to dinner time, the most crowded time of the day, Ruri walked down the road without bumping into a single person along the way.

The populated town was overcome with an odd silence, but once people started to realize that Ruri was a Beloved, chatter started to form among the crowd.

"By the way, what am I supposed to be doing exactly, Finn-san?"

"You can do anything you please, Ruri. If there's something in specific you desire, go ahead and buy it. I've received funds from His Majesty himself," Finn said, pulling out a money pouch from his breast pocket and lifting it up for Ruri to see.

"In that case, I will gladly accept Jade-sama's treat," replied Ruri with a chuckle.

Ruri and her crew moved toward the district housing the capital's shops and stalls. Being a port city, the royal capital had a host of sailors and merchants who would bring in all sorts of goods from other lands. In addition, since the nation was home to races of all creeds, the shops and marketplace were stocked with special products. Even a single loaf of bread had its own unique flavor and shape depending on the nation and race. There was a large variety of fruits and vegetables as well. Apparently, no other nation had such a diverse assortment of goods as the Nation of the Dragon King.

If it were any other nation, they would have given way to interspecies conflict, prejudice, and discrimination. But for thousands of years, the First Dragon King accepted both human and demi-human alike, which served as a foundation for many years to come. Because of that, compared to other nations,

discrimination was overwhelmingly low, with humans and demi-humans finding it easy to co-exist. Also, as a result, it allowed many to flock to the royal capital to buy those very goods.

Although some spats of varying degrees of intensity would break out on a daily basis, the nation was still ruled by dragonkin, the top of the biological hierarchy. One glance from a dragonkin soldier was enough to make people involved in even the rowdiest quarrel shake in their boots and lose their will to fight. Even now, there were those who tried to approach Ruri to speak to her, but once they caught a glimpse of Finn and Ewan by her side, they slinked away. Joshua was casually dressed, but Finn and Ewan were in soldier regalia. Their uniforms not only denoted a high rank, but since dragonkin wore a different design from other soldiers, one look was all anyone needed to tell they were dragonkin. Even if they couldn't tell from that, a demi-human would realize they were a dragonkin from the strong mana overflowing from their bodies.

Surrounded by three of the most qualified bodyguards ever, capable of threatening others with their presence alone, Ruri started to feel a bit uncomfortable—like some sideshow animal on display—as she wandered around town.

As she window-shopped and browsed the selection of never-before-seen products, a young boy, barely ten years old, timidly approached her. Seeing as how it was a child, Finn and the others didn't try to stop him, though they remained on guard. The young boy was Ruri's favorite—a beast child with a fluffy tail and pointy ears. From the shape of his tail, she assumed that he was part fox, and she was head over heels in love with his cuteness.

“Um, Ms. Beloved?”

“Yes, little boy?” Ruri replied with a soft smile, trying not to scare him as she stooped down to his eye level.

The boy was slightly nervous, but he calmed down upon seeing Ruri's smile.

Ruri's devious desire was to touch the boy's ears, tail, ears, and, last but not least, his ears. However, the boy couldn't hear Ruri's obsessive thoughts, so she just came across as a kind young lady. It was a saving grace, because the boy would've undoubtedly freaked out otherwise.

“Um, my place has really yummy skewered meat. I’m sure you’d like them, Ms. Beloved.”

“I see. If it’s as yummy as you say, then I’d like to try. Where are you located?”

How could anyone, Ruri included, refuse such a cute child’s offer? The answer: they couldn’t. While she wasn’t in the mood for loads of meat, Ruri decided to go to the young boy’s place to eat.

“Over there,” the boy said, pointing to a food stall. There, an older gentleman who seemed to be the child’s father had a huge congratulatory smile on his face as he quickly pumped his fist in celebration.

At the same time, the cheeky child’s trick caused the other business owners to clamor around her. Some looked toward the heavens in frustration, saying, “Gah, why didn’t I think of that?!” Others clutched their heads and screamed, “Gah, I don’t have a kid t’use like that!”

The stall owner, who had a similar set of ears and tail as the child, cheerfully greeted her. “Welcome, Lady Beloved! Please, partake in our establishment’s famous skewered meat!” He presented her with some skewers and followed by giving Finn and the others a share as well.

Finn tried to pay the man with the money Jade entrusted to him, but...

“Oh, no, no. I wouldn’t dream of accepting money from someone as illustrious as a Beloved.”

Just like when Ruri went to town for the first time with Chelsie, her attempts to pay were rebuffed. It took several trips for them to finally start accepting her money, but they would always throw in extras that were more than the price of her purchase. It was all so Ruri would spend even a little time in town and spread the spirits’ blessings upon them. She figured that this man had the same idea in mind.

However, she would quickly learn that the salesmen of the royal capital weren’t like the ones in a laid-back town far away—they were far more shrewd in their business tactics.

“Then again, in place of monetary payment, if you were to just state how

good these are, that alone would be enough.”

“That’s all you want?”

“Why, yes. In a loud voice, if you could,” whispered the stall owner as he leaned in with a shrewd smile.

Just as she was instructed, Ruri took a bite of the skewered meat and, in a slightly exaggerated voice, exclaimed, “Oh wow! This is so delicious!!”

Exaggerated as it was, the meat was indeed delicious. Joshua shamelessly accepted a second serving despite just having finished a full meal back at the diner, which made Ruri wonder about the workings of his stomach. That was definitely a clear difference between humans and dragonkin.

The stall owner was overjoyed and started stuffing a ridiculous amount of skewers into a bag, presenting it to Ruri.

“Huh? I couldn’t possibly take that many.”

“Oh, I insist! This is the very least I can do to thank you for contributing to the sales of my humble establishment, Lady Beloved.”

“Contributing to the sales?” Ruri pondered as she threw the large amount of skewered meat into her pocket space.

After that, Ruri and the others left the stall. The man’s words were still a mystery, but once she turned back around...

“Give me ten of the skewered meat that the Beloved just ate!”

“I’ll take twenty!”

Ruri grimaced as she watched a fierce battle unfold that resembled a crowd of customers ganging up on each other for a bargain sale. “What... is that all about...?”

“That’s the effect of a Beloved. Beloveds are an object of adoration no matter what the nation. Any food a Beloved eats, any clothes they wear, any jewelry they own, there’ll be people who want to copy it. Why, the Nation of the Beast King labels things with ‘Beloved-endorsed product’ all the time and brings in droves of tourists with the Beloved’s name alone. This is gonna give him customers for sure,” Joshua said, answering Ruri’s question.

“That makes sense. Same mentality as people wanting a specific item used by their favorite celebrity or model, right?”

Watching the meat vendor being rushed with customers, the other vendors found themselves motivated and started a shouting war to get Ruri’s attention.

“Lady Beloved, our food is delicious too!”

“You dumbass, ours is *way* better!”

“Lady Beloved, would you care for a refreshing drink after your meal?”

A bevy of solicitations flew to and fro around Ruri. With every shop she looked at, she received free food, stuffing her belly in a matter of no time. While her large-bodied entourage could still make room for more, Ruri wasn’t such a big eater and couldn’t pack in any more. It didn’t help that she had eaten a whole meal at the diner not too long ago, so this was a natural outcome.

Though she was well past full, the onslaught of food was relentless. After a certain point, Ruri decided to conclude her eating spree, apologizing to the vendors and placing their food in her pocket space. The inside of her pocket space was probably overflowing with the aroma of different good foods right about now. Ruri asked the nearby spirits to tell Lydia that she could eat any of the items she wished, and after relaying the message, Lydia thanked Ruri via the spirits on the outside.

As the group proceeded to walk around, being careful to avoid any food vendors, a single stall caught Ruri’s eye. There, she saw a collection of marble-sized glass beads the same color as her own eyes—a vibrant shade of lapis blue—which were processed into a variety of jewelry that lined the stall’s shelves.

Curious as to whether this was the latest trend, Ruri went closer. This surprised the lady standing at the stall for a second, but she smiled sweetly and greeted her. “Hello and welcome!”

“Excuse me, but what are these? Does this color have some sort of significance?”

“These are good-luck charms. If you adorn yourself in the same color as the Beloved’s eyes, the spirits will protect you... or so they say,” the vendor said, explaining the opportunistic goods in front of the very Beloved in question with

a broad smile.

However, it made Ruri wonder how she found out about her eye color in the first place. Ruri had stayed in the top level of the castle ever since she first arrived in the royal capital, which meant that the only people who knew of her identity were the dragonkin of the castle. Her name and appearance had been hidden until there was a formal announcement. Her only other guess was that she caught word from someone who saw her in human form at the victory celebration, but the victory celebration only happened a short while ago. Ruri was shocked and amazed at the shrewdness of the merchant; she was impressed there was *already* merchandise based off of her.

“They have been selling incredibly well, and I have you to thank!”

“Y-Yes, that is good news, indeed...”

“Please, take one, if you’d like~” the vendor said, handing over one of the items on display. It was a thin, looped strap with glass beads around it and a small bell attached to it.

She thanked the vendor and lifted the strap to eye level, watching as the sun’s reflection glistened through the lapis blue glass. The spirits around her gathered in, brimming with curiosity.

“*So pretty!*”

Spirits didn’t share the same standards of value as humans. Whether it be a rare gemstone or a cheap glass bead, they appraised anything pretty as pretty. In fact, even if it were a priceless gemstone, they would treat it as a pebble on the side of the road if they had no interest in it. In light of those facts, the spirits had nothing but high praise for the glass beads.

“*Hey, Ruri? This is a good-luck charm, right?*”

“Well, it’s *supposed* to be, for the most part...” Ruri replied, knowing that it was only a good-luck charm in name and a bunch of glass beads in reality.

“*But it’s got no power.*”

“*Yeah, right?*”

The spirits all looked on in confusion because they couldn’t feel any power

coming from it. It made sense that they wouldn't, however. They were just a bunch of commonplace glass beads, after all.

Since the spirits didn't comprehend the concept of human desire, they also didn't comprehend the concept of a good-luck charm. Ruri couldn't provide an explanation to the pure and innocent spirits' questions, so she smiled and tried to gloss over the matter instead.

"In that case, I'll make it be a good-luck charm!" said one male spirit, touching a glass bead and making it glow for a second.

"Then, me too!" said another doing the same.

After a while, one spirit after another swarmed around the beads and touched them, making some rather unsettling declarations all the while.

"Complete elimination~"

"Utter decimation!"

"No commiseration!"

It wasn't long before they all had triumphant looks on their faces. The fake good-luck charm had turned into a real one, loaded with alms from the spirits. Judging from Finn and Joshua's tensed faces, Ruri figured that the strap in her hand underwent a stunning metamorphosis. Ewan, on the other hand, who couldn't see spirits, was the only one left wondering what had happened.

"What should I do with this now?" asked Ruri.

"I mean, you should just take it. A good-luck charm infused with a spirit's protection isn't somethin' you just come across, after all," Joshua stated. "Though, we'd appreciate it if you put it inside your pocket space, if ya could," he added, taking a step back from Ruri.

"Now that it's loaded with so much protection, we have absolutely no idea what force it will unleash if something were to happen to the owner," added Finn.

As both of the men looked at the trinket like they were looking at a ticking bomb, a cold sweat started to form on Ruri's brow. Ruri then proceeded to take that ticking bomb back to the castle.

Parting ways with Finn, Joshua, and Ewan, Ruri went to Jade's office, where she found Jade sitting by himself.

"I'm back, Jade-sama," Ruri greeted.

Upon seeing her face, he paused from his task and gave her a soft smile. "Yes, welcome back. Did you have fun?"

"Yes! I managed to talk to the people from the diner!"

"Ah, did you now?"

"And, well, I learned something quite shocking."

"Shocking? Did something happen?"

"It's about Jet, the boy I tried to go on a date with a while ago."

Jade's brow furrowed the instant he heard Jet's name. "Did you see him?" Jade asked, unable to contain his displeasure.

Oblivious to his sudden sour tone, Ruri replied, "No, I didn't see him."

Jade's expression relaxed once he heard that.

"I only heard about Jet from one of the diner workers. It seems he was trying to two-time... no *three*-time me the entire time."

"Care to explain?" Jade asked.

Ruri gave him the entire story she heard at the diner. Not only was Jet already a married man when she met him, but he had another wife in addition and was trying to make Ruri the third.

"I see. There *are* more polygamist races than you'd expect, so these things do happen. Makes no sense to us dragonkin, but that's neither here nor there."

Ruri nodded her head in fierce agreement. "I'm not a fan of that either. If he was already married, then he should have said something to begin with. I would have never said yes to a date if he did. Also, he ended up dumping me out of the blue, which only adds to my dissatisfaction." Fuming with anger, Ruri renewed her resolve by stating, "Next time, I have to find a boyfriend who *isn't* from a polygamist race."

Seeing Ruri's reaction, Jade asked, "Were you not romantically involved with anyone in your world? I would assume it's not surprising to see girls your age already married." The average marriageable age for humans in this world was sixteen to early twenties. It wasn't uncommon for girls to already have several children at Ruri's age—an age much earlier than in Ruri's world.

"The average age for getting married where I'm from is much older. But I've had my fair share of boyfriends in the past. Granted, none of them lasted long since Asahi would always get in the way," Ruri said, taking a short yet annoying trip down memory lane that caused her to scowl.

It was the same story time and time again. Every time she dated a guy, Asahi would stick to her like birdlime, which would end the relationship. In many cases, the boy ended up liking Asahi more than Ruri. That was probably a result of Asahi's Bewitchment power, but since neither had any knowledge of that at the time, Ruri would anguish over Asahi stealing her boyfriend with nary a clue as to why.

"I see. That girl, eh? Honestly speaking, she's not the type I'd like to interact with, but since she eliminated your past boyfriends, I need to give her my thanks," said Jade. He had only had one or two interactions with Asahi, at best, but you would think it was even more given his apparent distaste for her in his tone.

Ruri understood that sentiment, but there was something else there that Ruri didn't understand. "Why would you want to thank her, Jade-sama?"

"You will not have any partner without my approval first," Jade said, this time, clearly trying to interfere with Ruri's boyfriend search.

"Oh, I see..." Ruri said with a dry laugh. That was when she remembered what she came for. "Oh, right. Someone gave this to me as a gift, but you can have it, Jade-sama," Ruri said, handing over the strap she'd received in the capital. "It's apparently a good-luck charm, so I think you should wear it on you."

"Thank you, Ruri," Jade said with a big smile as he gratefully accepted the gift.

Joshua had told her that she should put it in her pocket space, but thinking it would just go to waste if it wasn't actively being worn by someone, she came up with the idea to give it to Jade. Jade was the Dragon King, the strongest of all

the dragonkin. It was no exaggeration to say that the safest place in the world for such an item was with Jade, considering he was never in dangerous situations and was guarded at all times. That meant that if there ever was a situation in which the charm's effects manifested, there would be no need for restraint—it would serve its function.

Ruri felt proud of her brilliant idea. However...

"That's no fair!"

"Yes, no fair."

They both heard the nearby voices of two others in the supposedly empty office. Ruri swiftly turned around to find Rin and Kotaro staring holes into them.

"Rin? Kotaro?"

Rin circled around the office overhead, screaming, *"Unfair! Unfair!"*

"Wait, what's unfair?" Ruri asked, perplexed.

"You went to the diner, did you not?" Kotaro said, stepping in to explain.

"Well, we waited back here patiently since we didn't want to cause a commotion by going with you."

Just as Kotaro mentioned, since everyone had told her that bringing a supreme-level spirit in the body of the Nation of the Spirit King's sacred beast would out her as a Beloved, she asked Kotaro to stay back at the castle with Rin.

"So, why do you tell us to stay here while you have fun little shopping trips with the other spirits?" asked Kotaro. His bushy tail, usually wagging intensely when in front of Ruri, was now drooping sadly.

Meanwhile, Rin was upset for the same reason. *"It's not fair! We wanted to go shopping with you, but we got left out. Also, you gave the king a gift, but where's ours?!"*

Based on their remarks, Ruri wondered how long they had been listening in. It must have been boggling their minds as to why they were being left behind in spite of wanting to come along while the other spirits were free to accompany her as they wished.

"I'm sorry. I had planned on going in secret at first, but there was a change in

plans halfway through. Why don't you two come along the next time?"

"Tomorrow it is!" Kotaro prompted.

"Yes, tomorrow we go!" Rin added.

"Huh? Tomorrow?" Ruri repeated, thinking it a little sudden considering she just got back home, but neither of them looked inclined to hearing otherwise.

"I'm going to need to ask Finn-san to guard me again. I wonder if he's okay with work..." Ruri thought aloud. Her walk around the capital today served as a good lesson on how a bodyguard was necessary to deter scenes from breaking out if she was going to be stepping out as a Beloved from now on. However, Finn wasn't the only person on security detail today; he was just the only one visible. There were actually other bodyguards hidden in the crowd, out of plain sight. Ruri wasn't sure if they'd be able to exhaust that level of manpower again. It would be a lot to ask of Finn since he was busy with being a high-ranking military official.

"In that case, I'll go ask him," Rin said, whizzing out of the office.

"As will I," Kotaro added, chasing after.

"Rin, Kotaro, wait!"

A supreme-level spirit's request was equal to a threat. It would be detrimental to Finn's mental health if they asked him that.

Ruri finally managed to chase both of the animal-inhabiting spirits down. Jade watched their entire back-and-forth with a smirk as he placed the lapis blue charm in his inner pocket.

Chapter 6: Beloved of Cerulanda

It was morning, and Ruri had awoken from her slumber—only to realize that she wasn’t in her regular room in the castle. She paused, confused, but it wasn’t long before she remembered.

“Aah, right. I came to Chelsie-san’s house.”

Ruri had been at Chelsie’s since yesterday. Although the trip from the royal castle to here would have taken several days if Ruri flew via her own powers, riding on Kotaro, the Spirit of Wind, cut the trip down to a few hours. So, Ruri and the spirits took a visit back to their home away from home.

Ruri sat up, causing Kotaro, who was sprawled across the bed, and Rin, who was sleeping on a bed of Kotaro’s fluffy white fur, to stir and awake.

“*You’re up, Ruri?*” asked Kotaro.

“*G’morning, Ruri,*” greeted Rin.

“Good morning.”

Sleeping in the same room as Kotaro was a slightly novel change of pace since he was never able to enter the house before due to his old body being far too big.

“Phew. Alright, let’s go get breakfast ready,” Ruri said. She changed out of her pajamas and went downstairs to the kitchen while humming a tune.

Today was going to be her first trip into town with Chelsie in quite a while.



Meanwhile, back at the royal capital, the king and his aides were fretting over a note they’d received from the nation known as Cerulanda.

“And we can’t turn it down?” asked Jade.

“Your Majesty, I mirror your sentiments exactly, but this is not a request from Cerulanda—this is a request from the Beloved. I believe we cannot refuse it,”

replied Euclase. The expression on their face was filled with as much desire to turn this request down as Jade.

“What a bother,” Jade said wholeheartedly with a disdainful tone, one which resonated through his aides.

The note from Cerulanda was asking the Nation of the Dragon King to keep their Beloved. A raider had infiltrated their royal castle the other day and threw a dagger that stabbed the Beloved in the chest. Fortunately, the Beloved always wore her corset tighter than necessary, and it acted as enough of a shield to keep the dagger from reaching her heart, preventing a fatal wound.

Be that as it may, those were all Cerulanda’s problems. As for why the Beloved wanted to come to the Nation of the Dragon King, it was because though she made it out safely, she was fearful whether she would be attacked once more since her assailant wasn’t caught.

That was when a worker in the castle told her about the Nations of the Dragon King and Beast King. They told her that both nations were leagues bigger than Cerulanda and under the protection of their mighty kings. They assured her that their nations would never allow a raider to infiltrate their castles like with her incident.

This casual chat with the worker sparked the Beloved’s insistence to go to one of those safer nations. While the upper brass of Cerulanda tried desperately to persuade her that their nation was just as safe, the Beloved was afraid after narrowly avoiding death once already. She threatened them all by saying she “wasn’t accountable for what happened to Cerulanda” if they didn’t comply with her wishes.

Even so, Cerulanda was more than reluctant to let their Beloved go outside. After all, their prized Beloved could be snatched away by another nation if they weren’t careful enough. Fortunately, the Nations of the Beast King and Dragon King both had Beloveds of their own; they probably wouldn’t want another one on their hands. The Nation of the Beast King was mostly desert land with soil that was far from what one would consider “bountiful.” It was ill-suited for the benefits a Beloved would bring, so Cerulanda felt they would have no reason to tempt another Beloved to their nation. In contrast, the Nation of the Dragon

King had bountiful soil suitable for life even before their Beloved showed up. A reason for this was that dragonkin already had superior-grade mana, and out of any other race around, they were the most proficient with communicating their thoughts to the spirits. The top brass of Cerulanda thought that, while they would naturally be pleased to have another Beloved, since they were such a bountiful nation on their own accord, the chances of them stealing a Beloved was slim. Cerulanda had previously sent a letter to the Nation of the Dragon King at the request of the Beloved, who wanted to go there to take in the attractions. They were also known to be very helpful as a nation. Hence, Cerulanda inquired about possibly taking care of their Beloved until they captured the raider assailant.

Cerulanda had also considered asking the Nation of the Spirit King. They were in the same boat as the others in that they didn't want to add any more Beloveds, so they'd be unlikely to snatch their Beloved away. But they were also further away from Cerulanda, and they didn't really have an outstanding relationship with the nation. It wasn't as if they shared a great relationship with the Nation of the Dragon King either, but they were physically closer to them as opposed to the Nation of the Spirit King. And it wasn't as if the two nations didn't share *any* kind of working relationship in the past, so Cerulanda picked the Nation of the Dragon King instead.

Normally, the Nation of the Dragon King would have rejected a request from any nation that had no affiliation with them and wasn't an allied nation, such as Cerulanda, a nation with small presence. Their previous request for their Beloved to go sightseeing hadn't gone through. However, it seemed that Cerulanda's Beloved was desperate this time around, and there was the possibility of their rage falling upon the Nation of the Dragon King—a slight threat that was also included in the request. A Beloved's authority was universal across all nations. Even a powerhouse nation such as the Nation of the Dragon King couldn't flatly refuse.

"I cannot believe that this letter arrived just after Ruri went to Ms. Chelsie's house. Shall we write a letter for Ruri to return, Your Majesty?" Euclase asked, holding their temple in frustration over the abysmal timing of this situation.

"No. In fact, tell Ruri to *stay* at Chelsie's place. We can't allow her to

encounter the Beloved of Cerulanda.”

“Ah, yes, that is an issue as well, isn’t it?” Agate, who was also in attendance, sighed as if he just remembered that fact.

There was an unspoken agreement to never let two Beloveds from different nations meet in the nation in which one of them resided. There were different classes of Beloveds, and the strength of their powers varied based on the person. Their strength was measured by how much they were liked by the spirits, so if two Beloveds confronted one another, it would be a matter of who the spirits sided with. If two Beloveds were to know each others’ powers through meeting one another, and there was an off-chance that a fledgling nation were to have a strong Beloved, then they would be capable of making unreasonable demands out of even the mightiest of nations by brandishing their Beloved’s power. If one were to do that, it would inevitably attract criticism from nations without a Beloved of their own.

It was easy to tell a nation not to do it, but it was probably difficult for them to keep holding back—having the ingredients to make a major nation give in to your demands only to let them go unused. There would be those who’d give into the temptation despite knowing it was the improper thing to do. In which case, not only were Beloveds barred from meeting one another, but their power was not to be used in cross-nation politics from the very start.

This was a rule set in place ever since the four major nations of the world joined their alliance. For nations in possession of a Beloved, it eliminated the concern of being led astray by their own Beloved’s power. And even for those without a Beloved, it kept another Beloved from edging into their livelihoods. It was a rule that benefited everyone, so the surrounding nations came to an unspoken consensus to emulate that model.

However, among the four major nations, the Nation of the Dragon King included, this became a firm rule. If problems were to ever arise among Beloveds hailing from one of the four nations, then the supreme-level spirit of the Nation of the Spirit King, the Spirit of Trees, would act as an intermediary to end the dispute.

“In that case, I shall tell Ruri to make the most out of her stay and give Ms.

Chelsie a brief summary of the situation,” Euclase suggested.

“Right. That’s for the best. Claus, prepare to welcome the Beloved of Cerulanda post haste. Finn, since the raider has yet to be apprehended, I want you to overhaul our security.”

“I shall see to it,” replied Claus.

“Yes, Sire!” replied Finn.



After much preparation, the Beloved from Cerulanda came to stay in the Nation of the Dragon King temporarily until the raider was caught. That being said, she came with a massive amount of luggage—enough to make one question if she intended on *moving* here instead. It would’ve been fine if she came with just guards and servants to tend to her needs, but she also ended up bringing an entourage of men along with her.

Of course, seeing the Beloved arrive with a gang of men made Euclase, the welcoming committee, smile just a little wider. However, they were the chancellor of this nation. They quickly straightened out their face and regained their composure.

From Euclase’s perspective, the Beloved of Cerulanda seemed to be a normal girl just like any other. She had common attributes—brown hair and reddish-brown eyes. However, the spirits around her proved that she was, in fact, not a normal girl.

Euclase was familiar with the Beloveds of both the Nation of the Spirit King and Beast King and knew those two and Ruri were armed with general knowledge, but the Beloved that stood before Euclase now wasn’t necessarily the same. Plus, according to Joshua’s report, this Beloved was extremely spoiled in Cerulanda, which put the entire Nation of the Dragon King’s top brass, including Euclase, on edge as to how she would respond.

“Greetings, and welcome to our humble nation, O Lady Beloved. Unfortunately, the king is en route to the Nation of the Beast King and could not be with us, but he instructed us to ensure that you have a comfortable stay, so please inform us if anything should arise,” Euclase said in an overly polite tone.

If Ruri were to see Euclase's reception, she would likely raise an objection right then and there in regard to the very *clear* difference in how Euclase treated *her*. However, this was the general reception toward Beloveds. The reason all the soldiers and Euclase were so relaxed around Ruri was because they initially thought she was a cat. The fact that she took Ewan's lashing out in stride when she first arrived at the castle, and even forgave him for it, played a huge part as well. Those who saw that discerned that Ruri wouldn't get angry over small things and decided that they could interact with her in a casual manner. In a certain sense, thanks to Ewan being a "victim," no one gave Ruri any sort of elaborate treatment, which was a godsend as far as Ruri was concerned.

In response to Euclase's polite reception, the Beloved of Cerulanda smiled like it was second nature and replied as if in her own nation. "Alright, then show me to my room."

Euclase's brows twitched, but they kept their smile and showed everyone from Cerulanda to their rooms.

After confirming that the Beloved had entered her room, Euclase breathed a sigh, worried about the future. "She may also be a Beloved, but she is nothing like Ruri at all," Euclase commented as all the officials and soldiers around them sighed deeply as well.

It wasn't a very long walk from where they greeted the Beloved to her room, but requests kept coming one after another along the way. From the firmness of the beds to the material of the sheets, from foods she liked, foods she disliked, the color of the curtains, and even the placement of the furniture—she designated everything in excruciating detail.

Euclase led her to a different room for the time being and ensured her that her preparations would be in order shortly, but the Nation of the Dragon King was going to be spending out of pocket to get all of that done out of hospitality. It made Euclase wonder if she knew that would be the case already...

Another problem was that everyone, including her followers, weren't rebuking the Beloved for her behavior. In fact, they were implicitly telling Euclase to hurry up with the preparations. It made Euclase want to tell them

several times that this was the Nation of the Dragon King, *not* Cerulanda. While it was expected that the Beloved's behavior would be accepted even in a foreign land because of who she was, her followers were demanding equal treatment as well. Euclase's annoyance was reaching its peak.

Everyone else aside from the Beloved was affiliated with Cerulanda, with her extra entourage not even being invited. There was no real reason for Euclase and the others to show as much modesty as they would toward the Beloved, but no one dared to point that fact out around the Beloved herself for fear of what would happen.

All this comparison with someone else made everyone reaffirm how easy it was to deal with and get along with Ruri. Ruri was going to be at Chelsie's house for a while, but they were already starting to miss her being around.

"We've got one bumpy road ahead of us," Euclase commented. It was only the first day they were left in charge of the nation because Jade was visiting the nation of the Beast King, but they were already nerve-wracked.

Chapter 7: Upbringing

Azelda, the Beloved of Cerulanda, was born to farmer parents, an extremely normal couple who were neither necessarily wealthy nor necessarily poor. Her parents were human and lacked the power to see spirits, so whenever Azelda was in a good mood, they didn't notice that she was looking at spirits the whole time. Even in town, there wasn't anyone who could see spirits. In the royal capital, there were demi-humans from different nations coming to and fro, so someone there might have noticed her presence, but since the town she was born in was in the boonies, far away from the capital, she was raised like any other child.

The point at which all that changed was around when Azelda first started to crawl. Her parents met with an unfortunate accident that claimed their lives, leaving Azelda on her own. Without any other relatives of her own, Azelda was entrusted to an orphanage. From there, a few years passed with no one the wiser until a government official from the capital came to inspect the orphanage and noticed the abnormally high amount of spirits around the vicinity of the establishment. That was when he found Azelda happily chatting with the spirits, and her Beloved status was finally revealed.

Azelda was immediately taken to the royal capital, and her entire life turned on its head. Unlike her simple and frugal upbringing in the orphanage, she was living in the lap of luxury in the royal castle. Her simple meals of bread and soup were upgraded to an insane amount of foods to choose from. Her hand-me-downs from the older girls were replaced by fine silk dresses. The cramped room she shared with several other children was interchanged with a room so spacious that everyone in the orphanage could comfortably sprawl out on the floor. At first, Azelda couldn't help but be confused, but she quickly adjusted to her new life, possibly due to the fact that children tended to be better at adapting to situations.

One day, however, a servant yelled at her. It was an older girl who felt uncomfortable with how Azelda was becoming used to people pampering her

and how selfish it was making her. She yelled at her out of concern for her future, but that wasn't communicated to Azelda and it just enraged her. The servant figured that would happen and tried to patiently discipline Azelda in spite of that. However, the spirits were sensitive to Azelda's temper tantrum and ended up attacking the girl. The attack didn't leave any fatal wounds, but after feeling the wrath of a Beloved, the servant was ordered to leave the castle.

Afraid of being thrown out of the castle in similar fashion, or afraid that the Beloved would threaten to leave the nation, everyone became careful of Azelda's feelings and stopped refusing her for anything. That only served to make Azelda's selfishness shine even brighter. However, it wasn't uncommon for Beloveds to turn out like her. It was only natural since they had the favor of the spirits from birth and were spoiled by everyone around them as a result.

Currently, Azelda found herself in the Nation of the Dragon King, unwilling to stay in Cerulanda with the raider still about, but ever since she arrived, she was surprised by the many differences to Cerulanda. She was taken aback by the dragonkin, who were all much more beautiful than her entourage of good-looking gentlemen. Although she made orders for her room since it wasn't to her liking, everything from the bed sheets to the curtains was of higher quality than that of Cerulanda. She checked the closet to find dresses and accessories prepared for her that were clearly different in value than what she herself brought from Cerulanda. That fact made Azelda seethe with rage.

"Now, see here! Why is the difference in quality between here and Cerulanda so big?! Has Cerulanda been trying to pass off items of inferior quality to me, a Beloved, in hopes of deceiving me this entire time?!" Azelda asked, fuming.

The maid from Cerulanda could only flusteredly deny the claim. "P-Perish the very thought! I can absolutely assure you that we only allow you to use the finest quality items of our nation, Lady Beloved. However, since the Nation of the Dragon King is a major nation and referred to as one of the Four Great Nations, they are more powerful as a nation than our own..."

"What? You're saying they're rich?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Azelda regretted not leaving Cerulanda and becoming the Beloved of the Nation of the Dragon King sooner.

“If they’re so rich, then maybe I should just stay here for good.”

“Lady Beloved!” the maid practically screamed, turning pale.

“Well, it’s obviously better to be in a rich nation that has no raiders than a poor nation that does,” Azelda added.

“Lady Beloved,” said one of the men in the room as he stepped forward. He was the second son of a marquis family and the person with the highest title out of all of her entourage.

Once the man with handsome features almost identical to his peers’ came forward, Azelda shifted her brow in displeasure, asking, “What, do you plan on voicing complaints as well?”

The marquis’s second son simply smiled sweetly and softly shook his head. “Absolutely not,” he said. “There is not a soul alive who would raise objection with your decision. However, I am a man of Cerulanda. If you desire to stay here in the Nation of the Dragon King, me and the others will no longer be able to serve you.”

Looking at the man with his head held low, Azelda snorted at him as if she wasn’t interested in his sad display. “Oh? This has nothing to do with who you belong to. Where’s the harm if all of you just stay here, too?”

“No, we are all of Cerulanda, so we cannot stay here in the Nation of the Dragon King forever, milady.”

“There is no one who objects to my decisions, correct? I will just propose you staying here to the king myself.”

“L-Lady Beloved...”

The maids who came with her were all used to her selfishness, but this seemed to be the limit of what they were willing to follow. They racked their brains as to how they could change Azelda’s mind.

Finally, one of the maids timidly spoke up. “However, Lady Beloved, I am informed there is already a Beloved in this nation. But, well... they might accept

a switch...”

“In that case, all you have to do is take the Beloved here back with you. Yes, that’s it! I am so smart!”

The other maids looked at one another, perplexed.

“That might be a good idea. From their nation’s standpoint, they would have a Beloved in their midst either way, after all,” said one of the followers, backing up Azelda’s suggestion instead of objecting. This made all the other maids gasp in disbelief.

“That’s right! If we’re both Beloveds, I should do. Now that it’s settled, I’ll go talk to him.”

“Please, wait just a second,” the marquis’s second son said, attempting to stop Azelda before she bolted out the room.

“Why should I?”

“I don’t think it’s too late to see whether the Nation of the Dragon King is somewhere you can live comfortably, Lady Beloved. After all, we cannot discern from a simple glance what problems lie where in this nation.”

“Good point. We’ll watch and wait for a tad, then.”

“As you wish, milady.”

It seemed as though the marquis’s son bought a little time, and all of the maids breathed a sigh of relief.

Chapter 8: The Church of God’s Light

“It would seem you did not properly kill that Beloved.”

“My humblest apologies!”

A middle-aged man dressed in a pitch-dark vestment embroidered with silver thread stood as a person clad in only black kneeled in front of him, bowing their head and apologizing profusely.

“It matters not. It appears that the person in charge of taking care of the Nation of the Beast King’s Beloved has fouled things up as well. Apparently, the Beast King got to them before they could get to her. I suppose we should be thankful you made it back in one piece.”

“I am greatly obliged for the kind words. I will return immediately to finish off the Beloved.”

“The Beloved has already left the country and is heading to the Nation of the Dragon King. Slipping past those dragonkin eyes and infiltrating their castle shall be no easy feat. Are you up for the task?”

“Please, leave it to me! I will be certain!”

“I see. Word has it that a Beloved has cropped up in the Nation of the Dragon King recently. We had designs to infiltrate them sooner or later, so eliminate their nation’s Beloved while you’re at it.”

“As you command.”



“Excuse me?” asked Euclase.

While they were normally a tad ill-tempered, there was no one more qualified as a chancellor of a nation than Euclase. They had smiled and nodded at every one of Azelda’s selfish requests, but this time, Euclase was thrown out of their element.

They tensed their cheeks and struggled to keep a smile, but they just couldn’t

keep it up. “A million pardons. Might I have you repeat that once more?” Euclase asked the member of Azelda’s entourage.

The follower opened his mouth. “As I just said, Lady Beloved says she desires to have a tea party. We would like for you to prepare enough garments and accessories for the occasion for both Lady Beloved and us. As well as her maids and servants.”

Euclase managed to regain their smile, but they stared at the follower coldly. “...Yes, I understand the part about Lady Beloved holding a tea party and preparing garments. However, why must our nation buy all of the belongings for attendants from Cerulanda who weren’t even invited in the first place? Should that not be prepared for by Cerulanda themselves?”

“We serve to entertain Lady Beloved, and in order to entertain our mistress, our appearances must be in order.”

“Yes, as I said, I understand that, but why must...” Euclase started, pushing down their anger. They wanted to ask why the Nation of the Dragon King had to be in charge of *their* preparations.

However, the man cut Euclase off, telling them, “For that is what Lady Beloved desires.”

Hearing that, Euclase couldn’t argue the man’s point any further. If they were to brush aside Azelda’s wishes and anger the spirits because of it, then it would mean catastrophe. Not wanting to cause any issues while Jade was away, Euclase had no other choice but to quietly give in to the man’s demands. However, on the inside, expletives that dare not be uttered flew in every direction.

Even though Azelda’s selfishness was becoming the bane of their existence, the added demands of her entourage as of late weren’t making things any better. The people of the royal castle were willing to comply in the name of hospitality to a certain degree, but they were demanding far too much. And if they tried to refuse, the Cerulandians would name-drop the Beloved, stating it was “her desire.”

“Aah, blast it all! I wish they would catch that raider already!” Euclase said, echoing the sentiments of everyone else in the castle. But just then, Euclase

received the news they had been eagerly awaiting—Jade was returning from the Nation of the Beast King.

“He is?!” asked Euclase.

“That is correct.”

“Whew, *finally*.”

His return had no effect on the fact that the Cerulandians, the source of everyone’s headaches, were still in the kingdom, but Euclase could at least discuss with Jade a way to cope with the newcomers.

“There’s one more thing...” stammered the person who came to report the news, looking awkward.

“What else?”

“It’s that His Majesty will be arriving with the Beast King and the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King.”

Euclase’s revelry over Jade’s return was short lived as they were informed of the bigger news—Arman, the Beast King, and Celestine, the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King, were both visiting.

They now had two Beloveds hailing from different nations in their midst...

“How did this come to pass...?” Euclase asked, exasperated, holding a hand to their face. Their woes took an even more dire turn.

That was when Jade finally made his return to the Nation of the Dragon King.

When Euclase went to greet him, they were met with more than just Jade and his aides—Arman the Beast King, Celestine the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King, and other members of their kingdom were all there together.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty. And salutations to the both of you, O Great Beast King, Lady Beloved,” Euclase humbly greeted.

“Were there any problems while we were away?” Jade asked.

“...”

Euclase couldn’t answer that simple question right away since there were actually a *host* of problems—so many, in fact, that they didn’t know *where* to

begin.

“Is something the matter?” Claus asked, noticing Euclase’s somewhat sour disposition.

“Quite. There is much that needs to be said. Not just by me, but *everyone*.”

The workers of the castle who came to greet their guests from the Nation of the Beast King resoundingly nodded in agreement to Euclase’s statement.

“What happened?” asked Jade.

“The Beloved that arrived from Cerulanda, Your Majesty,” replied Euclase.

Jade tilted his head, perplexed. That sentence alone wasn’t enough to explain the situation.

Euclase had a great number of grievances to voice, but since Arman and Celestine were also present, they decided to move the conversation somewhere else.

Relocating to a guest room with Jade, Arman, Celestine, and Jade’s aides, Euclase was going to recount the turn of events since the Cerulandians arrived, but they had a question that needed answering before they started.

“Why is the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King here now despite the Beloved of Cerulanda currently being in the kingdom?” asked Euclase.

In the Nation of the Dragon King, Beast King, Spirit King, and the Imperial Nation, there was a rule that forbade Beloveds of nations outside of the allied four from meeting other Beloveds. Regardless, there had to be a good reason as to why a Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King would come to the Nation of the Dragon King now that they were housing the Beloved of Cerulanda.

“Celestine was nearly assaulted by an unidentified raider clad in black,” explained Jade.

Euclase was taken aback. “Would this person be...” they started, their keen intuition realizing the correlation.

Jade simply nodded in affirmation to what he assumed Euclase was going to ask. “It would be a safe bet to say they were from the same organization as the person who assaulted Cerulanda’s Beloved.”

“How can you conclude that an organization is perpetrating these crimes and not individuals?”

“After Arman fended off Celestine’s would-be assailant and went to apprehend them, they took their own life. As a result, we weren’t able to interrogate them for answers, but we found items bearing the mark of the Church of God’s Light among their possessions.”

“The Church of God’s Light... So, they still exist?” Euclase asked with a rather grim expression.

The Church of God’s Light—they were an organization that, in this world where faith in magical spirits reigned supreme, worshiped a singular god who was not a magical spirit. There was no shortage of these types of churches, but the point of concern with the Church of God’s Light was that they were radicals who advocated for their church to be the *only* one to be followed. They labeled any others as heretics and disavowed the existence of any other religion. In the past, they’d forced people to convert and incited several conflicts in the name of their church. When they went silent in recent years, everyone had naturally assumed their organization had collapsed. However...

“While it’s not certain that the Church of God’s Light employed these raiders, they would have motive to assault Beloveds,” Jade elaborated.

Beloveds, those adored by the spirits, were also known as symbols of spirit-based faith. Seeing as how the Church of God’s Light tried to assert their religion as the one true faith, it wouldn’t be far-fetched to assume they wanted to eliminate that symbol.

“I understand there is a possibility of the Church of God’s Light being involved, but wouldn’t that give more reason to assume that Lady Celestine would be safer from a security standpoint if she remained in the Nation of the Beast King? It would have spelled disaster if she had been assaulted while en route to the kingdom, wouldn’t it?”

Jade paused momentarily before explaining. “...When Celestine was assaulted, the spirits didn’t react at all. In fact, they took absolutely no action against her assailant. No, perhaps it’s more accurate to say there were no spirits by her side at the time.”

“That shouldn’t be possible. A Beloved being assaulted without intervention from the spirits is simply...”

Before Euclase could finish their sentence, they were cut off by Arman, who stated, “No, we’re certain of it.”

Not only did Jade concur with his eyes, but so did Claus and Finn, who had accompanied Jade to the Nation of the Beast King. “At the time of her assault, the spirits all practically ran away from Celestine. And when the Beloved of Cerulanda was assaulted, the spirits didn’t act but let the raider flee even though the Beloved was injured, correct?” asked Jade.

“Indeed,” Euclase said, pondering for a bit over Jade’s summary of the events. Then something popped into their mind that made their head jolt up. “No... Spirit Slayer magic?!” Euclase exclaimed, shooting their gaze over to Jade, who gave a single, silent nod in reply.

Spirit Slayer magic was the same magic utilized in the Nadashian war. It siphoned energy from nature and mana from individual reserves. For spirits, losing their energy equaled death, so it was assumed that was the reason they rushed to vacate the area.

“That is the only explanation I can deduce as to why a spirit would mysteriously leave a Beloved’s side. Also, from what Celestine heard from the spirits afterward, they said they were certain it was Spirit Slayer magic,” Jade elaborated.

“You don’t think they have any ties to Nadasha, do you?” Euclase asked.

“That’s still up in the air. It’s hard to consider that anyone from the Church of God’s Light—the same church that asserts they’re the one true faith—would have ties with Nadashian priests, but I’d like you to investigate that.”

“Yes, of course,” Euclase replied, roughly sorting through what they needed to do in their head before returning their gaze to Jade. “If the spirits vacated once the raider infiltrated, then it must be quite easy to detect their abnormal presence.”

“True, but by Lady Rin and Lord Kotaro’s account, only a supreme-level spirit can fend off Spirit Slayer magic. I suggested that we entrust Celestine to the

Nation of the Spirit King since the supreme-level Spirit of Trees resides there, but..." Jade shot a suggestive glance at Arman.

Arman picked up where Jade left off, saying, "If Beloveds are being targeted this badly, then chances are the next target is either the Beloved of the Nation of the Dragon King or the Nation of the Spirit King. Geographically speaking, the Nation of the Dragon King is the closest to our nation. I also hear you're housing the Beloved of Cerulanda at the moment, who they also failed to kill. Seeing how it's likely they'll be back to finish the job, then the chances of this nation being targeted are high. In which case, we decided it would be better if we teamed up and caught them. Well, that's the reason on paper, at least..."

Everyone other than Euclase flashed a glance at Celestine, a simple gesture that was enough to clue Euclase in.

"I figured I ought to see the nation's Beloved that Master Jade has been doting over with my own eyes while I'm here," Celestine elaborated with a smug tone.

"Y-Yes, quite," Euclase replied.

The Church of God's Light was secondary to Celestine. Her number one reason for coming to the kingdom was to meet with Ruri. Apparently, her appearance in the Nation of the Dragon King as a Beloved came up in the past council about Nadasha. At the time, Jade commented that he wouldn't let another nation take Ruri, alluding to her possibly being his mate. He didn't explicitly say that, however, since at the time Jade was still under the impression that Ruri was a cat. Also, Jade hadn't confirmed Ruri's intentions for staying in the Nation of the Dragon King just yet, so he intentionally confused them in order to buy time. He didn't want someone from another nation swooping in and whisking her away, and he assumed that no one would try to steal a dragonkin's mate.

Jade figured that all he needed to do was clear up the confusion after Ruri told him she wanted to stay in the kingdom, but the misunderstanding only served to shock Celestine to her very core. After all, everyone present in the room knew that Celestine was madly in love with Jade. Her goal in coming was to scout out her romantic rival.

Euclase shifted his attention over to Jade to see his face, which practically screamed exasperation. He'd had a chance to clear up the confusion while he was in the Nation of the Beast King, but now that Celestine knew Ruri wasn't a cat, Jade shrank from telling the truth. Therefore, Celestine was still under the wrong assumption that Ruri was Jade's mate. That being said, he didn't intend to let it end that way.

"Shall I inform Ruri to make her return?" asked Euclase.

"Right... Considering Celestine was attacked, a raider just might go to wherever Ruri is as well. Then again, I wouldn't think she'd be in danger since she has two supreme-level spirits by her side. But we can never be too careful," Jade surmised.

Rin and Kotaro's presences would prove to be invaluable for protecting Celestine as well. Not only that, but Euclase had a hunch that Jade most likely couldn't stand being away from Ruri any longer. Even when Ruri initially discussed going to Chelsie's house, Jade heavily implied that she should make it a quick visit.

Allowing her to meet the Beloved of Cerulanda was an issue, but since she was currently staying in the guest room in sector two, it wouldn't be too hard to keep Ruri around but also away from her since she lived in sector one anyway. Jade planned on arranging a room for Celestine in sector one to keep her away from the other Beloved as well.

"Now, about the Beloved of Cerulanda?" Jade asked, backtracking.

The very mention of the topic made Euclase's brows tense. They then went on to complain to Jade, venting the past few days' worth of frustration. "Her repeated demands for dresses and jewels like she's in her own nation is just the half of it. She throws tantrums and shouts at the castle staff over the tiniest thing that irks her. And if you try to object, she will use the same 'I'll just tell the spirits on you' line to negate the argument. Everyone, including myself, has been so afraid of earning the ire of the spirits that we haven't been able to interject at all."

"So, Cerulanda hasn't taught the Beloved any manners..." Jade said, grimacing and holding his temple in frustration about what transpired while he was away.

Arman looked none too thrilled either, but Celestine was visibly upset. Proud of being a Beloved herself, Celestine likely found Azelda's threats of using the spirits to carry out her demands reprehensible. To her, spirits were noble entities who oversaw the world, but it seemed as though Azelda thought of them as tools to carry out her selfish whims.

"Why, I never! I shall not stand for someone using the graces of the spirits as a means of coercion."

"Settle down, Celestine," Arman interjected.

"How do you expect me to 'settle down'?! I simply will *not* stand for the spirits to be used as objects for a petty child's demands. I shall go and give her a little lesson in humility!" Celestine said, fuming. She was about to bolt out of the room at any moment.

Arman rushed to stop her. "Hey, c'mon now. You can't do that. Meeting another foreign nation's Beloved goes against the rules."

"Yes, but, Master Arman...!"

"We're in the Nation of the Dragon King, so leave dealing with her to Jade. Right, Jade?" Arman said, passing the ball over to Jade.

Jade, for his part, seemed very reluctant to catch it. However, so long as they were in his kingdom, this was Jade's responsibility. He had no choice but to handle this matter himself for many reasons—including stopping Celestine's rampage.

"Yes, I will see to her, so keep your wits about you and stay here, Celestine."

"If that is what you wish, Master Jade." Celestine obediently followed Jade's orders, perhaps because she was so smitten.

Arman was relieved. Not even the mighty Beast King had any way to contain a Beloved, and Celestine, being the firecracker she was, was always causing him headaches. Even Euclase had sympathy for him.

Arman and Celestine both exited so Claus could show them to their rooms, while Jade and Euclase headed toward the room of the Beloved of Cerulanda.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am the Dragon King of the Nation of the Dragon

King,” Jade said, introducing himself. He wore an award-winning smile on his beautiful face.

He thought that leaving a favorable impression on her would help promote a peaceful discussion between the two, but he underestimated the effectiveness of his own appearance. Azelda’s cheeks flushed pink as she stared at Jade in a trance.

“Oh no, I have a bad feeling about this,” Euclase said to themselves, not knowing just how right they were.

Chapter 9: Volatile Situation

“Have you contacted Ruri?” Jade asked as he sat in his office signing documents.

Claus, who was also working in the same room, replied, “Indeed. I sent a letter to my mother early this morning. Lord Kotaro should be able to return to the castle in a matter of hours, so they should arrive either today or tomorrow.”

“... *Today*,” Jade curtly asserted, implying that he wasn’t willing to wait a second longer. He had been on pins and needles the entire morning, wondering when Ruri was going to return to the castle. Working at a faster pace than usual, it seemed like he was desperate to finish and secure time to spend with her.

Claus chuckled to himself and grabbed his pen in order to write a follow-up letter to Chelsie. However, that was when the both of them stopped their work and lifted their heads in an almost coordinated fashion.

“...Sounds like a commotion,” commented Claus.

“Yeah.”

Their unparalleled dragonkin sense of hearing picked up on a slight bit of clamor outside the room. The noise seemed to gradually get closer with each passing second as a terrible feeling started to swell in their chests. It wasn’t long before they could hear a set of arguing voices right outside the room, followed immediately by the door swinging wide open without so much as a word beforehand.

That sort of conduct was unthinkable. This was the royal office, after all. No one would be so uncultured to open the door without announcing themselves. It was clear from the second it happened that whoever did it wasn’t from the Nation of the Dragon King.

The person who barged into the room, as expected, was none other than Azelda. Behind her, they could see a soldier desperately trying to stop the girl

from doing anything rash.

“Dragon King!” Azelda called out, making a rather rude entrance as if she didn’t comprehend how disrespectful she was currently being.

“P-Please forgive the intrusion, Your Majesty. A thousand apologies!” said the soldier after nervously entering the room. He then bowed deeply to Jade before making his way toward Azelda.

“Um, Lady Beloved, this is His Majesty’s office. Please, I implore you to vacate,” said the soldier in a timid tone.

Azelda, however, was entirely focused on Jade and didn’t seem to hear a word the soldier said. “Dragon King, I shall be having a tea party soon that I wish for you to attend,” Azelda said with flushed cheeks, making no attempt to hide how smitten she was.

Azelda had apparently fallen in love with Jade at first sight. She was hell-bent on inviting him to her parties at any opportunity she could get, just like this. However, Azelda was supposed to be barred from entering sector one in order to prevent her from seeing Celestine. That being said, why was she in Jade’s office in sector one...? Jade shot an accusing glare at the soldier, making him feel guilty.

“My sincerest apologies. I informed Lady Beloved that she was not allowed to enter sector one, but she positively insisted on having an audience with you, Your Majesty. I tried to stop her, but she became enraged, causing the spirits to...”

Jade didn’t have to hear the rest to gain a rough idea of what happened. It was common for the spirits to be influenced by the anger of a Beloved. Not even a dragonkin could earn the ire of the spirits and come out in one piece. The soldier wasn’t powerful enough to stop her from coming here, but Jade couldn’t blame him for that. Not even Jade could stop her once the spirits came into the equation.

He had heard from Euclase’s account that Azelda barely enforced any control over the spirits. While Ruri would quell her spirits more often than not, Azelda used their anger to her advantage to get her way.

Jade's head ached over the fact that he was babysitting such a troublemaker. He took his eyes off the soldier and turned around to Azelda. "Lady Beloved..."

"Oh, Lady Beloved sounds so reserved. Please, call me Azelda," she said, keeping her eyes fixed on Jade, albeit embarrassed.

That look put a bitter frown on Jade's face. "Okay then, Lady Azelda. I'm sorry, but I am in the middle of work at the moment, so I won't be able to attend your tea party."

"You never attend my tea parties when I invite you. Can't you make an exception today?"

"I'm terribly sorry to decline. However, my work needs me, so I need you to understand. Also, I need you to refrain from entering sector one of the castle."

"I just wanted to see you..." Azelda said, her brows slumping sadly.

Jade started to sweat, not wanting the spirits to go berserk. "I'm not saying it to be mean. Currently, we have the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King in sector one. A Beloved outside of the four allied nations meeting another Beloved goes against the rules."

"Oh my, there is another Beloved here? I would like to meet them."

"No, there is a rule that forbids Beloveds of outside nations from meeting in order to prevent conflict, so I *can't* let you meet her."

"Don't worry about that. I can get along with her."

Jade almost let out a sigh. It wasn't a matter of *likability*. Also, they probably *wouldn't* get along anyway seeing as how Celestine's impression of Azelda was already at rock-bottom. Even Jade could say with confidence that the two were practically oil and water.

"Regardless, I can't allow the two of you to meet. Now, return to sector two before you encounter Celesti—"

"Pardon my intrusion." Just as Jade was about to hand over Azelda to the soldier, the royal office's doors opened and out stepped the very individual Jade was warning Azelda about—Celestine.

Jade's eyes snapped over to the door where Celestine stood and his jaw

tensed. “Celestine...”

“I knocked several times, but I heard no response, so I took the liberty of coming in. I had something I wished to speak to you about and... Oh my, is that who I think it is?” Celestine said as her eyes fell upon Azelda standing beside Jade. Azelda was surrounded by a group of spirits just like Celestine, so she had a hunch as to who the girl was without Jade even answering. “Yes, you are ‘Azelda,’ if I recall...”

Celestine’s look intensified. Jade and Claus both started to sweat.

“Celestine, please, step outside,” Jade urged, but Celestine’s eyes were fixed on Azelda.

Whether she was oblivious to Celestine’s stern glare or not, Azelda simply smiled and approached her. “You’re the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King? I’m Azelda. Charmed,” the young girl said, holding her hand out for a handshake. But Celestine maintained her icy gaze and slapped the girl’s hand out of her face. It wasn’t a very hard slap by any means, but Azelda let out a tiny shriek, possibly from the shock alone. “Eeep! What are you doing?!”

“I have no intention of being friends with someone who treats the spirits like tools. I would advise you to not act so overly familiar with me.”

“W-Why?! I was going out of my way to be friendly!”

“I never *asked*.”

Celestine poutily turned her head to the side as Azelda glared a hole into her. Jade and the others in the room watched on in suspense as the volatile situation between the two unfolded.

Jade thought he was imagining things, but there were clearly more spirits in the room than before—all of them probably provoked by their anger. He had to act quick or the worst-case scenario would come to pass.

Jade made up his mind and stepped in. “Wait, you two. Celestine, you know the rules, don’t you? I’ll listen to what you have to say later, so just return to your room for now. You as well, Lady Azelda. You’re holding a tea party, aren’t you? I’ll have the soldiers escort you to sector two.”

Both looked dissatisfied, but Celestine was the first to move. “Very well. I will go regain my composure,” Celestine said in a display of rationality, much to the relief of Jade and Claus. Azelda, on the other hand...

“No. I *hate* this person. I’m a Beloved. I won’t leave after being treated like such a fool! Everyone, sic her!”

Even though Celestine was being an adult and going back to her room, Azelda wasn’t going to sit with that. Because of her status as a Beloved, she’d never had anyone respond to her like this. Her whole face was beet red, and it was clear she was furious. She turned to the nearby spirits and ordered them to attack.

Jade and Claus turned pale. Jade tried to stop Azelda and Claus moved to protect Celestine, but Celestine herself spoke up before they could act, her words reverberating.

“Who cares if you’re a Beloved? You use the spirits when things don’t go your way. You’re like a child throwing a tantrum. Isn’t that just embarrassing?”

“What did you say?!”

The spirits had yet to move.

Jade and Claus weren’t terribly familiar with the specifics of what happened in a confrontation between two Beloveds since their kingdom had lacked any Beloveds for quite a long time. It was unknown what actions the spirits might take, and that unknown factor only invited fear and panic.

It was clear that they couldn’t let this fight go on for any longer, so Jade stepped between the two and broke up their staredown. Then, he turned his back to Celestine and walked to Azelda.

“Lady Azelda, I must ask you to calm yourself.”

“Why are you covering for that brat?!”

“I’m not covering for her. Lady Azelda, weren’t you holding a tea party? I would appreciate it if you’d let me join.”

“But, did you not just turn down my offer because of work?”

“Yes, but I feel that having a leisurely chat with you is more of a priority than

work. Let us be off, quickly.”

Azelda brightened up as if she completely forgot about her anger up until that point. “Oh, you mean it?! Let’s be off, then!” Azelda took Jade’s arm and huddled up to him in a spirited mood.

Jade shot a glance at Claus. With an expression that seemed relieved as well as annoyed, Claus whispered, “Best of luck, Sire.”

“Claus, I’m leaving the rest to you.”

“Yes, consider it done,” Claus replied, bowing his head.

Jade left the sulky-looking Celestine behind and walked out of the office with Azelda.

Chapter 10: Invasion of the Capybara

Jade had told Ruri to stay at Chelsie's house for a while, so she had been staying in her room there. Even though Ruri now lived in the royal castle, Chelsie maintained her room by periodically cleaning it. Therefore Ruri didn't panic over Jade's abrupt orders; she was able to stay in comfort.

Several days rolled on, and on one early morning, Ruri was having a distressful slumber.

"Ungh, unghh... So heavy... Urgh..." Ruri groaned. Unable to take it any longer, she opened her eyes. The sun shone through the cracks in the curtains, but it was way too early to be awake. She looked drowsily around her. Simply laying down felt extremely uncomfortable. In fact, it felt like something was crushing her body and causing her to suffocate. When she turned her head faceup, something came into her blurry vision—something that snapped her wide-awake.

Ruri's eyes went wide. "...Huh?!"

"Yo," someone greeted, raising their front foot—someone who was neither Kotaro nor Rin.

"Huh? A capybara? ... *What?*"

Sitting neatly atop Ruri's belly was an animal about thirty-or forty-centimeters tall with brown fur—a capybara. While she was curious as to what a capybara was doing in her room in the first place, she was more curious as to why it had such an evil look to its eyes.

The capybara stared at Ruri dead in the face with its intense, deep set eyes. She stared blankly back, thinking she was still half dreaming.



“Heeey, are you awaaake?” said the capybara as it waved its foot in front of Ruri’s face.

“G-Gaaah!!” Ruri screamed, springing herself upright.

The capybara lying on her stomach went tumbling across the top of the bed. *“Hey, now. Don’t just suddenly get up like that. You spooked me.”*

“A-A capybaraaa?!” Ruri stammered, now in utter shock seeing as how the capybara could speak among other things.

Just then, Kotaro and Rin, both asleep next to Ruri’s bed, slowly started to awaken.

“Ruri, mind your volume,” said Rin.

Kotaro added, *“It’s far too early to be up and about, Ruri.”*

“Now’s not the time for casual attitudes! There’s a capybara... There’s a capybara right there!!” Ruri frantically pointed at the capybara clearly in front of her.

Catching on to the new presence, Rin and Kotaro turned their eyes to it.

The capybara once again raised its front leg and greeted them. *“Yo.”*

Kotaro and Rin’s eyes bulged in surprise. However, their surprise was different from Ruri’s.

“Is that you, Earth?” asked Kotaro.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Earth,” said Rin.

“Heya, how’s it hanging, you two?”

The friendly back-and-forth between the three helped Ruri regain some of her composure. *“An acquaintance of yours?”* she asked.

“Indeed. This is one of our brethren—the supreme-level spirit of the earth,” explained Rin.

He was apparently the Spirit of Earth, one of the twelve supreme-level spirits of this world. That was still a surprise in itself, but why were they here in the first place?

“But why is the Spirit of Earth in my room? And why sitting on my body? Thanks to him, I was practically choking in my sleep.”

“Ooh, my bad, my bad. Didn’t want to just suddenly wake you up, so I sat patiently and waited. I was trying to be considerate, but I guess it backfired.”

“In that case, why wait *on top* of someone?” Ruri asked, breathing a sigh.

“So, what brings you here, Earth?” Rin flapped over to Ruri’s shoulder and parked her rear on it.

“Well, y’know, they said Wind, a known misanthrope, let a human name him, yeah? On top of that, I heard you let the same human name you, Water. It piqued my interest. I also heard she made a contract with Lydia. So, as someone who also got their name from Weidt, I dropped by to see what kind of gal she is.”

“Now that you mention it, you and Time have the same contract-bearer,” said Rin.

“Yup, that’s right! Can’t blame me for getting curious and wanting to check out Lydia’s new contract-bearer since she hasn’t had one since Weidt.”

Weidt was the First Dragon King. It was a fact that didn’t leave Ruri too shocked considering Lydia had also informed her that the First Dragon King made a contract with the Spirit of Earth.

“Then, I assume you’re done here?” Ruri asked.

Now that he confirmed what kind of human Ruri was, it was only natural he would immediately take his leave—or so Ruri thought.

“Well, I kinda made a contract with you while you were sleeping. So, yeah, I’ll be crashing with you, too. Nice to meetcha, roomie!”

“You’re... *Pardon?!* ” Ruri exclaimed, unwilling to believe her ears. “You contracted me?! Why?!”

“I’m bored, for one. And two, from what the other spirits tell me, being with you is a blast.”

Ruri’s shoulders slumped dramatically. Whether it be Lydia, Rin, or even this capybara, she wondered why spirits had a penchant for suddenly doing things

like this. Lydia pretty much contracted Ruri under her nose as well, and Rin came up to Ruri out of the blue badgering her for a name. Ruri had the impression that a “contract” wasn’t something you could just easily make, but perhaps that wasn’t the case with spirits. They seemed to live based solely on instinct.

“Is a contract really something you should just be making on a whim?”

“If it’s someone I like, then it’s fine! Just fine! If Lydia and Wind made a contract with you, then you’ve gotta be a good gal. And if I end up disliking you, I’ll just cancel the contract, so no worries!”

“Should you be that casual about it?”

Kotaro explained, *“There are some spirits that seldom make contracts with humans, such as myself, but on the opposite side, there are also those who make contracts with multiple humans. And among them, Earth makes contracts at the spur of the moment, so the amount of contract-bearers he’s had in the past is especially high. So, I wouldn’t be too concerned about it, Ruri. A contract is but a spirit’s sign of affection; you will incur no harm from it.”*

“Well, I guess I’m fine with it if there’s no issues.”

“Then, nice to meetcha. My name’s Chi.”

And so, Ruri gained herself yet another unexpected pet, this time one with mean-looking eyes.

Over the course of their discussion, Ruri found herself completely awake. It was a little early, but she went to the kitchen and began prepping breakfast. Once the food was done, Chelsie awoke and came to the kitchen herself. She laid eyes on the unfamiliar rodent parked on top of the table and stared blankly at it.

“Ruri, what is this animal doing here?”

The focus now on him, Chi lifted his front paw and greeted Chelsie just as he did Ruri. “Yo!”

Ruri explained the situation while preparing tea for herself and Chelsie. “He’s

apparently a supreme-level spirit named Chi.”

“And what, pray tell, is the Spirit of Earth doing here?”

“He’s here to meet me since I’m Lydia and Kotaro’s contract-bearer. One thing led to another and he made a contract with me.”

“*What* thing led to another?”

“To be honest, I haven’t got a clue myself.”

Chelsie wanted a more concrete explanation, but as for *why* she ended up in a contract, that was a question only Chi knew the answer to. Ruri had stopped thinking too deeply into it.

Once the tea was all ready, breakfast was underway.

“Oh, right, Ruri. I got a letter from Claus. It asked you to come back to the castle by today.”

“Is it safe now? I know that Beloved from Ceru-whenever is there, so they told me to stay here, but do you suppose she’s left?”

“It’s ‘Cerulanda,’ and she hasn’t left yet, but there seems to be a lot going on. Claus said that he’s sorry for asking a lot, but he wants you to come back.”

“Are you sure? I was told I shouldn’t see her, though.”

“If they’re asking you to come back home, I’m sure it’s fine. I’m also sure that His Majesty is reaching his limit without you around.”

“Jade-sama...”

Part of Ruri was flattered that Jade missed her so much, but another part of her was disappointed in him for blowing things out of proportion over a few days’ absence. With Ruri gone, his kitty source of comfort was also gone, which meant he was probably feeling more down than usual.

“You can come back here in a matter of no time on Kotaro, so hurry on back to the capital, child.”

“Yes, ma’am.” That was when Ruri remembered Chi. “Chi, what are you going to do?”

“*Tag along for the ride, of course.*”

Ruri observed Chi's body and estimated his weight. Rin and the other spirits were small, meaning they could ride along with Ruri on Kotaro's back if they sat on Ruri's shoulders or head. Chi, on the other hand, was far too big for that. Given that, Chi would have to ride together with Ruri on Kotaro's back, but...

"You might barely fit..." Ruri said, comparing Kotaro's size to Chi's. If he couldn't, Ruri *could* always take cat form and fit him on.

After finishing breakfast, Ruri quickly got herself tidied up and went outside. She lifted up Chi and set him on Kotaro, and then she straddled herself on Kotaro's back.

"Alright, Chelsie-san, I'll be back soon."

"Yes, give my regards to His Majesty."

"Will do."

With everything settled, Kotaro raced through the sky at incredible speeds, arriving all the way back at the royal capital in mere hours.

Ruri intended to fly straight to the castle, but Chi suddenly stopped her. *"Hey, hear me out. Since it's my first time back in the capital in such a long time, I wanna take a look around. You mind?"*

"Huh? But it could be dangerous since I don't have any security detail assigned to me today."

If Ruri was by herself, then she could walk around disguised with her wig and glasses, but with Kotaro, Rin, and now Chi in tow, she would stand out immediately. One glance her way and she would be caught as the Beloved and her merry spirits. She was worried about inciting a commotion.

"What are you talking about? You've got this many supreme-level spirits around you; you don't need security detail."

He had a point since she had the supreme-level spirits of earth, wind, and water all with her. Not only that, but with this many spirits tagging along, there wouldn't be a soul who would try to mess with her.

"Well, if you put it that way, you're not wrong."

“See? It’s fine. Just a little bit.”

“Hmm, okay. But only a little bit since Jade-sama is waiting.”

“You got it!”

Per Chi’s request, Ruri’s party descended into the city. Obviously, as soon as people saw them land, an immediate uproar began. However, no one around them tried to approach Ruri, instead crowding around from afar, possibly because of the vigilant Kotaro in his giant wolf body by her side.

“Ooh, this place hasn’t changed a bit since then.”

“You were here back in the First Dragon King’s time, right? I would think at least *something* changed in that time.”

“Nah, human and demi-human living together, bustling with activity? It’s the exact same,” Chi said, scanning around the area in enjoyment.

“Don’t get lost, now,” Ruri warned.

“Yeah, I know,” Chi said, ignoring Ruri who was following behind him and marching further into the city, his interest shifting around to anything that caught his eye—like a child. He slipped effortlessly between the legs of people without any regard to Ruri and gradually got further away from her.

“Aah, geez. You’re *definitely* going to get lost like this. Rin, go with Chi, will you?”

“On it,” replied Rin as she flapped off after Chi.

Not only was the royal capital filled with people, but Chi’s small body disappeared into the crowd in the blink of an eye.

“And there they *both* go...” Ruri sighed, slumping.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be able to find the both of them. You should just let Chi walk around until he’s satiated.”

Ruri was thankful for Kotaro’s diligence, and they proceeded to leisurely walk around, figuring that Rin would keep an eye on Chi anyway.

As she walked around town, receiving food from shops she passed along the way, she noticed a narrow path between two buildings. There, she saw a lady

standing with her back to the street—she seemed to be talking to someone. In the next instant, the lady turned around and met eyes with Ruri.

The lady nodded. “My, my, Lady Beloved. How pleasant to see you. It’s been quite a while.”

“Huh? Oh, um...” Ruri stammered, unable to remember this lady who was talking to her in a friendly and familiar manner.

She could guess that Ruri didn’t remember her from her behavior, but she simply gave a good-natured smile. “I am the vendor that was selling the good-luck charm in the design of your eyes, Lady Beloved.”

“Aah, you’re from back then.”

“I am thrilled that you remember me. My name is Amarna.”

Ruri finally remembered her. She was the vendor who was selling good-luck charms made of glass beads the same color as Ruri’s eyes. She had given Jade that trinket, which had been turned into a *real* good-luck charm by the spirits.

“Thanks to you, I sold out of merchandise; I am extremely grateful.”

“Oh, I see...” Ruri said, feeling kind of awkward over the fact that people actually bought those regular glass beads.

“I know it’s not much, but please take this,” Amarna said, presenting Ruri with a small, floral-patterned purse.

“What is this?”

“It is one of my new products. If you sleep with this under your pillow, you will get a good night’s rest.”

She took the purse and a slight herb-like scent hit her nose. This must be something like an aromatic sachet with an aroma that has a relaxing effect. It looked to be a more legitimate product than the fake good-luck charms.

“Thank you very much. I’ll make sure to use it.”

“Tee hee hee, if you were to use it, Lady Beloved, I am sure it will fly off the shelves just like the good-luck charms,” she said, thanking Ruri. She knew this would positively affect her sales.

Ruri was speechless at how shrewd of a business woman she was. She hesitated and then said, “Hate to run, but I’m in a hurry.”

“Oh, yes. Please, do stop by my stall again sometime.”

Parting ways with Amarna, Ruri began chasing after Chi. After a bit of tailing, Ruri and Kotaro were able to reconvene with him and Rin.

“Come on, I said you’d get lost that way.”

“*My bad, my bad,*” Chi said in a tone that didn’t seem apologetic in the least. He seemed satisfied, most likely having his fill of walking around.

With the four of them successfully together again, they head out—this time *straight* for the royal castle.

Chapter 11: Gloom

After returning to the castle, Ruri made her way to Jade's office with Kotaro and the others in tow. She figured she would need to introduce Chi while she was at it, seeing as how if a mean-looking capybara were to just up and strut around the castle one day, they would probably kick it out.

Ruri knocked on the office door and waited, but there was no response. Reluctantly, she opened the door and went inside. There was no one there.

"Huh? No one's here." Usually if Jade was absent, then at least Claus would be present, but even he was missing. "Hmm, what now? Kotaro, do you know where Jade-sama is?"

"Right, give me a second... He isn't around here. He's in sector two."

"Sector two, huh? Maybe we should just wait until he comes back, then."

Sector two was where all of the royal guests were placed. Normally, Jade would have no reason to go down there, but she guessed it had something to do with the Beloved from Cerulanda. Remembering that she wasn't supposed to meet that specific Beloved, she gave up on her idea to follow after him.

Deciding to leave Jade for later, Ruri set her sights on introducing Chi to the others and headed to Euclase's room next. There, Euclase was at their desk, their head buried in work.

"I've come back, Euclase-san."

"So, you're finally back home," Euclase greeted, looking and sounding somewhat exhausted.

"Erm, are you tired, Euclase-san?"

Seething with anger, Euclase said, "Yes, and it's that girl's fault."

"That girl?" Ruri asked, cocking her head.

"That matter aside, I see you've got yourself yet another pet," Euclase commented, their eyes falling upon Chi who had entered the room with her.

“Don’t tell me we’re graced with yet another supreme-level spirit?”

“Ahaha, you’re right on the money,” Ruri said, lifting Chi and thrusting him out in front of Euclase. “He is the supreme-level spirit of the earth and his name is ‘Chi.’”

“Yo!” Chi greeted with a raise of his front paw.

Euclase’s eyes went wide. They had predicted it was no ordinary animal, but upon hearing it was actually a supreme-level spirit, they couldn’t contain their surprise.

“Hold on, ‘supreme-level spirit of the earth’? That’s the spirit that made a contract with the First Dragon King, then!”

“That’d be right. This time he’s made a contract with me,” said Ruri.

Euclase breathed a tiny sigh. Their utter surprise had turned into downright exasperation. “How are you able to make contracts with so many high-level spirits? No Beloved in any other nation has as many contracts with high-level spirits as you. Why, they wouldn’t be able to be on such intimate terms in the first place.”

“Isn’t it because I had a run of good first encounters, though? Rin met me through Kotaro, and Chi came to see me because I was contracted to Lydia.” Once she gave it some consideration, almost everything was partially luck. It also made Ruri a tad uneasy over the prospect of even more spirits coming to see her in the future.

Just then, Euclase lifted their head, as if they came to some sort of realization. “I beg your pardon, O Spirit of Earth. There is something I wish to confirm, if you wouldn’t mind?”

“Sure. Shoot.”

“When the First Dragon King was still among us, there was a mineral used for our currency, but it dried up ever since His Majesty shuffled off this mortal coil. The Spirit of Time informed us that it was because you left the Nation of the Dragon King, but is that true?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“If you have made a contract with Ruri here, might this become a mineable mineral once more?” Euclase asked, looking at Chi with baited breath.

“Oh, you want that old thing?”

“Yes, ever so much!” Euclase exclaimed, their eyes sparkling—no, *positively beaming*. Their eyes were like a hunter stalking their prey, and they were determined not to let it slip away.

“Well then, I’ll make it mineable for ya.”

“Oh, I thank you so much!” Euclase clenched their fist tightly under their desk. “A fine job, Ruri!” they said, praising Ruri for bringing the Spirit of Earth back to the kingdom.

“Euclase-san, your eyes are taking on quite the different color now,” Ruri commented. Their eyes were now the color of *money*.

It was an inevitable reaction considering they were told that a long-lost precious mineral would become available once again. The profits birthed from that would be immeasurable, so as the Chancellor of the Nation of the Dragon King, there was no way they *wouldn’t* be pleased.

Ruri thought that none of this really concerned her, but then she suddenly realized something. “If that mineral becomes readily available, then that means all the old money in my pocket space will become worthless, doesn’t it?! This isn’t good, then. I should sell it all off quick...” She had managed to sell off her old money at a high price due to the scarcity, but now that the mineral was going to be available again, it would naturally drive down the price.

“Have no fear. If this mineral ran dry once again, it would cause issues, so it will no longer be used for currency. Its value as a material will indeed drop, but the coins will still have value as cultural artifacts. Their selling price won’t undergo any drastic changes either.”

Ruri was relieved to hear the news. It may have sounded greedy of her, but it was a big deal. There was nothing she necessarily needed a large amount of money for at the moment, but there was no harm in securing her savings for a rainy day.

With one matter out of the way, Ruri moved on to the next. “Oh, right. So,

Euclase-san? The Beloved from that ‘Ceruleanda’ place is still here, right? Was it safe for me to come back to the castle? I remember you all telling me that I shouldn’t meet her.”

“Ah yes. That.” Euclase then filled Ruri in about the Church of God’s Light and how someone suspected of being affiliated with them attacked the Beloved of Cerulanda and the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King.

“Beloveds are being targeted? Then, I will be, too...”

“Which is exactly why we asked you to come back to the castle. With consideration for your safety since Ms. Chelsie’s house lacks the proper security, of course. Then again, with your grand lineup of supreme-level spirits, no one thought anything would happen to you, but better safe than sorry. The Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King is here as well, so we also wanted you and your present company around.”

“Oh, the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King is here?” Ruri asked, her interest piqued. Unlike the Beloved of Cerulanda, she should be safe to pay a visit.

“Indeed. With the raider assault, it was a toss up between her temporarily staying in the Nation of the Spirit King, where a supreme-level spirit resides, or the Nation of the Dragon King, for her safety. Ultimately, they chose the Nation of the Dragon King.”

“And it’s safe for me to meet with the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King, right?”

“It is. You’re allowed to meet with the Beloved of an allied nation such as hers. However, you mustn’t interact with the Beloved of Cerulanda. Well... I say that, but the Nation of the Beast King and Cerulanda’s Beloved wound up seeing each other,” Euclase admitted with a heavy sigh.

“And... that is okay?”

“It’s most certainly *not* okay. However, it was an accident outside of our control, so far be it from me to dwell. It’s not like there’s any punitive measures in place even if they do meet anyway.”

“Is that so?” Ruri was convinced that, since everyone so persistently

dissuaded her from meeting this Beloved and insisted she keep her distance, she'd suffer some sort of punishment if she were to ever meet her. That didn't seem to be the case, however.

"It's simply a gentleman's agreement between nations designed to avoid any mayhem caused by two Beloveds meeting. Even if a Beloved *didn't* abide by the agreement, there's no one who *could* punish them in the first place. So, while it is a rule between the nations, it's not really a binding one. If a Beloved said they wanted to see another Beloved, no one could oppose them no matter what rule was in place."

"I've been thinking this for a good while now, but Beloveds can really do whatever they please in this world, can't they? They're more powerful than the government." It made Ruri feel even weirder considering that *she* was a Beloved herself.

"I'd say less the Beloveds and more the spirits. We flatter the Beloveds because we fear the wrath of the spirits. And since spirits can be fickle, we handle them with the utmost delicacy."

"It might be my imagination, but I feel I get handled with a little *less* delicacy, all things considered..." Ruri said, thinking back on all the times she was grabbed by the scruff of her neck, scolded, and petted on the head. She personally wouldn't want them to start standing on ceremony around her now, but it did make her think about the treatment she's been receiving as a Beloved.

"Ruri, since you know better, you get treated more casually. It's proof that people think fondly of you. But that Beloved of Cerulanda is a different story, the selfish little brat..." Euclase spat out with a hint of disgust.

Ruri didn't know about Euclase's conversation with Azelda, so their behavior only confused Ruri, but she understood that it must have stemmed from something that had happened.

"Ruri, can't you do something?!" Euclase asked, sounding a little desperate.

"Um, well, that's a pretty sudden request, but I can't really say if I can or can't considering I haven't even met this Beloved yet..." She didn't know what made Euclase this angry, but there wasn't really much that could be done to help it.

Euclase clicked their tongue, pointed their face down, and clutched their head, lamenting, “Ugh, why did they have to come to *our* nation, of all places~!” It seemed that they had worked up a lot of stress, among other things. But then Euclase suddenly raised their head. “Oh, yes. By the way, Ruri, you need to watch out for the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King.”

Ruri stared blankly. “And why is that?”

“The Nation of the Beast King’s Beloved has been hounding His Majesty with attempts at courtship for quite some time. But there was a slight misunderstanding and she seems to think you’re His Majesty’s mate. Not even I know how she would handle you if she suddenly snatched you from the sidelines, so be on your toes.”

“What kind of unsettling info is this? Do you mean she’s painting me as a man-stealer and trying to pick a fight with me?! I’m not even Jade-sama’s mate, though.”

“But it is true that His Majesty dotes on you, isn’t it? It’s practically common knowledge to the other dragonkin as well. That’s why she’s so hostile toward even the idea of you.”

“To clarify, he dotes on me as a *pet*,” Ruri asserted.

Ruri wasn’t ignorant enough to think that no one would fall for Jade given his attributes, but it was surprising that it was a Beloved, of all people. Even though he only viewed her as a pet, this person likely didn’t know that. Petting her on the head, cradling her in his arms, sleeping in the same room at night—all these regular instances of cuddling happened regardless of whether she was in cat or human form. From the outside looking in, though, that was more than enough ammunition to fuel someone’s jealousy. Ruri wondered if she would even listen if she explained that those were all just signs of affection toward her as a pet.

While Ruri wanted to clear up the misunderstanding, the idea of being involved in an unjust fight left her frightened. A fight between Beloveds probably sent shivers up everyone else’s spines, as well.

“So long as you don’t go busting up the castle, then do whatever. Try to hang in there, will you? She’s quite intense when it comes to His Majesty, after all.”

“‘Hang in there’? That’s not reassuring...” Ruri uttered, slightly disheartened by Euclase’s flippant phrasing. She left Euclase’s room, doom and gloom taking root in her mind.

Chapter 12: The Beast King and the Beloved

“Aah, what do I do? God, the gloom is killing me...”

Ruri had been pretty excited to meet another Beloved, but then she was told that the same Beloved might harbor hostility toward her. She had no idea what kind of person the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King was, but she wanted to limit her interaction with her as much as possible.

“Fear not, Ruri. If the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King does anything to you, I will strike her down,” Kotaro said.

“Me, too! I will teach her to never mess with you ever again,” Rin added.

Chi hopped on the bandwagon and said, *“Oh yeah? I’ll help you guys with that, too.”*

The three spirits all gave Ruri their support—Kotaro and Rin out of concern for Ruri and Chi because it seemed like it’d be fun.

“I appreciate it, but I have a feeling that would end up causing a scene for no reason...” Ruri explained. The rather extreme remarks from the spirits left her extremely unsettled. Thinking it best they not meet, given the fervor of her spirits, Ruri decided to avoid the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King as much as she possibly could.

As Ruri walked through sector one toward the garden, she happened to see a man and a woman talking on the terrace along the way.

“Who could that be?” she wondered. They both had entry to sector one of the castle—that much was obvious.

There were a multitude of maids and guard soldiers in the castle, so she didn’t remember everyone’s faces, but the two people she saw on the terrace weren’t dressed like any soldiers. The woman wore an outfit of thin material—almost like you’d see on a dancer—unlike anything worn in these parts. The man was dressed in stylish apparel of his own.

Although purely assumption, it seemed to Ruri as though the man was someone of high rank. After all, the only other people allowed in sector one besides maids and soldiers were high-ranking officials. And there weren't many high-ranking people who served Jade to begin with. Considering Ruri spent almost all of her time in Jade's office, she would have at least remembered seeing his face before, but she was drawing a complete blank.

However, upon closer inspection of the woman, it became all too clear who they both were. Several spirits were floating around the woman. Yes, just like Ruri herself.

"Could that be the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King?"

As Ruri's eyes remained on the two, the man noticed her and met her gaze. This sent a jolt through Ruri's heart—not in the romantic sense, of course. The pounding sensation in her chest was from shock and regret for accidentally making eye contact.

The man started to make prompt yet firm steps toward Ruri. The closer he came, the more her eyes had to shift farther up.

"He's huge..." Ruri unintentionally murmured.

There were quite a lot of physically tall dragonkin, and Jade was much taller than Ruri, but the man who stood before her was even *bigger*. His body was well-built, and his muscles rippled underneath his clothes, making him appear that much larger.

Overcome by an invisible sense of pressure, Ruri started to back away.

"Looking at your company of spirits, I assume you're the Beloved of the Nation of the Dragon King?"

"Y-Yes, sir..." she answered, trembling slightly.

His lips curled into a grin. "Yeah, I knew it... Oh, right. I haven't introduced myself, have I? I'm the Beast King, Arman," he said as if remembering his manners. He introduced himself with a smile, probably wise to the fact that Ruri was on her guard.

"I'm Ruri. By 'Beast King,' do you mean the same one with nineteen queens,

or...?" she asked, that being the only impression she had about the Beast King.

"That's some way to remember a person. Well, not like you've got it wrong either way..."

Not only was Ruri raised in a monogamous society, but she was surrounded by dragonkin, who devoted themselves to a single mate for their entire life, so she looked at Arman with a bit of a cynical eye.

Picking up on that cynicism, Arman started to feel a little awkward. "Well, whatever the case, we're part of the allied nations, so I'm sure we'll be running into each other often. Nice to meet you," Arman said, extending his hand.

"Yes, likewise," Ruri replied, extending her own.

True to his physique, his hand was large and meaty. Once he gripped hers and squeezed, it felt like her hand was getting squashed like a bug.

Arman then turned around and introduced the woman he was with. "And this here is the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King, Celestine. Since you're both Beloveds, here's hoping you two get along just fine."

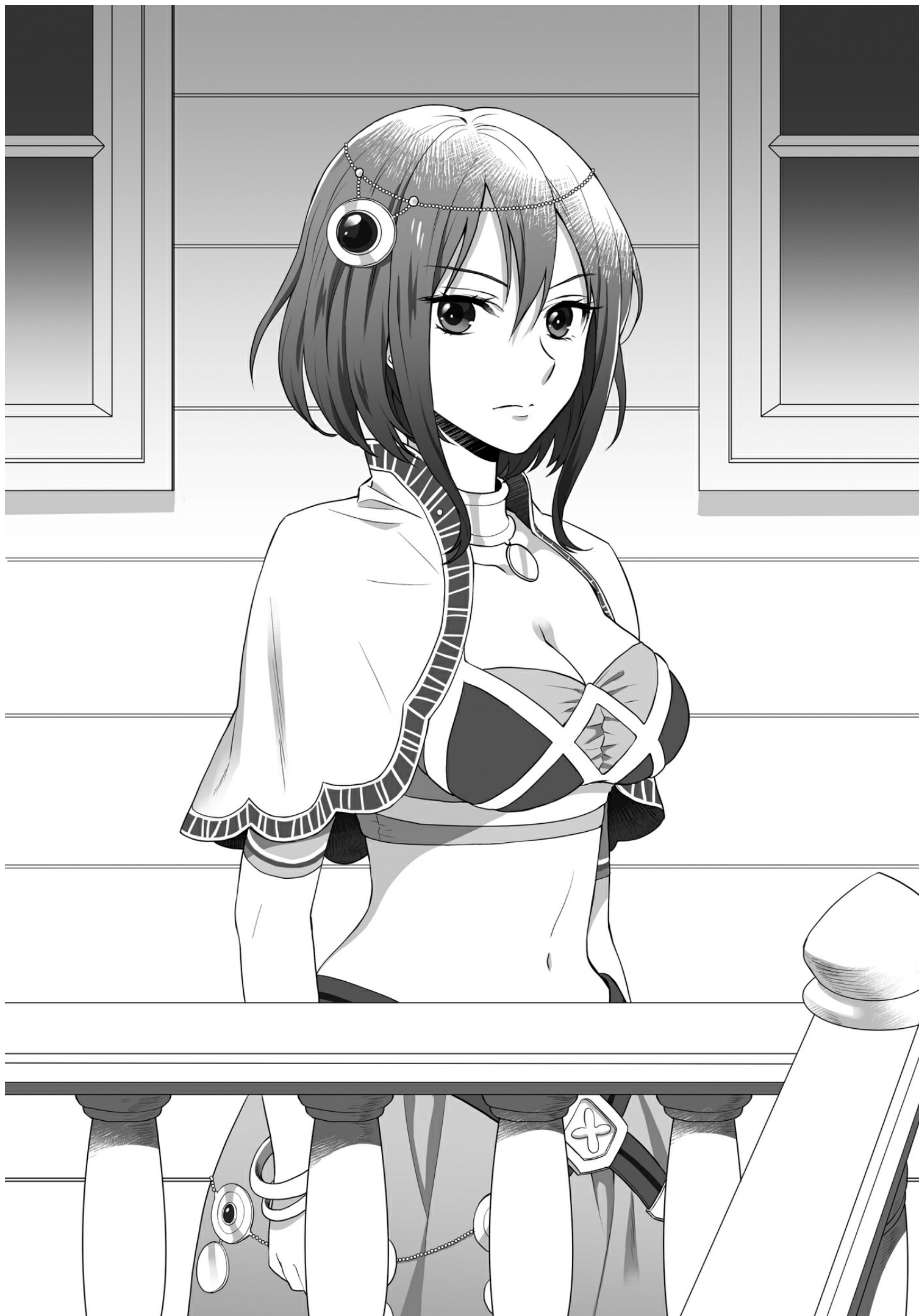
"Charmed," Celestine said in a curt manner.

Here she was, the very person Ruri swore not to meet just moments ago. Before she even realized it, her back had straightened up. Perhaps it was all in Ruri's head, but Celestine's gaze felt intense and uncomfortable, as if she was sizing up her romantic competition. However, as intense as her gaze may have been, she didn't feel any hostility from it, which made Ruri breathe a little easier.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ruri."

"Celestine."

Celestine's expression seemed far from what one would call "amicable," but seeing as how Ruri had been convinced she'd come at her with her dukes up, the look on her face didn't bother her much.



After the two ladies exchanged a handshake themselves, Celestine looked away from Ruri and toward Kotaro and the others by Ruri's side.

"Oh, this is Kotaro, Rin, and Chi. They're spirits with physical bodies," Ruri said, making the distinction that they were spirits and not magic beasts.

Celestine then took to one knee before the trio of spirits. "My name is Celestine. It is a great honor to meet a group of supreme-level spirits—overseers of the world," Celestine said, bowing her head.

Ruri stared at her with wide eyes, bewildered by her behavior.

That was when the carefree Chi interjected. "*Hey, no need for that here; I'm not a fan of being all stiff and formal. Loosen up and relax,*" he instructed.

"Consider it done," Celestine said, standing up.

Arman spoke to Ruri, who was still in a state of confusion. "That shocked you? The Nation of the Beast King is far more spirit-religious than other nations. And out of all of them, Celestine's tribe is the most religious. Spirits are a symbol of worship to them. They have the most respect and adoration for spirits out of any race around."

"Oh, is that so?" Ruri remarked.

Since Ruri was raised in a world without spirit-based religion, Kotaro and the others were akin to friends to her. But to Celestine, spirits meant something different. If she saw them as a symbol of worship, then she could see the logic behind Celestine's sudden behavior. Even though they were both Beloveds, their ideologies about spirits couldn't be any more different.

"Ms. Ruri?"

"Uh, yes!" Ruri exclaimed, surprised that Celestine suddenly called her by name.

Celestine stared straight at Ruri, and Ruri stared right back, trying not to buckle under the pressure. Their eyes were locked on one another as if they were conducting an impromptu staring contest.

"I will be staying here until the raider is apprehended."

“Oh... Yes, of course...”

Euclase had described Celestine as being hostile toward her, so she braced for an unfettered shower of abuse. But Celestine’s subdued response subverted her expectations and threw her for a loop. She was slightly fired up to retaliate if need be, but the situation just sort of sputtered out. As such, Ruri’s first conversation with Celestine came to a harmless close.



Arman and Celestine remained on the terrace after Ruri took her leave.

“You were mighty behaved back there. I was on the edge of my seat hoping you wouldn’t flare up at her like every other girl in the past. Were you holding back because she’s a Beloved?”

There was no shortage of women who had tried to court Jade, but the one who always dispersed of all those would-be suitresses was none other than Celestine. Arman was afraid she might throw a tantrum over Jade fancying someone, but Celestine was surprisingly level-headed. She didn’t even try to remove Ruri from the picture.

Celestine looked displeased with Arman’s remarks. “Of course I was. From what the dragonkin have told me, Master Jade is madly in love with that girl. If I were to attack her like all the other girls, then Master Jade would be ever so cross with me!”

“Aah, yeah. I suppose the chances of that are high. Then again, it seems she’s not his mate just yet.”

“Yes, but, I’ve heard a great number of people saw him feeding that girl by hand,” Celestine said, sounding honestly depressed.

Feeding someone by hand was a sign of affection dragonkin showed toward their mates. She apparently wasn’t his mate just yet, but that act made it clear where Jade’s heart lay. Putting her hands on a dragonkin’s mate was just as dangerous as putting her hands on a Beloved. Even though Ruri wasn’t *technically* his mate, if Celestine were to attack her, Jade would never forgive her.

Arman found himself blessed that Celestine was someone capable of properly

checking a situation before acting. Celestine would fight for dear life if Jade was involved, but she wasn't foolish enough to not consider how he would react as a result of her actions.

"I am fully aware that I cannot do anything to her. After all, Master Jade is a chaste soul, unlike you, Master Arman!"

"Hey, don't pretend to praise *Jade* while punching *me* down. I'll have you know that I love my wives just as much as Jade would love his!" Arman objected.

Celestine simply shot him a cold stare, replying, "Master Arman, while I do believe you are a magnificent king, I have no faith in you when it comes to your relationships with women. You are the type of person to watch and snicker over women vying for your affection. Even if you were in Master Jade's shoes, it's obvious that you would simply watch from the sidelines in amusement."

"Aww, but seeing girls in a tug-of-war over my affection is simply adorable."

"I'm afraid I don't see the appeal." Celestine's tribe was also a monogamous race, so she couldn't comprehend the feelings Arman shared for his nineteen wives. "In any case, I shall be evaluating whether she is worthy for Master Jade during my stay here!" Celestine said, making her decision known.

Arman silently prayed that her decision didn't cause any trouble.



After parting ways with Celestine and Arman, Ruri went to the garden, where she was currently resting atop Kotaro's fluffy body. Just then...

"Ruri!" exclaimed a voice.

Turning toward the direction it came from, Ruri saw Jade running toward her and stood up. "Oh, Jade-sama." He had probably heard from Euclase or someone else that she'd returned.

He made a beeline straight for her. "Oh, Ruri, I've missed you," he said as he caught her in a stifflingly tight hug.

Ruri chuckled. "We've only been apart for a few days, haven't we?" she asked, finding it funny that Jade was acting as if she had been gone for several

months instead.

He loosened his grip slightly and looked at her with a sulky face. “What, are you saying you didn’t miss me? I can’t stand to bear even a single day away from you,” Jade said as if gushing to a romantic partner rather than a pet.

Ruri tried to exercise some self-control so that she didn’t misconstrue his affection, but she couldn’t stop the pounding in her heart. “That isn’t it. I missed not being able to see you, too, Jade-sama,” she said hastily after sensing Jade’s mood dropping.

Upon hearing that, Jade’s face naturally took a satisfied turn as he embraced Ruri once more.

“Um, should I change into a cat?” she asked, assuming that he had a severe cuddle deficiency.

“No, you’re fine as is,” he replied.

From an outside perspective, this looked like a lover’s rendezvous. Ruri could logically assess that unless she made Jade understand that she was a human and not a cat, he wouldn’t be getting married any time soon.

(Even if he sees me as a pet, no other girl is going to approach someone who embraces another girl like this. I certainly wouldn’t.)

Since he was a dragonkin, if he were to actually be involved with someone, he probably wouldn’t give Ruri the time of day. When she considered that and the shock that would come from it, it secretly brought Ruri’s mood down.

Once she started to wriggle from the slight discomfort of his strong embrace, Jade relaxed his arms, allowing Ruri to breathe easier. She could now give herself over to his embrace in comfort.

Ruri then remembered that she needed to introduce Chi to Jade. She tried to move away from him, but Jade denied her attempts by keeping a firm grip on her.

“Jade-sama, could you let go of me for a second?”

“No. This still isn’t enough.”

“No, I mean, I want to introduce you to Chi.”

“Chi?” Jade repeated, finally loosening his hold on Ruri.

Ruri walked away in search of Chi. She soon found him using Kotaro’s pelt as a pillow, passed out with his gut hanging out. She knew he was a supreme-level spirit, but she couldn’t help but think that he was a little *too* lax for his own good.

Walking over to Chi’s sleeping body, she shook the capybara. “Hey, Chi, get up.”

“A spirit?” Jade asked, skeptical.

“Yes, he is the Spirit of Earth, the same spirit who made a contract with the First Dragon King,” said Ruri, causing Jade’s eyes to shoot open. “He said he came to see me out of curiosity for making a contract with Lydia. But then he went ahead and made a contract with me anyway...”

“...Contracting a spirit isn’t something you can normally just *do*, but you make it seem like child’s play.”

“I’d like to note that they all *pushed* me into making contracts with them,” Ruri said, thinking about all the times she was contracted. Not counting Kotaro since she unwittingly named him out of convenience, Rin just showed up and badgered Ruri for a name, while Lydia and Chi forced her into a contract without any consent whatsoever. She was practically coerced.

Then again, it was fortunate that none of these contracts really changed much, so she never felt bothered by any of them. In fact, gaining all these pets was a sight for sore eyes. Chi’s mean mug was a little concerning, but it was cute once you got used to it. The same happened with Kotaro’s old body.

“*Hngh~*” Chi grumbled, finally opening his eyes. He slowly got up, albeit still groggy.

“So, hey, Chi? This is Jade-sama. He’s the current Dragon King.”

Chi looked up at Jade with heavy eyelids. “*So you’re the current Dragon King? I’m Chi. Nice to meetcha.*”

“Yes, I’m Jade, the Dragon King. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“*Oh yeah, sure,*” Chi said, stretching with a big yawn.

The gestures themselves were cute, but it wasn't enough to draw attention away from his mean-looking eyes. It made Ruri question why Chi decided to possess a body with a face like that to begin with.

"Oh, yeah. There's another Beloved here right now, right? I can sense a lot of spirits around."

"Yep. Aside from the Nation of the Beast King's Beloved, there's also the one from a nation called 'Ceruleanda.' Isn't that, right, Jade-sama?"

"...Right. She's in sector two right now," Jade said after a slight pause, making Ruri raise an eyebrow.

"Alrighty, let's go give 'er a look-see!"

"I can't," Ruri said. "As much as I'd like to learn about her, I'm not supposed to meet the Beloved of Cerulanda."

"Oh, what? Psh, lame. Oh well. Guess we'll just go ourselves," Chi said, hopping up on Kotaro.

Kotaro was surprised, to say the least. *"Hngh? I have to come along?"*

"Why, of course! Don't you wanna know what we're dealing with? If she's interesting, I can quit my contract with Ruri and make one with her, too."

"A free spirit as always, eh, Earth?" commented Rin in an exasperated tone, but since she remained on Kotaro's head, it was assumed she was tagging along as well.

"Alright, let's get going!"

With that, Chi and the others rode off on Kotaro. The other spirits glanced at one another before following Kotaro and the others, possibly curious themselves.

"...There they all go."

"Indeed."

Now that the garden was no longer teeming with spirits, a short silence descended upon Ruri and Jade. Not sure of her next course of action, Ruri looked up at Jade, who placed his hand on her head and stroked it. As his hand

ran through her hair, Ruri's lips curled into a smile. And once he saw her smile, Jade smiled as well.

"Sigh, you are simply adorable, Ruri..."

"What brings this up all the sudden?"

"Your cat form is cute and you yourself are comforting. A world of difference from the Beloved of that nation."

"That nation'?" Ruri asked. The only two people who popped into her mind were Celestine and the Beloved of Cerulanda, who she had yet to see.

"Cerulanda. She is a tad... No, she is *very much* spoiled to the bone. And avoiding her is tough since she's apparently taken a liking to me."

"Jade-sama... You have the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King in love with you, too. Beloveds just can't help but throw themselves at you, can they?"

"Where did you hear that from?"

"Euclase-san. They also told me to be careful, and that she has me pegged for your mate. She didn't really give me any grief, though."

"You *met* her?!" Jade exclaimed in surprise, letting go of Ruri and staring her straight in the eyes.

"Yes, before coming here."

"She didn't do anything, did she?!"

"No, we just talked." It was such an uneventful encounter that Ruri felt embarrassed for being so high-strung about it in the first place.

"I see. That is good to hear, then. Not as though Celestine would be foolish enough to lay a hand on a Beloved of an allied nation. Regardless, if anything happens, let me know."

"I don't mind letting you know, but is there anything that you can actually do, Jade-sama? I mean, you'd be squaring off against a Beloved, wouldn't you? Are you capable of stopping a Beloved?"

"Urk..."

Ruri figured that not even a dragonkin would be able to stop a fight between

Beloveds if one were to ever break out. And if Ruri were to be involved in said fight, she wasn't sure what action the spirits would take. But she had a feeling it wouldn't be a situation Jade could break up, at the very least.

She hadn't asked her question with the intent to insult him, but her words made it seem like Jade was useless, which cut him pretty deep.

"I mean, Celestine will listen to reason, so I should be able to talk her out of anything drastic," Jade elaborated. "Well, I would think if a girl was chewing out another girl for coming onto the man she's after, and the man in question started scolding her, it would only add fuel to the fire."

Ruri had never experienced that before, but it was a common trope in TV dramas—which was fine for dramas, but she didn't want to have the misfortune of experiencing it firsthand.

"Um, well, don't worry. If something does happen, I can take care of it myself. Kotaro and the others will likely stop things if it comes to that, too."

Ruri's words poured salt on Jade's wound, robbing him of anything else to say. "...Which means I'm useless, then."

It seemed that Ruri's attempt at reassuring Jade ended up needlessly hurting his feelings instead.

Chapter 13: Peddling

After breakfast, a soldier notified Ruri that Euclase wished to see her. Since Jade partook in breakfast with her, he accompanied her in following the soldier to the room Euclase had designated.

“In here, please,” said the soldier. He bowed his head and took his post beside the door.

Ruri opened the door as instructed, but she couldn’t believe the sight that leapt out at her. The entire room was lined corner to corner with a vast selection of dresses and accessories. She was straining her eyes just looking at it all. One could only assume that it took a substantial amount of time to lay out this much apparel.

Euclase noticed them entering and urged Ruri, who was standing dumbfounded at the entrance, inside. “Ruri, don’t just stand there; come in here.”

Coming back to her senses, Ruri walked into the room as she looked at everything around her. “What is all of this, Euclase-san? Are you trying to start up a business here or something?”

“Well, you’re not necessarily wrong.”

Ruri noticed the multitude of people other than Euclase in the room, and judging from their clothes, they weren’t employees of the castle.

As Ruri wondered about the identity of these people, Euclase provided an answer. “These people are peddlers—traveling salesmen.”

“Traveling salesmen?”

“Yes. Ruri, pick out whatever you want from here. Don’t worry about the cost; I’ll be fronting the bill.”

“Huh? No, that’s not necessary. I have my own clothes, and these all seem rather pricey.” There was no way that Ruri could start picking things out willy-

nilly after being told to do so out of the blue. Not only that, but every piece of merchandise here seemed expensive, which made her restrain herself even more.

Fretting over Euclase's sudden order, she looked up at Jade for help, but Jade provided no assistance and simply said, "All you have to do is pick."

"You too, Jade-sama...? You don't have to; I'll buy anything I need on my own."

"I will not allow that to happen. If you won't pick out anything, I will pick them out for you." Euclase said.

Euclase was more likely to pick out items that would suit Ruri more than Ruri herself, but she wasn't hard-pressed for clothes or the like anyway.

"But, I have so many clothes and accessories in my pocket space."

Euclase should have known that, considering they went into Ruri's space once before. With a combination of the items inherited from the First Dragon King and items Lydia picked up from pocket spaces slated for erasure, Ruri had more clothes and accessories than she knew what to do with. Granted, whether any of them suited Ruri's tastes was another matter altogether.

"That's not the same. None of those things you were bequeathed are made for you nor are they new, correct?"

"Well, yes. But why do you want me to shop so badly?"

Euclase breathed a heavy sigh before saying, "You know we are currently housing the Beloved from Cerulanda, yes?"

"Yes."

"The Beloved has been calling in salesmen and buying dresses and accessories one after another ever since she arrived in the kingdom. And all on the Nation of the Dragon King's dime! Knowing full well we can't scold a Beloved, *arghhh!!*"

"That is quite problematic..."

"'Problematic' doesn't even begin to describe it. Even her followers are taking advantage of the situation and shopping! And as much as I'd love to send the

bill to Cerulanda, we can't if we want to save face as a major nation. We don't want others thinking that we're a nation filled with *cheapskates*, after all!" Euclase raged.

Ruri flinched. It seemed being chancellor was a tough job in more ways than one.

Euclase heaved another sigh and calmed themselves down. "Well, even discounting the whole matter of being perceived as a nation of cheapskates, we certainly can't have another nation's Beloved going on a shopping spree with our money while our own Beloved doesn't purchase anything."

"I don't really mind, though."

"It's the *nation* that minds, my dear. Spending for you is already calculated into the nation's budget in the first place. But, dear Ruri, because you don't desire anything, we always have massive surplus. This is a prime chance, so burn through the budget."

This was the first time Ruri had a budget built around her. Although, it shouldn't have been too much of a surprise considering that she was a Beloved, an important person in this world.

"What, *really*...? But..." Ruri said hesitantly.

"For crying out loud, let's go already!" Euclase said, taking the initiative and pulling Ruri behind them. They took item after item and laid them over Ruri's body. "Hmm, this is too much. How about this one? Oh, this is good."

"*Oh my, so is this one. Ruri, try this on, too.*"

Euclase's feminine sense was second to none. They were picking out apparel one after another that suited Ruri even without her input. And, for whatever reason, Rin had joined in, as well.

Ruri loved to dress up and she loved shopping, even if it was just browsing around, but with Euclase being so assertive right now, there was no way she could enjoy herself.

Euclase shoved Ruri behind a folding screen for changing and handed her dresses and high-end clothing—pieces that were a far cry from simple everyday

wear—and accessories to go with them. Mostly all of them were impulse buys. Ruri tried each piece on as she was instructed, but the more Euclase's picks began to stack up, the paler she became.

Meanwhile, each peddler wore an ear-to-ear smile. Not only were they selling one piece of expensive merchandise after another, each one became "Beloved-approved," adding to their prestige and profits.

"Euclase-san, aren't you buying a little *too* much...? I don't get many chances to wear dresses, and if it's everyday wear, then the cheaper options would suffice," Ruri said.

Both Euclase and Rin gave her death glares.

"Ruri, you're a Beloved, so you need to be more self-aware. A Beloved can't go running around in shabby clothes. The last thing this nation needs is to be mocked for not being able to provide you with suitable attire! There is *always* going to be demand for a dress, so it's *fine*. This isn't frivolous shopping; it's *necessary spending!*"

"*That's absolutely right!*" Rin said, agreeing with Euclase.

"Okay..." Ruri said, conceding to the pressure. But since she was never the type to spend frivolously, she couldn't help worrying over the price.

Suddenly remembering that she came with Jade, she looked around the room to see where he had gone, only to find him in the corner of the room gracefully sipping on a cup of tea. By his feet were Kotaro, yawning disinterestedly, and Chi, conked out.

Just as Ruri thought about how often Chi slept, the door to the room slowly opened and Agate stepped into the room.

"Huh? Agate-san, what is the matter?"

"I heard that you were trying on clothes, you see. I thought I could use your choices as future reference, but... it seems you're just about finished," Agate said disappointedly after looking at Ruri's exhausted face and the mountain of apparel.

"What do you mean 'reference'?"

“Oh, you know... I just wanted to check what kind of color and pattern of dress suited you.”

“Can’t you just do that the next time we call the traveling salesmen?” asked Euclase.

Ruri couldn’t believe her ears when she heard that this would be happening again. They had finally finished up, and the thought of being made a dress-up doll again was tiring.

However, Ruri really wanted to know why Agate needed this “reference” in the first place. “Why do you need to ‘check’?” she asked.

“Oh, for in the future, like I said. By the way, would you mind me asking how weddings work in your neck of the woods? Dresses for the ceremony, customs and ordinances—that sort of thing?”

Ruri raised an eyebrow, confused as to why he was suddenly asking about weddings, but she answered nonetheless. “A wedding dress is usually white, isn’t it?” A wedding dress was normally white in Ruri’s world, but that didn’t seem to be the case here.

Euclase explained, “No, there’s no real set color. It can be a flashy color, a subdued color, or any color you want for that matter. So, it’s white where you’re from?”

“Yes. In my world, wedding dresses are white, so I’ve always wanted a white dress.”

Agate nodded to himself and asked his next question. “Any particular gemstones you care for?”

“Hmm, none in particular. Or rather, I’m not too familiar with gemstones in this world, so I can’t say.”

“Ah, okay. Fair point.”

Ruri tilted her head, not understanding what Agate was getting at with all these questions. She unfortunately didn’t have any wedding plans on the horizon. Although, all this wedding talk made Ruri wonder what a wedding in this world would be like.

“Speaking of gemstones, is it customary to exchange rings in this world?” Ruri asked.

“Exchange rings?” repeated Agate.

“We exchange rings during weddings in my world. A ring on your third finger—the ring finger—serves as proof that you’re married. There’s also what we call an ‘engagement ring’ that we give when we propose, so I was curious if that existed in this world, too,” replied Ruri.

“It depends on the race, but a dragonkin passing over a dragonheart is the ultimate form of proposal. We don’t really give anything else, though,” Euclase elaborated.

“Oh, you don’t say...” Ruri said, looking slightly disappointed. She wanted someone to present her a ring and ask her to take their hand in marriage. Even though she already knew that the marriage process in another world would be different, it was still a letdown. “So, I take it you *don’t* exchange rings here, then...”

“That’s correct,” Euclase answered. “There are other races where gifting one another jewelry is a part of their culture, but not for dragonkin. The exchange of dragonhearts would correspond to that.”

Ruri was born in a different world and even a different race, so it was inevitable that there would be discrepancies, but it was still disappointing.

“If you wish to exchange rings that much, then why not just do it? It wouldn’t be that difficult to do,” suggested Euclase.

“It isn’t?” Ruri asked.

“A small gesture like that wouldn’t. Also, exchanging rings at weddings might just catch on in the future if a Beloved were to do it. It might even become commonplace in due time.”

While it wasn’t certain that it’d become common practice, seeing as how a fake good-luck charm made of beads the same color as Ruri’s eyes could sell, it was a safe bet that if Ruri exchanged rings, people might imitate the gesture. There was just one problem before all that, however.

“Okay, but, I need a *partner* before I start talking about *marriage*. Finding one comes first.”

“Ah, yes. Indeed it does...” said Euclase, clicking their tongue, blatantly dismissive.

“Could you at least *try* to sound interested?”

“Interested in what? You’ll find a partner soon enough,” Euclase declared somewhat confidently.

“Well, I hope so. I don’t really want much out of a partner. If I could get a fluffy husband who only keeps one wife and makes a livable income, then that’d be perfect!” Ruri emphasized, clenching her fist.

“Two of your points are fine, but a ‘fluffy’ husband won’t do. Give up on that.”

“Aww... Wait, but why? I’m here in a world with beast-people, so why waste the opportunity?”

“Opportunity or not, no means no,” Euclase said. Agate vehemently nodded his head in agreement.

The two of them looked at Jade, but Jade didn’t realize what they meant by that.

Chapter 14: Beloved Rank

By the time Ruri had finished her mandated shopping spree, Jade and the others needed to attend to the day's business, so Ruri took a walk around the castle.

Perhaps it was in part due to the Beast King and the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King currently staying in sector one, but she often found herself passing by people dressed in outfits not associated with the Nation of the Dragon King. However, unlike the workers of the Nation of the Dragon King who would casually greet her, the workers from the Beast King's domain would courteously bow to her. That was a likely indicator of how much authority a Beloved should normally hold. The Nation of the Beast King's heavy religious faith in spirits could've also played a part, as well.

However, since the Nation of the Dragon King's people first met Ruri in her adorable cat form, they would look at her in the same tepid way you would look at a pet animal. When she walked around as a human, she could feel their disappointment. She could feel them saying, "Aww, what? She's not a cat today?" Apparently, Jade wasn't the only one who sought comfort from Ruri. They were dragonkin as well, so smaller animals like cats probably ran away from them just the same. It put her in a difficult position—she wasn't sure if she should be happy that the dragonkin had an affinity for her or sad that they were taking her for granted.

"That reminds me, you guys went to see the Beloved of Cerulanda, right? How did that go?" Ruri asked Kotaro and the others who were walking beside her. Kotaro was, of course, the only one *walking*; Rin and Chi were riding on his back. Seeing that sometimes made Ruri ponder if they only saw Kotaro as a convenient way around.

"I mean, what's to say? She was a regular old Beloved. I was set on making a contract with her if she seemed interesting, but she was as plain as plain could be. Boooring."

Euclase already wasn't too keen on the Beloved, and now Chi's assessment of her was that she "wasn't interesting."

Kotaro simply said, *"I have no interest in any Beloved other than you, Ruri."*

"I'm not fond of people such as that either. And it's not because she isn't 'interesting' like Chi said. I'm speaking personality-wise. We don't mesh at all," said Rin.

"But don't spirits determine their likes and dislikes by mana wavelength?"

"That isn't a definite rule. The lower in spirit rank you go, the more spirits you find who act as immature as they look and act on instinct, so they have preferences based on mana wavelengths. But the higher up the chain you go, you find more rational spirits who take things other than mana wavelength into consideration. Just like how Chi picks who he finds interesting, you see. Kotaro and I operate similarly to one another. We didn't pick you based on mana alone," Rin explained.

"Oh, I see."

"Well, I'll admit that your power as a Beloved is a tad higher than normal."

"There are Beloveds with weak powers?"

"Of course there are. The strength of a Beloved is based on how many spirits they can attract. And how many spirits they can attract depends on their mana wavelength. Therefore, the quality of their mana determines their rank as a Beloved. The more superior the quality, the more spirits favor them. If two Beloveds confronted one another, that rank would decide the outcome."

"Hmm, then who has the highest rank among the Beloveds around now?"

"My, that should be obvious, shouldn't it? Why, it's..." Rin started, but just as she was about to finish, an intense verbal dispute erupted and stopped everyone in their tracks.

"What could that be?" Ruri questioned, deciding to head toward the source of the noise.

An angry-looking girl was shouting at Ewan and the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King, Celestine, who were standing before her. This girl was also

surrounded by several spirits. Behind those three were the Beast King Arman and a soldier from the Nation of the Dragon King—both looking flustered.

Ruri approached the commotion and asked the petrified soldier, “Hey, did something happen here?”

“L-Lady Beloved!” exclaimed the soldier. He looked at Ruri and started to panic.

“Who is that girl? I don’t recognize her,” Ruri asked, referring to the girl arguing with Ewan. It seemed as though the girl was having a shouting contest with herself, but Ruri didn’t know who she was.

However, it wasn’t the soldier but Rin who answered. *“Oh my, that is the Beloved from that ‘Ceruleanda’ nation we were talking about a second go. ‘Azelda’ was her name, I believe.”*

“Oh wow. So, that’s her?” This was the first time Ruri ever saw the Beloved of Cerulanda. Just like Chi said, she was a normal girl—the kind you could find anywhere. She seemed to be younger than Ruri, somewhere in her teens. “...Huh? I thought I wasn’t allowed to meet the Beloved of Cerulanda. If I recall, she’s supposed to be in sector two of the castle, so what is she doing up here on sector one?”

The soldier then made a troubling grimace. “Um, you see... Lady Beloved of Cerulanda made her way here unannounced, demanding to see His Majesty. We tried to get her to vacate sector one before she could meet the other Beloveds, but she raised an unnecessary uproar. The spirits reacted to her anger and things took an ominous turn for the worse. I was hard-pressed for what to do, but that was when Ewan arrived. And even though I explicitly gave warning, things devolved into a verbal altercation. Since Ewan can’t see spirits, he lashed out at the Beloved of Cerulanda, which only resulted in making her even angrier...”

“Typical Ewan...” Ruri sighed. When it came to foolhardy recklessness, Ewan was your man.

“Also, the Beast King and Lady Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King happened to pass through, and upon seeing the Beloved of Cerulanda’s selfish outburst, she joined the fray as well, which leads us to where we’re at now...”

the soldier fully explained.

It was safe to assume that the soldier couldn't interfere since they were Beloveds. Even as they spoke, he was at a total loss as to how to accurately control the situation. In the meantime, Azelda, Ewan, and Celestine's argument raged on.

"And as I've said, you have no permission to enter the first floor, so return to sector two at once," said Ewan.

"And as I've said, I want to see the Dragon King!"

"Once you return to your sector, then I will inform his Majesty you seek his audience."

"I want to see him *this instant*! Now, enough talk; let me through. Anger me any more and the spirits won't take this lying down!"

Azelda tried to threaten him, but since Ewan couldn't see the spirits anyway, it was to no avail. Her threats only made Ewan's icy glare even more frigid, and they instead angered Celestine.

"My, you are one *dreadful* child, aren't you? When someone doesn't listen to your selfish ways, you throw a temper tantrum. I'll have you know that the spirits are *not* your convenient little tools for retribution!"

"Celestine, stop!" Arman hesitantly said in an attempt to contain her. However, whether she was listening was doubtful as her eyes remained fixed on Azelda.

Azelda glared back at Celestine, perturbed. "What, do you want to get it too?!"

Celestine mockingly sneered. "Look at that, clinging to the spirits when you're in trouble. You truly are a child. Do you seriously think you can get me to bend to your will by using the spirits to threaten me?"

"I'm a Beloved, so it's only natural that I get to employ the spirits' powers! You people know I'm a Beloved and won't do what I want, so you're in the wrong here!"

"Oh, you poor deluded thing. You're sorely mistaken if you think being

pampered is a *natural right*. The reason people enable your selfish whims is because the spirits keep your company. Your influence alone means *nothing*. You should hold more gratitude and respect for the spirits,” Celestine said, seeming to intentionally phrase her words to anger Azelda.

Whether it was part of her plan or not, Azelda’s face turned beet red in obvious rage all the same. “Shut up, shut up, *shut up!* Don’t you *dare* lecture me! Everyone, this person is bullying me. Do something about it!”

Once Azelda said that, the spirits by her side moved. However, Celestine was also a Beloved. The spirits on Celestine’s side formed a wall in front of her. And everyone watching this unfold started to panic.

“Hey, so, what happens when two Beloveds fight? Both of them have spirits, but the spirits don’t start fighting among themselves, right?” Ruri asked, having never seen two Beloveds fight before. However, considering that the spirits would try to defend both of them, she didn’t know what kind of situation that left them in.

“*Don’t worry; spirits would never fight one another,*” Rin assured.

Ruri was relieved to hear that, but she was still slightly worried as to what would happen next. The spirits on Celestine and Azelda’s sides each faced each other in order to make it clear which side they were taking.

“*Everyone, gather ’round!*” yelled one spirit in a loud voice, flooding the area with a wave of spirits from out of seemingly nowhere.

“*Vote for which side you’re on!*” another spirit said.

“*Aaaand, start!*” said another.

With that cry, the spirits looked at both Celestine and Azelda, took some time to think, and started to individually line up next to the person they picked.

Ruri looked at Rin for an explanation, asking, “What does this mean?”

“*Spirits won’t fight among each other, but if they are pit against each other, each spirit will grant the wishes of the Beloved they like. Since they would come to blows otherwise, they do this vote in order to decide which Beloved’s wishes they grant. Spirits won’t oppose those of a higher level than them, so the*

Beloved with the greatest number of high-level spirits on their side wins. However, since there are only low-level spirits assembled here, the one with the most spirits wins instead."

"Oh wow..."

All anyone in attendance could do was watch matters unfold; none of them could stop what the spirits were attempting to do. They watched on as they started to split off and side with both Celestine and Azelda.

The victor was—Azelda. It was by a slight margin, but Azelda had more spirits on her side than Celestine.

The results left Arman and the soldiers of the Nation of the Dragon King and Beast King, who stood unable to intervene, pale in the face. Celestine seemed to be standing her ground, but her face had tensed up.

Seeing that Azelda had won, the spirits in the area all showed hostility toward Celestine. The spirits that had been around her before looked at her with concern, but they showed no signs of trying to stop the others. Arman promptly stepped in front of Celestine, acting as her shield.

"Hold on, isn't this *really* bad news...?" Ruri asked.

"The lower in level a spirit is, the more pure they are—for better or worse. If the Beloved of Cerulanda tells them to attack the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King, they'll do just that," Rin explained.

If nothing was done, Celestine was bound to be assaulted by the spirits. Ruri took action before the thought of siccing the spirits on her took root.

"Woah, just hold on!!" Ruri screamed, jumping in front of Celestine and Arman. "Guys, hold on a second! Cancel that order! Let's be peaceful! Don't attack!"

"Hey, I'll make *you* meet the same fate if you intend on getting in my way as well!" Azelda barked, but Ruri kept her eyes on the spirits and begged them profusely.

All of the soldiers of the Nation of the Dragon King were biting their nails. The spirit army looked ready to strike at any time. If something happened to Ruri

right now, then it would be a disaster. A few of the soldiers ran to summon Jade.

“Please, don’t attack!”

Tensions were high. If Azelda’s rank was higher, then they would target Ruri as well. Ruri and everyone around her all held their breath and maintained their watch on the spirits’ reaction.

The spirits all looked at one another, and then...

“Sure!”

“We’ll stop if you say so, Ruri!”

“Kay, that’s a wrap, guys!”

Just like that, the spirits immediately started to disperse. Ewan simply stood looking clueless, unable to comprehend what had just transpired since he couldn’t see a single spirit. Even those who could see them stared with mouths agape at how fast they were dissuaded.

Ruri breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing that the spirits listened to her request.

Meanwhile, Azelda became even more upset, asking, “Wha? Why won’t you do what I ask?”

However, the spirits responded in an indifferent tone to her question, no longer willing to follow her commands.

“Well, ’cause Ruri said to stop. That’s why.”

“Yeah, what else are we supposed to do?”

“Who are you anyway? You can’t just show up and get in my way like that!” Azelda exclaimed, glaring straight at Ruri.



Ruri flinched for a second before remembering that this childish tantrum was nothing to fear. “Ewan, take her back to sector two,” she said.

“Is that okay?”

Fortunately, it seemed the spirits were listening to Ruri more than Azelda.

“I think it’ll be fine. Guys, Ewan is going to be a little forceful in taking her back, but don’t attack him, okay?” Ruri explained to the spirits beforehand.

They all gave her a spirited reply.

“Okie dokie!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Discerning that Ewan would be safe, Ruri nodded at him.

“Well then, Lady Beloved? This way, if you please.”

“Wait, don’t you touch me!”

Azelda tried to fight back, but she proved no match for Ewan’s dragonkin strength. He carted her away, and she couldn’t offer much in the way of resistance.

Sensing that the mood had finally de-escalated, Ruri unloaded a sigh before looking over to Celestine and Arman. “Are you both all right?”

“Yeah, you saved us. You have my thanks,” said Arman with a slight bow of his head. He then gave a wry smile. “I never would have guessed she’d be a higher rank than Celestine. Then again, it seems you’re a higher rank than the both of them. Thanks to you, we’re all safe. I’ll tell you, I didn’t know *how* that was going to turn out.” Turning back toward Celestine, he lightly poked her head while saying, “And you, learn to keep your little attitude under control.”

“My apologies, Lord Arman,” Celestine said with a dejected face. She quickly straightened it out and looked over at Ruri. “Miss Ruri, you have my sincerest gratitude.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. I’m just glad nothing happened,” replied Ruri.

“I simply cannot believe that I would lose to someone like her, who uses spirits only to suit her needs...” Celestine lamented, her expression rife with

humiliation.

“I hope you’ve learned not to get near that girl again. We’d be in serious trouble if the same thing were to happen,” lectured Arman.

“Yes, I understand,” Celestine said with an obedient nod as she and Arman walked back to their rooms.

With the case successfully closed, Ruri sighed. “A fight between Beloveds really is scary, though.”

The terror of the spirits suddenly turning against you was indescribable. There wouldn’t be any point in attacking back, either, as you would only get trounced.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Ruri,” Rin assured.

“Why is that?”

“I said it earlier, didn’t I? How capable you are at attracting the spirits is important. Just like how they prioritized the Beloved of Cerulanda more than the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King, the spirits found your mana more attractive, so they obeyed you.”

“That makes sense.” Basically, if her mana was inferior to Azelda’s, then Ruri would have been subjected to the spirits’ attack. It was a scary thought in retrospect.

“Besides, if it came down to a vote, then the one who had the most high-level spirits would win. And with supreme-level spirits such as Rin and myself under your subjugation, there would be no way you’d lose,” Kotaro said, somewhat boastfully.

“Wait, that means I’m unbeatable?”

“That it does. Even if you did butt heads with another Beloved, you wouldn’t have to worry about a thing,” Rin stated.

Kotaro agreed. *“Indeed. We would protect you, rest assured.”*

“Thank you, both.”

“Hey, I’d give ya a hand if it looked like fun,” Chi added.

“Uh, thanks. I guess...” Chi basically meant that he *wouldn’t* help if it *wasn’t*

interesting. It was hard to feel flattered when she didn't know when he would turn his back on her.

Afterward, Ruri also left the area, but she ran into Jade and Euclase, who'd both caught wind of the commotion, and explained the situation to them.

"That selfish brat!" Euclase said, quivering in anger.

Jade just heaved a sigh.

Ruri simply threw up a silent prayer that Cerulanda's problems were solved before the stress ruptured holes in Euclase and Jade's stomachs.

Chapter 15: Portrait

"The Reapers?" Ruri lifted her tiny cat head as she laid curled up on Jade's lap and inquisitively repeated the words in Joshua's report. *"What's that supposed to be?"*

"The Reapers are a guild of assassins," answered Joshua. "Sex, age, origins—all unknown. They take on any request so long as you pay them. And they never fail a job they take on. They say it's a sure death if they ever target you, which is how they gained the moniker 'Reapers.' Rumors have come out that these 'Reapers' are currently in the Nation of the Dragon King."

A question popped into Ruri's head. *"How do you know they're these 'Reapers' if you don't know their sex or age?"* Ruri asked, noticing the contradiction in his statement.

Joshua gulped, stumbling over his words. "Err, well, when you put it that way, I guess not, but..."

As Ruri looked at Joshua with a doubtful gaze, Jade's hand fell upon her head and gave her a few good pats. "Well, they're only rumors, after all. Still, it never hurts to be careful. They still haven't found the assailant in Cerulanda, so we can't say for sure that the Reapers *aren't* involved at this point. Ruri, do me a favor and refrain from going into town."

"Aww, but I planned to go into town today."

"Yes, but..."

"Kotaro and Rin had their hearts set on it so much that it'd be a headache to tell them we're not going now."

Whether he pictured the two spirits objecting in his head or not, Jade thought it over for a bit before compromising. "Fine, just for today. Joshua, keep your ears peeled to the streets and collect what you can. I'm *hoping* that I'm just being paranoid, but you never know..."

"Very well," Joshua said before exiting the office.

As if swapping places with him, a soldier entered and stated, “Your Majesty, preparations are in order.”

“Right, then,” Jade said. He lifted Ruri up, stood, and then headed out of the office.

“Jade-sama, where are we going? He said something about preparations being in order? I have plans to go to the city, though.”

“I’ve prepared a painter. He’s going to paint a portrait of the both of us. You can go to the city afterward.”

“Huh?! I understand the need for you, but why me?” Ruri said, eyes wide.

“Because you are the first Beloved this nation has had in a very long time. There is a lot of demand from people who want a glimpse of you, but people in other towns don’t have the same chance to see you as those living in the royal capital. It’s not even guaranteed that residents of the capital can get a glimpse themselves. That’s why I plan to have a portrait drawn and sold. And I’ll be in it with you since I have the chance.”

“You’re charging for it...?”

“It takes manpower to mass produce anything. Paint and paper cost money, after all. Naturally, I plan to make them affordable enough for anyone to buy.”

Ruri was doubtful that anyone would actually spend their hard-earned money on a portrait of herself, but she remembered the times she went shopping in the city prior and people flooded the stores, trying to get their hands on whatever Ruri bought. It was still hard to wrap her head around the fact that everyone idolized her, but Ruri accepted the fact that Beloveds were just that revered to the people of this world.

“Are they going to be drawing me in cat or human form for this portrait?”

“Human form, of course.”

After Jade removed her bracelet for her, they both headed toward the room set up for the painting.

“Ooh, I never would have dreamed of being entrusted with the great task of painting a portrait of our Lady Beloved! Rest assured, I will capture every single

detail of your charm and beauty on the canvas!” said the hyped-up painter.

After exchanging greetings, she sat in the seat prepared for her while Jade stood next to her. There Ruri sat still for ten minutes... twenty minutes... Her face was steadily starting to cramp up.

“Jade-sama, do I *have* to keep this pose?”

“Yes, until he’s done painting.”

The painter was moving his hand like his life depended on it, but it was probably going to take a while before he was done. But exactly *how long* was a while going to be...? Ruri honestly found it unbearable. Plus it was going to make her late for her plans in town. At her wit’s end, she stood up from her seat.

“Lady Beloved, please don’t move, now~” instructed the painter, but Ruri disobeyed, stuck her hand into her pocket space, and pulled out her smartphone. She then handed it over to a spirit that knew how to use it.

Since the phone was charged by the power of her lightning spirit companion, it was coursing with magical energy, making it fair game for spirits to touch. Luckily enough, the spirits that came with her from her world knew how to use devices, so Ruri instructed the spirit, “Use this to take a photo, okay?”

“*Okie dokie!*” replied the spirit without a second thought, pointing the phone toward her.

Ruri once again took her seat, faced straight ahead, and told a very confused Jade, “Jade-sama, front and center.”

“*Alright, here we go! Say cheese!*” the spirit said, taking the photo.

Once she heard the shutter sound from her phone, Ruri once again stood up and checked the photo. “Okay, perfect. Thanks for that,” Ruri thanked the spirit.

As Ruri checked the photo, Jade peeked at the screen from the side. “Oho, incredible. Is this magic from your world, Ruri?”

“Something similar, yes.” Even if Ruri tried to explain the concept of “science,” she herself couldn’t accurately do so, and Jade probably wouldn’t entirely comprehend it anyway. She decided to leave it at “similar” and nothing

else.

Keeping the screen on the photo, she showed the phone to the painter.

“Ooh, this painting looks as if I’m staring at the real thing. Magnificent. How did you go about this, might I ask?”

“Specifics can wait. Can you paint while looking at this?”

“Yes, I certainly can. In fact, a pair of constantly still models makes it *easier* to paint.”

“Then, if you’d please?” Ruri said, passing the phone over to the painter and turning back to Jade. “Okay, now I don’t have to keep myself still, yes?”

Jade smiled wryly, answering, “Apparently not. Seems we have time now, so I’ll go back to work until the painting is done. I assume you’re going into town?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Take care of yourself down there.”

“I will. I’ll be fine with Kotaro and the spirits around,” Ruri assured him.

With that out of the way, it wasn’t long before Ruri was in town and walking the streets with Kotaro, Rin, and Chi in tow. In similar fashion to before, the shopkeepers in the area were busy trying to attract her into their establishments.

As she went around, focusing on places she’d never visited before, she stumbled upon Amarna’s stall again.

“Hello and welcome, Lady Beloved!”

“Good afternoon.”

Her shop’s selection had switched from good luck charms to scented pouches, like the one she gave Ruri last time. However, despite the change in stock, it seemed that her “Beloved-approved” sales tactics remained the exact same.

“Tee hee hee, I have you to thank for my excellent sales, Lady Beloved.”

“Hahah... You don’t say...”

Amarna was as shrewd a salesperson as ever. Judging by her expression, she had been selling a lot of her stock. It was a plain old scent pouch, but a Beloved's influence proved to be incredible once again.

As Ruri was taken aback from the fact that these scent pouches were being sold at such a high price and actually selling, a boy with a pair of fluffy ears and a tail came to buy one.

"Hey, aren't you the skewer stand owner's..."

"Oh! It's you, Ms. Beloved. You remembered who I am?"

"Don't tell me you're here to buy these, are you?"

"Yup! You use them yourself, don'tcha?"

"I, well, um..." Ruri indistinctly hemmed and hawed, seeing as how she'd received one as a gift but hadn't actually used it. She eventually admitted, "I have one, but I haven't used it yet, y'see."

Amarna replied in a sad tone, "Aww, what? Please don't let it go to waste. Use it!"

"Really? Then, let's use them tonight. They're supposed to let out a good smell when you're going to sleep," the boy explained.

Ruri nodded. "Right. I suppose I will use mine tonight, then. You put it under your pillow, if I remember right?"

"Yup, that's how it works!"

The two of them smiled at one another. The boy's innocent smile was absolutely adorable and comforting, making her wish that she had a little brother in the same vein.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"My name is Noah."

"I see, Noah-kun."

After some light banter, Noah saw the spirits floating next to Ruri and asked, "Hey, Ms. Beloved? Do the spirits always stay by your side?"

"Well, for the most part they do."

“Aww, but what do ya do when you wanna be alone? The spirits are cute, but aren’t there times you’d find it annoying with them always being there?” Noah asked, proving that children can be just as cruel as they say.

His words cut the spirits next to her deep, making them ask with teary eyes, *“Huh? We’re annoying?”*

Even Kotaro seemed to be shocked, asking, *“Do you find me... annoying, Ruri?”*

Ruri scrambled to deny the idea, covering for the spirits. “I’ve never thought any of them were annoying. Everyone keeps me well in mind and will let me be on my own when I want to be alone. They know when to stay away, when I’m in the office with Jade-sama or at night when I’m sleeping, so it’s not as if they’re with me the entire day.”

“That makes sense. You wouldn’t be able to sleep if all of them were around you at night. Do spirits sleep and stuff?”

“There are some that sleep, but I don’t think they need it.”

In the middle of their conversation, a man approached Ruri. “Well, if it isn’t you, Lady Beloved of the Nation of the Dragon King. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Hello there,” Ruri greeted back, almost wincing from the call as she wondered why this person was even here. While she managed to keep herself under control, the question “Why?” still remained in her head. “What are you doing here?”

“Running an errand for my mistress,” he replied.

“Oh, I see...”

His mistress was Azelda. He was the son of a Cerulandian marquis—the same who had accompanied Azelda to this kingdom.

After the fight that broke out between Ruri and Azelda the other day, he came to Ruri to apologize on Azelda’s behalf. They’d met each other a few times after that, but Ruri was simply not keen on the marquis’s son at all.

“How are you enjoying life here in the Nation of the Dragon King? Hopefully, everything is to your convenience?” he asked.

“Yes, everyone treats me very well...”

“That is wonderful to hear. However, I am to assume that dragonkin would find it quite difficult to understand a human Beloved such as yourself, milady. Should anything ever arise, you can always confide in me, as we are fellow humans, whenever you so desire.”

“Yes, thank you for the reassuring offer...”

“Alas, I must depart. Till we meet again,” the marquis’s son said with a bow, taking his leave.

Ruri held back as she watched him walk completely away, at which point she let out a sigh of relief. Every time they would meet, he would always talk about how “he could understand her better than dragonkin, as a fellow human himself,” or something to that effect. Ruri wasn’t sure if he was concerned out of genuine good will or if he was trying to implicate something. Since his remarks certainly seemed to suggest that he didn’t think fondly of dragonkin, Ruri was constantly lost as to how she should reply, leading to her distaste for the gentleman.

“Ms. Beloved? You okay?”

“Oh. Yeah, it’s nothing.”

“I need to get going, okay?” Noah announced.

“Yup, see you later, Noah-kun.”

“See ya later, Ms. Beloved!”

Ruri watched as Noah waved goodbye and walked off, and then she went around town for a little while longer until she figured the painting was done.

Once Ruri returned to the castle, she laid eyes on the portrait. It was everything you would expect from a painter invited to paint a Beloved. Ruri couldn’t deny that she felt he made her look somewhat more beautiful than she really was, but the piece was beautifully done. Jade also seemed to be satisfied with the results.

Afterward, that painting would go on to be mass-produced and sold in town.

However, it would end up selling out in a matter of no time, leading to the hire of even more painters for the production line.

Chapter 16: Kotaro Enraged

At a pub in the castle town of the Nation of the Dragon King, the festivities were going well into the wee hours of the night. There, a man and a woman both entered together. The pub was filled with people swigging booze and getting drunk. Everyone was so engrossed in drinking and conversation that even if anyone were to catch the two out of the corner of their eye, they would soon be forgotten.

The man and woman sat at a table in the back of the pub that was already occupied by two hooded individuals. Both wore baggy robes with hoods covering their faces, making it hard to tell if they were men or women.

Without exchanging a single word, the hooded duo handed over a bag to the inconspicuous pair. Quickly checking the contents, the man raised an eyebrow. No one in the noisy crowd around them was paying the group any mind.

“I assume the other preparations are set?” the man asked.

One of the hooded individuals silently nodded while the other placed a large cloth sack on the table. It hit the surface with a loud *clank*, signifying that it was holding something heavy.

The woman reached her hand inside and pulled out a jingling length of chain from within.

“You said the target is a Beloved, right? This is a risky job, so we’re charging you a hefty retainer,” declared the man.

“And you’re sure you’ll succeed?” asked one of the hooded individuals, finally speaking up.

The woman smiled in a smug manner. “Who are you asking here, pal? Reapers never fail. Beloved or not, once we have a target, we’ll kill them for sure.”

“Payment will be upon completion.”

“Hey, fine by us,” said the man with an air of confidence. Neither the man nor the woman doubted their success.

With negotiations done, the hooded duo left money for their drinks and left the establishment.



“Nyaaah.” Ruri yawned, stretching her cat body after pleasantly awakening on a delightful morning.

(Maybe the scent pouch did its job?) Ruri remembered to put the pouch underneath her pillow last night, and it felt as though she slept better than usual.

Jade, resting beside her, started to awaken as well. Since he was off from work today, he was waking up much more leisurely than he would normally.

“*Good morning to you, Jade-sama,*” Ruri said while peeking at Jade’s face, prompting him to gently pet her tiny head.

Once she reverted back to human form, she went to go eat breakfast with Jade, who was dressed more casually since it was his day off.

When Ruri would eat by herself, she would have her meals brought to her room, but when accompanying Jade, she would head down to the Dragon King’s special dining hall. The long, rectangular dining table was far too big for a mere two people to use. Regardless, Ruri didn’t sit on the opposite side of the table but instead beside Jade for some reason—so close, in fact, that it was a waste of perfectly good space. However, since the wait staff placed the meals closely together on the wide table as if it were natural, Ruri accepted all this as a difference in human and dragonkin social behavior. Even if Ruri had wanted to enjoy her meal at more of a distance, Jade wouldn’t allow it because...

“Here, Ruri,” Jade said, holding out his fork to her as if it were business as usual.

“No, I can eat by myself,” Ruri said, declining. However, Jade wasn’t willing to take no for an answer; he pushed the food next to her lips. Ruri had no choice but to open her mouth and chew. She wished he would just let her eat on her own like a regular adult instead of some child, but Jade seemed intent on

feeding her.

After repeating the process a few times, Jade seemed to be content, so she conceded and tried to eat in this manner, but it still left her feeling awkward all the while. It was going to take a while before she was used to all this.

Once breakfast was over, Ruri once again turned into a cat and climbed on Jade's lap. He read aloud a simple book for children for her study purposes. Normally, Agate would administer her lessons, but whenever Jade had free time like this, it had become routine for him to read to her while she sat on his lap.

As Ruri studied handwriting and spent a relaxing time with Jade, Claus abruptly burst into the room without knocking.

"Your Majesty, that girl is at it yet again!!"

Jade's face instantly frowned in displeasure.

It had become common knowledge for anyone working in the castle that "that girl" referred to none other than Azelda. After getting into a fight with Ruri, everyone figured she'd learned her lesson since the spirits didn't obey her, but it seemed she was back to her old selfish ways. At this point, addressing her with the title "Beloved" was a misnomer. Granted, Ruri had no intention of amending said misnomer since Azelda was getting exactly what she deserved.

"What is it this time? Found someone she wants to add to her groupie pool? Dissatisfied with one of the soldier's behavior? Found a maid more beautiful than herself?" Jade asked.

"She barged into the garden while Lady Celestine was enjoying her tea and blamed her for why the spirits wouldn't listen to her. She started off aggressive and the spirits are already on a hair trigger! Right now, Lord Agate is holding them back, but he can't hold them for much longer!"

Jade breathed a single heavy sigh.

Azelda's requests covered a broad range of spoiled behavior. There was one day where she gave Jade's bodyguard, Finn, an order to join her entourage and serve her. There was another day where she was dissatisfied with the behavior of a soldier who denied her audience with Jade and demanded that he be fired. And on yet another day, she saw that her entourage couldn't take their eyes off

of a beautiful maid in the castle and accused the maid of seduction.

Her selfishness was gradually growing more intense by the day. Every time, she would try to get her way by using the spirits, and each time Ruri would wind up holding the spirits back. The spirits followed Ruri's instructions more than Azelda's, which upset Azelda so much that she would relieve her anger by being selfish, creating a vicious cycle. The general consensus of everyone in the castle was that they *desperately* wanted her to leave.

Ruri hopped off of Jade's lap and said, "*We should hurry over there; Celestine-san is in danger, Jade-sama.*"

"Yes, let's."

"*You can give her a proper scolding. You don't have to worry about the spirits lashing back with me around! Please, really lay it on her!*"

"If there's no worry of the spirits, maybe we should just send her back to Cerulanda," Jade said, suggesting an idea that would likely be met with a standing ovation from everyone in the castle.

They all sprinted toward the garden before danger befell Celestine.

"*Hey, looks like fun,*" said Chi from behind, tagging along. Kotaro and Rin soon followed.

In the garden, Agate was trying to stop Azelda's whining tirade. Celestine glared silently at Azelda, and the spirits were poised to strike at any moment—it was an extremely chaotic situation to say the least.

Agate saw that Ruri and Jade had arrived and a wave of relief drew over his face.

Ruri made containing the spirits her top priority and dashed over toward them. "*Guys! Stop, stop! Don't attack her! Break it up!*" she ordered.

"*Oh, it's Ruri!*"

"*You heard her, break it up!*"

"*Okie dokie!*"

Spirits were docile and cute by nature. Once Ruri said to stop—something she'd been doing over the past few days—they all smiled sweetly and followed her instructions. That meant that the only spirits around were following either Ruri or Celestine.

Azelda's face was red from anger. "W-Why?! Why are you leaving?! Come back here!"

Once the spirits left Azelda's side, the people who had been watching the situation on pins and needles breathed a little easier.

Jade walked in front of Azelda. "Lady Azelda, this is a problem. I have repeatedly requested that you refrain from entering sector one since the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King is staying here."

Once Azelda saw Jade, her enraged face took a complete turn. "Oh my, it's you, Dragon King. It's not my fault. This girl keeps getting in my way. It is her fault that the spirits have stopped listening to me. You should admonish her for sticking her nose where it doesn't belong," Azelda said, fawning and snuggling against Jade.

Jade nonchalantly regained his distance from her. "Celestine is not the one who did that. Your conduct as of late has been intolerable, and if you proceed with this misconduct any longer, we shall respectfully ask you to return to your nation. Are you all right with that happening?" Jade said, using stronger language than usual because he knew that Ruri was higher in rank than Azelda.

The onlookers enthusiastically turned their eyes toward Jade as if to congratulate him and say, "Yes! That's telling her!"

"How could you say such a thing? I am a Beloved! Do you think you can just get away with speaking to me like that?!"

"Unfortunately for you, the spirits who serve your selfish whims are prioritizing the words of our nation's Beloved instead of yours. This nation will not tolerate your selfish whims any longer."

"Wha?! 'Selfish whims'? I am simply asserting my rights as a Beloved."

"If our nation is not to your liking, then you are free to return to Cerulanda where they will heed your wishes. Our nation has no intention of being toyed

with by you any more,” said Jade, refuting her as bluntly as could be.

Azelda stood there, wordlessly flapping her mouth in a fruitless effort to speak until she finally managed to say, “I am *not* being selfish. You are blessed by the spirits thanks to *me*, so it’s only natural that you listen to what I say!”

“Indeed, your presence keeps the soil bountiful,” Jade confirmed, “but that does *not* give you the right to do whatever you please. The people around you are at fault for inflating your ego, but you yourself need to learn to be a bit more compassionate.”

“How *dare* you say that to *me*! After all the good I do for the land here, this nation would be *nothing* without my presence!”

“This nation already has a Beloved of its own. We needn’t go through the trouble of welcoming a Beloved *troublemaker* into our fold. Our nation does *not* deem you necessary.”

“Hngh...!” Azelda choked out, her body quaking and her face red in what was either rage or embarrassment.

Jade turned his back to her as if to say he wouldn’t waste his breath on any further discussion. “Come, Ruri,” he called.

“*Right away*,” Ruri replied, coming back to him.

Just then, as soon as Ruri passed by Azelda’s side, she felt an intense pain and a jolt run through her body which landed her on the ground.

“Nyan!” Ruri yelped.

“Ruri!!” Jade screamed in a mixture of panic and terror.

“Urk!” Ruri grunted, quickly realizing that Azelda had punted her as Jade’s cry echoed through her ears. She tried very groggily to stand to her four feet, but Azelda followed up with a stomp of her high-heeled shoes, which she proceeded to dig into Ruri’s body.

“Nyaaa!” Ruri cried out sharply. She was unable to produce human noises in her cat form, so her shrill cat cries echoed throughout the garden.

“Shut your mouth! How dare you try to make a fool out of me!”

“Stop!!” With sheer horror on his face, Jade dashed over, shoved Azelda off of Ruri, and picked her up gently as to not touch where she had been stepped on. “Ruri! Ruri! Are you okay?!”

“...Yes... I’m... *fine*...” Ruri tried to say to calm Jade’s nerves, but the pain wasn’t making that easy. It made sense considering her small cat body had just had Azelda’s heel grinding into it.

“*Ruri!*” Rin called out in concern, coming over to her side.

Jade glared straight at Azelda with a stare as frigid as a tundra. Azelda winced for a second before immediately tensing her brow. She was going to speak, but before she could get a word out, something suddenly blew Azelda’s body backward.

“Eeek!!” she shrieked as her body slammed onto the ground.

Ruri, Jade, and everyone else watched on in confusion as to what had just happened, but the culprit was soon identified. It was Kotaro, who was slowly walking up to Azelda, an intense anger radiating from his being.

“How dare you. Do you know what you’ve done? You have no right to hurt Ruri. Know your place, you vile brat!” Kotaro shouted as an electrifying pressure emanating from his body took hold of the entire area.

This display made the normally confident Azelda go pale as she looked at Kotaro with a face filled with fear.

“You inflicted harm upon Ruri right in front of me, so I assume you’re ready to meet your maker.”

“Uh... uh...” Azelda’s body started to levitate. “Huh? Eeeep!!” She fluttered her legs in resistance, but she continued to float higher and higher into the sky regardless. “Noooo, somebody...!”

Everyone stood completely still, unable to come to her aid as her body lifted high into the sky. She was then flung around in all directions—up and down, left and right—tossed around like a toy in a bathtub.

“Eeeeeek! Help meeee!!”

“Wait, Kotaro!”

Whether Kotaro didn't hear Ruri's cry or he chose to ignore it, he didn't stop.

After a while, Azelda's body halted in midair. Just when it seemed he was done, she went higher and even higher into the sky until, as if the strings were cut, her body started to drop.

"E-Eeeeeeeek!!"

Kotaro was going to stop before she hit the ground—or so Ruri thought—but Azelda showed no signs of slowing as she plummeted down. At this rate, she was bound to smack straight into the ground.

Ruri frantically cried, *"Kotaro, stop it!!"*

Azelda's body then came to a dead stop just a few centimeters away from the ground. Had Ruri not stopped Kotaro, she would have undoubtedly collided with the earth below.

Relief drew over Ruri as she shuddered in fear. Meanwhile, Azelda shivered in unbridled terror. Her buckling legs couldn't hold her weight and she collapsed to her knees on the ground.

Kotaro looked at Azelda, her face still positively frozen in fear, with an icy glare. He then turned toward the spirits around him and spoke.

"This person has laid hands on my precious contract-bearer. Heed my words, spirits! As of now, you are not to help, intervene, or interact with this person in any way, shape, or form!!" declared Kotaro.

That was a direct order from a high-level spirit to all lower level spirits. Spirits would absolutely comply with any order a spirit higher than themselves delivered. And considering how this was an order from Kotaro, a supreme-level spirit, any and all spirits other than his supreme-level spirit brethren were to abide by it.

The spirits were not allowed to offer her aid. That essentially meant that Azelda was no longer allowed to receive the blessings of the spirits, the power that made Beloveds who they were.

On this day, this world lost one Beloved.

Chapter 17: Small Fires

Azelda's entourage of men escorted her back to her quarters, her legs shaking all the while. Ruri and the others remaining in the garden were left speechless.

Kotaro walked over to Ruri, his head and his tail hanging low. *"I'm sorry, Ruri."*

"Kotaro?" replied Ruri.

"I was right here, yet I couldn't protect you..." he said, looking thoroughly depressed.

"You don't have to be so down on yourself."

"No, this is a failure I will bear forever. I am so pathetic—listening to Earth's advice and digging up dirt like I was without a care in the world."

"Digging up dirt?" Ruri repeated. She looked around the garden to see that several spots were indeed upturned, revealing the brown soil below.

"Why were you digging up the ground?"

"Why? Just having some fun because I was getting bored," Chi said. He had tagged along because he thought the prospect would be fun, but it seemed he grew tired of Ruri's back-and-forth with Azelda rather quickly. Ruri failed to see how that led to digging holes, however.

Agate peered into one of the holes, and his eyes went wide in shock. *"What is this?!"* he exclaimed, sticking his hand in the hole and pulling out a stone-like object. From its glittering luster, it was very clearly a gemstone. However, it was as big as a fist—far too big for an ordinary gemstone.

Jade, curious as well, peered into the hole while cradling Ruri. Lying inside were several multicolored gemstones of various shapes and sizes.

"What is this?!" Ruri asked in surprise, forgetting the pain in her body.

"Made 'em 'cause I got bored. People like stuff like this, right?"

"I mean, if you asked for my honest opinion, then yes. But still."

"Well then, they're yours, Ruri. I don't need 'em, after all."

"O-Oh, thanks."

Ruri wasn't quite sure what Chi was trying to do. Why would he make gemstones just because he was bored? Granted, she was taking it if Chi was offering, but he was still too much of a free spirit for his own good.

Nevertheless, Ruri was worried things might get out of hand if it became common knowledge that Chi could produce gemstones out of nothing. Those blinded by greed might attempt to kidnap him if they ever found out. However, considering he was a supreme-level spirit, that worry was most likely unnecessary.

Agate thought to himself for a moment as he looked at the gemstones. Then he turned to Chi and asked, "Would you mind me asking, O Spirit of Earth, if you might be able to make *other* gemstones as well?"

"Yup, sure as shoot can."

"Truth be told, I've been searching for fine quality gemstones about *this* size, but I simply haven't been able to find any that are worthwhile," Agate said, miming the size he was after with his hands. It was smaller than a closed fist but considerably large in terms of a gemstone.

"Gotcha," Chi cheerfully said in acknowledgment. He started to pace around in circles while Ruri and the others watched on, baffled as to what was going to happen. After he made a few spins, he came to a quick stop and called Kotaro. *"Alright, dig 'er up, Windy."*

"Fine," Kotaro said, skillfully using his front legs to dig up the plot of land Chi paced around on. He put so much effort into digging you'd swear he was a real dog.

As he dug on, large gemstones with a rainbow-colored luster started to pop out.

"Mm, they're coming out," said Kotaro.

"Ooh, this is amazing! More than I could ever imagine!" Agate said in jubilation, clapping his hands and staring at the gemstones that were bigger

than his description.

“I can understand Euclase-san’s desire for jewels, but I never expected you, too, Agate-san.”

“What are you talking about? These are for His Majesty.”

“For Jade-sama?”

“That’s right. These are to be used in the jewelry necessary for His Majesty’s wedding ceremony with his future bride. It will surely craft something incredible,” Agate said, grinning in delight with gemstones in hand.

How extravagant of a piece of jewelry was Agate trying to make with a stone of that size anyway? Actually, considering that Jade didn’t even have a marriage partner yet, he was *definitely* jumping the gun.

“That should be enough conversation for now. We’re going to the infirmary, Ruri. We need to get you medical treatment immediately,” said Jade as the pain Ruri forgot about came back with a vengeance.

“That no-good wench!” Ruri said, cursing. Even she had her limits of tolerance. She could feel the anger seething from within after suffering from Azelda’s assault. Not to mention, Ruri was currently and had been in the form of an adorable cat. What kind of self-respecting person would lay their hands on an animal like that? It made Ruri want to sue her for animal abuse.

As such, Jade quickly carted her off to the infirmary.



“Gah, it’s gotten red. This is definitely gonna leave a mark,” Ruri commented. She had returned to human form to receive treatment and was looking at the side of her torso in a mirror. She couldn’t tell while in cat form, but now that she took a look as a human, she could see the utterly red spot that Azelda kicked and trampled over.

“Lady Beloved, I will see to your wound, so sit here, if you would.”

“Right,” Ruri said, showing the doctor the reddened area.

Once the doctor started palpating Ruri’s abdomen to assess the damage, pain shot through her body, making her wince.

“Mm-hmm, there doesn’t seem to be any broken bones, but I will apply some medicine,” the doctor said as they began to grind some medicinal plants with a mortar and pestle. Then, once the medicine was done, they smeared it onto a square cloth and pasted it onto the afflicted area. The initial chill from the fresh medicine made Ruri jump, but the area started to warm up a little in time. “That should do it. I will give you some painkillers, so be sure to get plenty of rest.”

“Yes, thank you very much,” Ruri said, thanking the doctor. She took the provided medicine and walked out of the infirmary.

Waiting outside the door was the usual cast of Kotaro, Rin, and Chi, but there was one more—Joshua.

“Huh? Joshua?” Ruri said, taking a scan of the area only to realize that Jade, who was supposed to be waiting outside the door, was nowhere to be found.

“If you’re looking for His Majesty, Finn called him away.”

“Oh, I see...” Ruri trailed off. She was disappointed that she couldn’t tell Jade she would be all right since he was so concerned in the first place.

“Apparently, there were multiple small fires breaking out in the castle town.”

“Huh?! Are people safe?”

“The fires themselves weren’t too big, so they were able to put them out right away. But, y’see, since it wasn’t isolated to not just one but *multiple* locations, they’re suspecting arson.”

“Oh, yikes, that’s terrifying. No one’s found the culprit?”

“Right, about that. Seeing how the culprit might not be done yet, we’ve sent a slew of soldiers to the castle town. I’m bettin’ they’ll catch them in no time. It would be fine if this were just some random guy getting his jollies off by setting things ablaze, but given the intel we have about the Reapers in the capital and the Church of God’s Light assaulting Beloveds, even His Majesty is concerned as to whether this could be playing a part in that.”

“The Reapers, huh?” Ruri repeated, concerned that a guild of assassins might be in the capital, though she knew there was nothing she could do.

“We have the castle firmly secured, and you have the spirits to protect you, so

you should be fine. But, just to be sure, be careful. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Anyway, are you doing okay? I heard the Beloved of Cerulanda busted you up.”

“Yeah. It hurts, but I’ll manage.”

“They told me Kotaro snapped on her. If she’s not gonna have spirits by her side, you can’t really call her a Beloved, right?”

“*It’s only natural, considering she hurt Ruri,*” Kotaro chimed in, puffing his chest in pride.

Ruri awkwardly smiled. “Still, I kind of think you may have gone a *little* overboard...”

Going from always having spirits by your side to suddenly not at all must’ve been pretty damaging to the girl’s psyche. After having the spirits always showing you the utmost care and affection, a life without them seemed inconceivable.

In Ruri’s case, she wasn’t able to see spirits until she came to this world, but even so, it was hard to imagine her life *without* them around. In fact, if they were to leave her now, the depression would be unbearable. Considering Azelda had lived with them ever since childhood, that sense of loss was most likely immeasurable. It seemed a tad too severe for a punishment.

“I’d say she’s getting her just desserts. Plus, if you were to let that girl have her powers, she’s bound to cause more tragic casualties. You may have stopped her here, but if she were to go back to Cerulanda, there’d be no one to stop her. I think that her *not* being a Beloved is better for everyone, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, but, I think that her not being a Beloved anymore is a huge issue. What is she going to do now?” Ruri wondered aloud. She most likely couldn’t ask for the same treatment she’d received up until now. Not only that, but Cerulanda would cease to receive the tidings from the spirits they’d enjoyed this entire time.

“Well, I guess she’s gonna be pretty darn confused. But *they* were the ones

who sent that Beloved our way in the first place. Letting their Beloved throw her weight around is Cerulanda's responsibility to bear. Neither the Beloved of the Nation of the Beast King or Spirit King would act in that way, so it's totally a lack of proper upbringing on Cerulanda's part. And, well, I guess *they're* gettin' their just desserts, too."

"Hmm, well, you do have a point."

Ruri thought that maybe it wouldn't hurt to give Azelda a second chance considering she was still in her teens. However, she also felt that if she let her off the hook so easily, Azelda would never change her act. Ruri had no idea what the best course of action was. She could feel the butterflies fluttering around in her chest.

"You don't need to worry about that, I tell ya. Things will run their course. That aside, Ruri, what did you do with that good-luck charm?"

"Good-luck charm?"

"The glass beads you got when we went walkin' in the capital the other day, the ones infused with spirit power. You know, you got hurt, right? I was curious if something happened as a result. You've still got it inside your pocket space, don't ya?"

"Oh, that. I gave that to Jade-sama."

Joshua's face tensed up. "Woah, woah. What if somethin' happens to His Majesty?"

"But isn't it safer in the hands of Jade-sama since he's the strongest of all the dragonkin?"

"When you put it that way, it would be safer... I guess?" Joshua said, not really sure what to think.

"He's the Dragon King, so he'll be just fine," Ruri assured him.

Ruri parted ways with Joshua and spent the rest of the day recuperating from her injury. Then she ate dinner and took her painkillers. Not long after, she received word from Jade to go to bed without him since he was preoccupied

with work, so Ruri followed his suggestion and headed to Jade's room by herself.

"Okay, good night, guys," said Ruri.

"*Yes, good night, Ruri,*" replied Kotaro.

"*Nighty night~*" replied Rin.

"*G'night,*" replied Chi.

Since they weren't allowed in, Kotaro and the others parted ways in front of Jade's room, and Ruri entered inside. She took a short dip in the bath, being careful of her bruise. Then, as she was changing into her pajamas, she was hit with an intense sense of drowsiness. She shook her head, clasping her hand over her temple.

"What's going on? I'm so sleepy... Are the painkillers taking effect?" Ruri asked herself as she laid down in bed and slipped out of consciousness in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 18: The Reapers

Jade's room was dead silent as Ruri slumbered soundly in his bed. The silence was broken by a faint click followed by the slow creak of the door. From the entranceway, a man and a woman, both dressed in black, entered the room with soundless steps. Ruri remained dead to the world.

"She asleep?" asked the man.

The woman checked and answered, "Yeah, out like a light."

"Hit her with the drug so she doesn't wake up in the middle," instructed the man. The woman then pulled out a finger-sized spray bottle, pointed it at Ruri, and spritzed her face with a mysterious liquid.

After waiting for the drug to take effect, the man looked into Ruri's face to confirm she was still sleeping—she was dead asleep and completely unaware that anyone had entered the room.

"It'd be easier to just kill her here," he commented.

"We can't. The client wants us to kill her so they don't find the body. Besides, we won't be able to use you-know-what if we kill her now."

"Tch. Well, when you're right, you're right."

The man reached for Ruri and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of rice. "Heh, these 'spirits' ain't such a big deal. Their precious Beloved is about to get kidnapped and they haven't even noticed."

"Neither have the dragonkin. It's unreal that our plan managed to run this smoothly and that they're all *this* incompetent," added the woman.

"That's a society that elects their rulers based on strength for you. All *brawn*, no *brains*."

"Let's hurry out. *They* should be making their move soon."

"Right."

The man and the woman carried Ruri out, absconding into the darkness.



The ground was quaking.

Instead of sleeping in the soft and cozy bed she was used to, Ruri lay atop a hard floor, sending pain shooting through her body. She also couldn't move. Perhaps it was Chi lying on top of her again. Enough was enough; she was going to let him have it this time.

With the vague thought of scolding Chi in her mind, she opened her eyes. However, the darkness all around her signified that it was still nighttime. Ruri tried to get up, but something was constricting the upper half of her body, rendering her unable to move.

"Huh? What...?" She tried to move her arms next, but all she heard was the sound of something clanging.

The strangeness didn't stop there, however. The smell of brine tickled her nose, the *splish-splash* of water around her filled her ears, and the stars in the sky caught her eye.

Ruri quickly came to her senses. "W-What? Where am I?!"

"Looks like you're awake," said the voice of an unfamiliar man.

Ruri jumped in surprise. "Who are you?!" she asked. She raised her groggy head toward the direction of the voice, but it was so pitch-black it was hard to distinguish if anyone was even there. She could sense someone was there, however.

Before long, Ruri heard the sound of fire igniting, and a single lamp floated in the void of darkness before her. The dim light revealed not just the man who had addressed her but a woman as well. Then, looking down at her immobilized body, Ruri realized that her arms and upper body were wrapped in chains.

"What is all this...?"

Why was she here instead of Jade's room? Who were these people in front of her? Ruri's mind ran rampant with things she didn't understand.

"What am I doing here? Did you two bring me here? First off, *who* are you

two?!” Ruri asked in a forceful tone to hide her fear, clueless to the situation she found herself roped into.

“You familiar with ‘Reapers’?”

“‘Reapers’...?” Ruri repeated, feeling herself go pale. The Reapers were the guild of assassins that Joshua spoke of.

“Why are the Reapers after me...?”

“Obvious, isn’t it? We got hired for a job—one to *kill you*.”

“A job...?” Ruri knew someone was gunning for the lives of the Beloveds of both Cerulanda and the Nation of the Beast King, but she’d assumed they were affiliated with the Church of God’s Light. Ruri couldn’t discern whether the client was said church or someone altogether different.

The man slowly stood up and extended his hand over to Ruri.

“Wait, don’t touch me!!” Ruri exclaimed, flailing her unbound legs in an attempt at resistance. That was when the silver glint of a dagger gleamed in front of Ruri’s face. “Ulp!”

“Now, shut up and be still. Otherwise, you might make my hand slip.”

Ruri’s face grew stiff in terror as she nodded in reply.

As soon as Ruri stopped trying to resist, the man lifted her and sat her straight up. Now that she knew he wasn’t going to do anything to her, Ruri breathed a sigh of relief. Sitting upright, she had a better view of her surroundings too. She could see the lamplight reflecting off of something and she froze. After a scan of the area, she could also see the lighthouse of the Nation of the Dragon King’s port far off in the distance.

It seemed she was on a small boat out to sea with no escape. However, Ruri could swim, and the port looked to be a swimmable distance away, albeit a tad far by normal standards. She also had the spirits to help.

That peace of mind that Kotaro and the others would always come to her rescue was keeping her calm, but that was when she realized something was odd. Ruri was in an extremely dangerous situation, so why weren’t they coming to her aid? Why couldn’t she see a single spirit flying around? She scanned all

around her. Seeing as how she was on the sea, there should have been a massive amount of water spirits gathering, but there were none to be seen.

“No use looking for the spirits,” said the Reaper lady, chuckling to herself in an immensely amused manner. “The chains binding you are infused with Spirit Slayer magic. With those on, no spirit would dare come near you.”

The color left Ruri’s face as soon as “Spirit Slayer” was mentioned. Spirit Slayer sucked up the energy of spirits in order to activate, so spirits steered clear of it. Also, it had prevented Kotaro from scouting out the Nadashian castle when he tried in the past. Essentially, even if Kotaro tried to search for Ruri, he wouldn’t be able to locate her.

Ruri attempted to use her magic, but the chains sucked up her mana and her magic wouldn’t activate. Not only that, but it felt as if the chains got heavier.

“Whoa there. You shouldn’t use magic. Well, use it all you want, but it’s just going to make those chains tighter.”

“Ugh...!” Ruri tried twisting her arm, but her bindings wouldn’t budge. “You plan on killing me?”

“Yep, sure do,” the man declared as casual as could be.

“In that case, why didn’t you just kill me right away? That’s far more efficient than taking the extra effort to kidnap me, isn’t it?”

“Client’s orders. We kidnap you and throw the castle into chaos. Then, well, whatever happens after that has nothin’ to do with us.”

“Even so, kidnapping me couldn’t have been an easy task... I was in the first sector of the castle, at the very tip of the mountain with security everywhere...”

The man chuckled, obviously finding something funny. “Getting past them was a cakewalk. Their security is riddled with holes. No one would have been able to catch us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Heh heh heh, good question,” said the man, dodging the point. “Spirits won’t come near us so long as we have the Spirit Killer chains. And those small fires during the day made them send a ton of their men down to the castle town,

throwing the castle into disarray. They probably still haven't noticed that you're even gone yet."

"Wait...! That was *your* handiwork, too?"

"No, our clients set those fires."

"By clients, who do you mean?"

"Now, why should I tell you?"

Ruri never expected a straight answer out of them anyway, so she didn't pursue it any further. Nevertheless, all this information swirled around in her head. Ruri pondered what their clients were trying to accomplish by ordering her assassination and throwing the castle into chaos. However, now wasn't the time to let other questions distract her. She had to keep them talking for as long as possible so that someone would come out in search of her—at least, that was what she hoped.

However, the situation proceeded to get even worse.

"Alrighty, I think that's enough chitchat."

Ruri's body jolted. "W-Wait. I still have some questions..."

"Keep 'em to yourself, then. You're gonna be dying here anyway."

"A few questions never hurt!"

The next moment, the man booted Ruri off of the side of the boat.

"Ngh, urk!" She hit the water with a loud splash. Seawater soaked her clothing and entered her mouth.

Although her chain bindings made her body heavy and unresponsive, she was still able to flutter her legs and come up to the surface. "Pwah!!" She then looked up to see the man, standing in the boat and staring her right in the eye.

"You know what this is?" the man asked, holding a giant cloth sack that was fastened to the end of the chain wrapped around Ruri. "This thing has a *whoole* bunch of sand. What'dya think is gonna happen once I drop this?"

If he were to toss that large sack filled to the brim with sand into the sea, it would naturally sink to the bottom—bringing Ruri along with it.

“D-Don’t do it...” Ruri pleaded, grimacing.

“Hahahaha. *Boy*, your face is twisted up in terror! Priceless!” the man said, letting out an insane laugh that sent discomfort down Ruri’s spine. Her body was unconsciously shivering and it definitely wasn’t because of how cold the water was.

“Hurry up already. We still have things to do,” the woman interjected.

“Yeah, I know. Well, see ya, little lady,” the man said, immediately dropping the sandbag into the water.

The heavy sandbag started to sink in the blink of an eye, dragging the end of Ruri’s chain along with it into the briny deep.

“Ngh, unghhh!” Ruri mumbled, holding her breath and struggling against her bindings. It was to no avail; they were wrapped too tight for her to unravel.

As such, Ruri was helpless as she steadily sank to the bottom of the sea.

(Help...)



Chapter 19: The Disappearance

Upon hearing that there was a series of small fires in the town, at the base of the castle, Jade headed for the royal office. Given the intermittent pattern of these fires, there seemed to be only one conclusion—someone was perpetrating them. In order to investigate the cause of these crimes and stop the arsonist responsible, Jade quickly sent a fleet of soldiers into the castle town.

As Jade finished delivering his orders, Ruri popped into his mind. He had allowed someone to assault her despite being right next to her. Although he never would have expected anyone would attack Ruri while she was a cat, he still felt the frustration bubbling from within, frustration toward himself for being unable to protect her—along with rage toward Azelda for kicking Ruri in her adorable cat form.

“Claus, begin preparations to return the Cerulandians back to their nation,” Jade ordered.

“Are you sure about that, Your Majesty?” Claus asked. “It appears the assailant from the Church of God’s Light has yet to be caught.”

“That’s *Cerulanda’s* matter, not *ours*. A matter, mind you, they would have had to solve *in* Cerulanda had the Beloved not requested to come here in the first place. Also, Lord Kotaro has stripped that girl of her Beloved powers. We don’t need to show pity for someone who hurt Ruri. Ship them off,” Jade declared in a stern tone.

Claus grinned awkwardly. “As you command. However, Cerulanda might try to blame us for their Beloved losing her powers.”

“If they do, then kindly give them a lesson on how terrifying dragonkin can truly be,” Jade said, a sharp glint in his eyes.

“Indeed, that I shall.”

Jade felt like a load had been lifted off his shoulders—things could finally start

going back to normal. Azelda's selfishness had been a problem on its own, but one of her followers had been talking to Ruri several times as of late, which also served as a reason to kick the Beloved and her party out post haste. Jade's instincts were telling him it was likely Azelda would come after Ruri once she found out she lost her Beloved powers; he wanted them all out of the kingdom before that happened. Cerulanda might try to voice their objections, but it all boiled down to the dynamic of both nations—big versus small. The only reason they'd accepted Azelda's request was because she was a Beloved. Now that this small nation had lost their one bargaining chip, any grievance they aired would simply fall on deaf ears.

That aside, there was the matter with the intermittent fires. Several timer-based magical devices serving as igniters had been located all over town. Retrieving them all would require a considerable amount of time, but at least they wouldn't cause any major damage since the devices were only strong enough to set off small fires anyway.

"What in the world could all this mean?" Jade wondered, contemplating if the fires were started for the thrill of the crime or for some other reason.

He then added, "I want heightened security around the Beloveds for insurance." Between the Reapers possibly being in town and the Church of God's Light organizing the attacks on Azelda and Celestine, Jade had two very big causes for concern.

"Does that go for the Cerulandian Beloved as well?" Finn asked earnestly.

After some short deliberation, Jade decided that he couldn't wittingly expose a guest from another nation to danger. "Yes, see to it," he instructed Finn.

However, it wasn't long before Joshua came rushing into the office. "Your Majesty, I have news!"

"What is it?"

"Intel from the person who reported about the Reapers before has allowed us to find their base of operations in town!"

"You found it?!" Jade asked, eyes wide.

The guild of assassins on everyone's watch list. How many members did they

have? Who was their leader? Where were they from? No one knew anything about them, shrouding them in mystery. Now there were reports that their base of operations in the Nation of the Dragon King had been found. Although Jade doubted how simply this elusive shadow organization was found, he had no time to sit and ponder. If they were the ones behind the arson, then they needed to apprehend them as soon as possible before they caused an even bigger incident.

“Take the troops and seize their base,” Jade ordered.

“But, with the heightened security on the Beloveds, in addition to the fires, we’ll be shorthanded...” Claus trailed off, looking troubled.

“Aah, yes, I had almost forgotten...” Jade said, exasperatedly tapping his temple with his finger.

Dragonkin were quick to jump into a fight. The sight of fire apparently got their blood running, so many of them were stepping over one another to go down into town. There were other non-dragonkin troops, but since no one was sure how powerful the Reapers actually were, Jade wanted to send in the dragonkin because of their superior combat prowess.

“Bring back the dragonkin on the fire and send our other troops. Once they get back, have them storm the base.”

“Right away,” replied Finn. He immediately sent out the order for all of the dragonkin troops in town to return to the castle.

However, that was when they ran into another problem. “Your Majesty, all of the dragonkin soldiers have fallen ill,” Finn reported.

“They’ve what?” Jade asked in surprise.

“From what we’ve found, it seems the dinner in the dragonkin cafeteria was poisoned. The men who were away and on duty are all fine, however...” They took breaks in alternating shifts, meaning every soldier that went on break first was affected.

“What does security look like? Are the soldiers all right?” asked Jade.

“Yes. Dragonkin are sturdy, so I’m told they’re in no mortal danger,” Finn

replied.

“Has the culprit been found?”

“No. While we believe this chain of disturbances was far too intentional to be coincidental, we cannot figure out who it was, what they’re after, or how they managed to slip in.”

Jade’s brow tensed. Who in the world could have mixed poison in the food? If someone had infiltrated the castle all the way to the dragonkin soldiers’ mess hall in sector five, then they had a huge problem on their hands.

“Claus, go see that Ruri and the other Beloveds are safe.”

“At once.”

Claus checked right away and reported that Ruri had already eaten dinner and Celestine and Azelda were safely in their rooms. It seemed as though Ruri’s meal was perfectly fine.

“What shall we do? We could add to the Beloveds’ security and investigate the Reaper’s base, but we will be short of hands,” proposed Claus. They had more than enough non-dragonkin soldiers, but it was better to have dragonkin for the security detail and for storming the Reaper’s base.

“We can’t afford to take away security from the Beloveds,” answered Jade.

Claus nodded. “That is true.”

That being said, they couldn’t let the Reapers go unchecked. After pondering that to himself, Jade headed toward his quarters. There he found Kotaro sitting in front of the door like a guard dog with Rin sitting atop him.

“Has Ruri already retired?” Jade asked.

“*Yes, she went into the room a moment ago,*” answered Kotaro.

“Lord Kotaro, I’d like to ask something of you...”

“*That being?*”

“Due to so many problems arising all at once, we are short on available soldiers. I’d like to take some from Ruri’s security detail, but would that be all right by you?” Jade had decided that it shouldn’t matter if he pulled some of

Ruri's security detail since she had so many supreme-level spirits attending her.

"Yes, that is fine. I will place more spirits and tighten defenses around Ruri to compensate. Also, my barrier is in place around the room. There is no possible way anyone could get in."

Jade was relieved to hear about all the extra precautions. "Thank you very much. I leave Ruri to your capable hands."

With Ruri's security left to Kotaro and the other spirits, Jade proceeded to pull the soldiers on guard duty and put them into the unit headed for the Reaper's base. As such, Joshua and his team stormed the base, but by the time they got there, it was already cleared out. There were traces of recent habitation, but there wasn't a single item left in the place. It made Joshua doubt whether they were duped by a false tip, so he left a handful of soldiers in case the Reapers came back and returned to the castle himself.

Jade ordered Joshua to investigate the matter once again and then decided to take the day off—and *what* a day off it ended up becoming.

Once he returned to his quarters, he found the door to his room open. Inside stood Kotaro and Rin, both looking panicked and enraged.

"What happened here?" Jade asked.

"Ruri's gone!" Kotaro replied loudly.

"'Gone'? What do you mean by..."

"Her presence suddenly vanished. And once we entered the room, she was nowhere to be seen," Kotaro elaborated.

Jade dashed over to the bed, an uncontrollable sense of dread coming over him. "Ruri?!" he called, tearing back the sheets only to be met with the linen on the other side. Panicked, Jade searched every room in his quarters—the wardrobe, the bathroom, the toilet—but Ruri wasn't in any of them. He could feel his heart practically beating out of his chest.

"Ruri..."

Kotaro added, *"I was in front of the door the whole time, but Ruri didn't step foot outside."*

“The only other place someone could get out is the window...” Jade trailed off as he went to check the window to make sure. Kotaro and Rin followed after him.

He opened the window and stepped out on the terrace, but there was no trace of anyone there.

Kotaro looked outside and called out, *“Did any of you see Ruri?”*

The spirits who were outside responded.

“We didn’t~” said one.

“Yeah, we were out here the whole time, and no one came in or out of the room,” said another.

“There was nothing out of the ordinary?” Kotaro asked.

“Nope.”

Kotaro and Rin were covering the door and the spirits were covering outside the window. Neither of them saw Ruri leave. In which case, it begged the question—where did she vanish off to?

“Did you really not see Ruri?! Maybe you overlooked...”

“No way. If Ruri left, we’d have known,” the spirit answered back.

“...What’s the meaning of this?” Asked Jade.

Ruri had abruptly disappeared, and it wasn’t of her own volition seeing as how she wouldn’t need to hide from the spirits if she wanted to go out. If someone had taken her away instead, then who and why? The two likely suspects then were the Reapers and the Church of God’s Light. If either one had kidnapped Ruri, then she was in danger. However, if it was the Church of God’s Light, then the spirits would have run off like with Celestine and Azelda.

“No Spirit Slayer was used either?” Jade asked the spirits who had been outside.

However, they shook their heads in response.

“Nope, none at all.”

“I didn’t feel anything~”

“So, it’s not the Church of God’s Light? In that case...” Jade thought that perhaps the culprit warded away the spirits and kidnapped Ruri while they had the chance, but the spirits said they had remained on the scene the entire time. How could they have kidnapped Ruri while she was surrounded by spirits at all times?

“I had a barrier around the perimeter in the first place. Be it the window or the door, if anyone tried to get in, I would know,” Kotaro said.

“Then, how...?”

Jade soon sent out an order to search every sector of the castle, but they found neither hide nor hair of Ruri.

Chapter 20: The Raid

“Your Majesty, you must contain yourself,” said Claus.

“You’re telling me what I already know,” Jade said, restlessly pacing around the office. He had been doing that for several minutes; he wasn’t able to sit still with Ruri missing.

“We’ve extended the search from the castle interior to the royal capital as we speak. It seems Lord Kotaro and Lady Rin have also gone out in search, so it will be no time before she is found,” Claus said in a gentle tone, hoping to instill relief. But Claus was actually just as concerned—he just kept his composure better than Jade.

“The fires, the poisoning, and now Ruri’s disappearance,” Claus summarized. “With all of this happening in the span of a day, none of it seems purely coincidental.”

“Indeed.”

“Also, normally it would be inconceivable for the spirits to lose sight of Ruri. I can’t imagine what kind of methods they used...”

As he listened to Claus speak, Jade felt stricken with regret. He’d carelessly thought that the spirits’ protection would be enough and had lessened Ruri’s security detail. The fact that the many spirits present had let Ruri disappear under their noses might be proof that the situation would have been the same regardless of how many dragonkin he added. Nevertheless, Jade lamented his choice, pondering over the what-ifs.

“...I’m going to search for her, too,” Jade murmured, unable to simply wait for news to arrive.

Claus looked at Jade with a worrying expression. “As much as I understand how you must feel, I cannot agree to that course of action when we have no idea what will happen next.”

“Even so...”

Jade walked toward the door. Claus rushed over to stop him. However, that was when they heard a large *boooooom* and felt a fierce tremor.

“What was that?!”

They rushed out of the door to see the soldiers standing all about, just as confused as they were.

Jade turned to a nearby soldier and asked, “What happened?!”

“I have no clue, Sire. There was a sudden explosion. I think it was close to either sector two or three, though...”

“Investigate the cause at once!”

“Yes, Sire!” the soldier replied, running off to fulfill his king’s order.

“I swear, if it’s not one thing, it’s another...” Jade spat to himself with a click of his tongue. He was getting perturbed at things going awry despite his desire to go search for Ruri.

“Your Majesty, shouldn’t we evacuate the Cerulandian Beloved in sector two?” asked Claus.

“Yes, let’s do that,” Jade said, stopping a nearby soldier and ordering him to bring Azelda up.

Allowing Beloveds of outside nations to see one another was against the rules, but since they’d already seen each other several times by now and Azelda had lost her Beloved powers, Jade decided it wouldn’t be an issue.

“Claus, go to Arman’s quarters and inform him to heighten Celestine’s security.”

“Understood.”

As Jade walked around dispensing orders, a soldier ran up to him.

“Your Majesty, the explosion was reported in sector three. We discovered a timer-based magical device, the same that was used in the series of fires, at the site of the explosion. We suspect the culprit is one and the same.”

“What is security doing?! How are you letting people just waltz in?!”

Moving between sectors required a clearance pass. And ever since Asahi

made her escape with someone else's pass, the checks were now even more strict. While it was possible someone could scale the mountain and infiltrate from the outside, the sides of the mountain were steep and rocky. And there were also soldiers on watch. Scaling the mountain all the way up to sector three would be near impossible. An aerial approach was even more impossible. There was a barrier in place to keep out any incoming flying magic beasts, and it would be apparent if any were to break through.

Their entry route was a mystery.

Just as Jade started to suspect that it was some sort of inside job, another explosion went off—this time much closer. And then right after his attention was temporarily drawn toward the commotion, he heard Azelda scream from the opposite end of the hallway.

“Eeeek!”

Jade made a dash for the source of the cry. There a person dressed in all black pointed a dagger at Azelda.

Jade stared in shock. The soldiers around her seemed to be clueless as to what happened.

“What are you all doing?!” Jade yelled, rebuking his soldiers. They stood by as the enemy held the person they were supposed to protect at their mercy.

In spite of the several guards posted around Azelda, she had been snatched from under their noses. The soldiers that Jade reproached, and everyone else, couldn't contain their confusion.

“They just a-appeared, Sire. We were distracted by the explosion for just a second and they showed up out of nowhere.”

“What do you mean ‘just appeared’?” They were standing in a perfectly clear, unobstructed hallway. Anyone coming would be spotted right away.

In a shaky voice, Azelda squeezed out, “Y-You. You're wearing the same clothes as that raider...”

Jade furrowed his brow. They had assumed that the Church of God's Light attacked Azelda. In which case, Jade was left to wonder if the person standing

before his eyes was a member of that very organization.

“Are you from The Church of God’s Light?” Jade asked, but his question fell on deaf ears.

“Death to Beloveds,” said the assailant in black, their voice muffled by the cloth wrapped around their mouth—a slightly high-pitched voice at that. They brought the dagger down on Azelda, but before it could hit its mark, Jade hurled a chop toward the assailant’s hand. They dodged just in the nick of time, but they weren’t able to fully avoid the blow and ended up with a bruised hand.

Jade’s eyes were burning with rage. “Don’t tell me you’re involved with Ruri’s disappearance as well! If you know where Ruri is, then tell me!”

“...Dead.”

Jade felt the world shake for a split second, and his hands started to tremble.

“Death to all Beloveds,” said the person in black as they sprinted toward Azelda. Azelda was so stricken with fear that she simply cowered, unable to run.

Jade quickly grabbed a sword from a nearby soldier and stepped in front of Azelda, deflecting the assailant’s blow. Once the assailant took their distance, Jade flung Azelda toward the soldiers. He heard Azelda scream, but he had no time to be concerned about that.

Jade proceeded to cross swords with the mystery assailant. Clanging metal rang loudly through the hallway. Their swords locked, and the physically smaller assailant started to slowly move back as Jade put more force into his grip. Then, when the assailant slipped and broke their posture for a split second, Jade delivered a ferocious kick from the side. His mighty dragonkin leg hit his opponent straight on and sent them careening toward the wall. Jade felt that he wasn’t facing a very seasoned warrior, but that was of little concern to him right now.

“Grk...” the person groaned as they stood up. Then they pulled something out of their breast pocket and chucked it toward Jade at full force.

Jade went to swat it aside without an ounce of hesitation. However, before it came in contact with his hand, the item triggered a large explosion.

“Khh...” The unavoidable blast came at Jade, and he shut his eyes to brace for the shock.

“Your Majesty!” cried the soldiers in panic, watching the fight from afar. They were concerned for Jade after taking that explosion head-on.

The assailant confirmed that Jade was incapacitated and turned their sights toward Azelda. The soldiers around her assumed fighting stances. However, a mysterious light started to wrap around Jade’s body. It beamed through the white smoke and blew away the person clad in black. They hit the wall with an even bigger impact than before, this time sustaining enough damage to keep them grounded.

When the smoke cleared, Jade stood unscathed, a light still wrapped around him. He looked confused, and in truth he had no idea what happened either. Realizing that the area around his chest was shining blue, he rummaged in his inside pocket and pulled out the lapis-colored glass beads that Ruri had given him. As if the glass beads had served their purpose, the light started to fade and the charm reverted to an ordinary trinket.

“So, *this* protected me?” Jade questioned. Ruri had told him it was a good-luck charm, but he never expected it would *physically* protect him from harm, so he was extremely surprised. Not only that, but it also seemingly counterattacked his foe, rendering them incapacitated. It made Jade think about Ruri, thinking she would have been better off keeping something this valuable instead—a thought that pained Jade.

There was no point in pondering the what-ifs now, however. Jade collected himself and returned the glass beads to his pocket. He then went over to the black-clad attacker slumped motionless against the wall. He grabbed them by the lapels, forced them to their feet, and pulled away the cloth covering their mouth, revealing their true face.

“You’re...” Jade started, his face showing astonishment. However, he went right back to glaring at the attacker with a razor sharp look. In a deep and threatening voice, he said, “I’ll ask one more time. Where’s Ruri?”

Jade was emitting such a strong and intimidating aura that the attacker started to show fear due to being in such proximity to it. Jade’s grip on them

got tighter and tighter, causing the mystery person to wince in pain.

“That Beloved is dead. Their corpse should be lying somewhere in the capital.”

The intensity of Jade’s glare increased. Still holding onto their lapels, Jade slammed them across the wall.

A soldier scrambled over to Jade. “Your Majesty, you shouldn’t apply any more force, or else it’ll endanger their life. We still need to interrogate this individual.”

Jade took a deep breath to quell his turbulent heart and proceeded to unhand the person, allowing the soldier to take over.

“They still might have cohorts about. This time, be certain to remain vigilant. Investigate this one’s background while you’re at it.”

“Yes, Sire!”

Jade went straight over to Euclase, who was also there. “I’m going to go search for Ruri. Handle the rest.” The king leaving his castle now of all times wasn’t a very commendable action. However, Jade didn’t have the confidence to calmly handle the situation right now either way.

“Yes, please, leave it to me,” Euclase agreed without saying anything more.

There was no way that Ruri was dead—those were the words Jade kept telling himself as he headed into town.

Chapter 21: In the Nick of Time

Ruri was frantic as the weighted bag dragged her into the depths of the sea.

(Oh God, this is terrible, horrible, extraordinarily awful!!) “Mm mm, nghh~”

As she steadily sank deeper into the water, she tried to pour every ounce of her strength into undoing her chain bindings, but they were wrapped around her tight and showed no signs of coming undone. She wasn't going to be able to hold her breath forever, however, and her panic grew stronger with each second her lungs went without fresh air.

As feverishly as she moved her arms, wriggled her body, and kicked her legs, the chains wouldn't budge. She couldn't breathe... Would she go on to die here? This easily? Unbeknownst to anyone? Nothing but terrible thoughts ran through her head, causing her terror to swell.

(I don't want to die! Kotaro! Rin!) Ruri screamed inside her mind, the image of the two guardian beasts who were always by her side flashing before her eyes. However, wrapped up in chains enchanted with Spirit Slayer magic, her words couldn't possibly reach them.

(Jade... -sama...)

She couldn't hold on anymore... She couldn't breathe—asphyxiating.

Just when she had given up hope, the force dragging her to the bottom suddenly stopped and her bindings slipped from her body. Before she had a chance to see the chains fully sink into the sea, something yanked at her collar. The pressure on her neck caused her to unceremoniously blurt out the scant amount of air left in her mouth as something pulled her further and further topside. She eventually emerged from the water, choking on the fresh air of the surface.

“Urgh! Koff, koff! Haah, haah...” Ruri coughed as she wearily regained her breath. “Haah, haah... I'm alive... That was absolutely bonkers, but I'm alive...” She wasn't sure if it was from the seawater stinging her eyes or from sheer

relief, but tears rolled down her face. Then, almost as if waiting for her to fully regain her breath, someone called out to her.

“Hey, yo. You alright?” said a rather happy-go-lucky voice.

Ruri turned back to see a familiar pair of deep-set eyes attached to a swimming body, a body that was holding her by the collar with its mouth. “C-Chi!” Ruri exclaimed, emotionally hugging Chi in what was either relief at seeing a familiar face or joy from being saved.

“Woah there. Hold your horses. Those guys might still be around, so keep it down, will ya?”

Ruri gasped and quickly shut her mouth. Fortunately, the sea was under the dark shroud of night, meaning their heads poking out from the water were unlikely to be detected by the naked eye. And as long as they didn’t shout, their voices would be drowned out by the sound of the waves.

“Anyway, let’s swim to shore.”

Swimming in the opposite direction of the Reapers’ escape route was probably the best idea, but due to Ruri’s desperate underwater struggle against the chains, she was absolutely spent. She sincerely doubted she could make the swim to dry land.

“Chi, I don’t think I can swim...”

“In that case, face up and float on your back. I told Wind and Water, so they’ll be here soon.”

Ruri did as she was told, holding her head up, relaxing her body, and floating atop the water. It was a good thing the waves were calm tonight.

“How are you here, Chi? I was wrapped up in Spirit Slayer chains, so I was sure no one would come to save me. Did you see me getting abducted?”

“I was taking a little stroll around the castle town to check out the ruckus. When I did, I found some strange rats that piqued my interest, so I chased them down, but I ended up losing sight of them. Since I lost sight in the direction of the port, I decided to give the port a search. That’s when I saw some guy manhandling you. And once I noticed he was wrapping you up in chains, I was

like, 'Yikes, bad news.'"

"Then, you should've come to save me *right then*." The fact that Chi found her because he was chasing down rats was a stroke of dumb luck at its finest. Ruri had the utmost gratitude to those rats.

"I didn't 'cos, it looked interesting," Chi replied frankly.

"Oh, you don't say..." Ruri sputtered, bemused that he let her sink in the ocean because he thought it was "interesting." She added, "What if they had killed me *before* dumping me in the sea?"

"Don't worry, I was swimming behind the boat, avoiding detection, the whole time. I planned on coming to help you if something happened."

Since he actually *did* come to help her, Ruri couldn't really complain—yet part of her *still* wished he had rescued her just a bit sooner.

"Did you unravel the chains wrapped around me, too, Chi?"

"Sure did. Not only does Spirit Slayer not work on me, those chains were made out of iron. And since I'm the Spirit of Earth, any mineral mined from the earth falls under my jurisdiction. Make 'em, break 'em—it's a piece of cake. Good thing they were iron, eh?"

"Yeah, good thing. But, really, thank you... Say, can you answer me this? Kotaro and the others didn't realize I was kidnapped, right? I assume that if they had, they would've come to the rescue ages ago."

"Apparently, they tried searching for ya."

"How did they take me out of the room in the first place?" Ruri questioned, her composure coming back to her. Even if those two snuck into the castle, it was a mystery how they managed to steal her away from Jade's room. Kotaro was manning the door and had a barrier posted up around the room at all times. If someone were to touch the periphery of that barrier, not only would it automatically tip off Kotaro, it would reject them from entering. Even if they made it inside on a one-in-a-million chance, throwing Ruri over their shoulder and carrying her out the castle under everyone's nose didn't seem possible. The tons of soldiers keeping guard inside the castle and the spirits posted outside made sure of that. Spirit Slayer did keep spirits away, but if it was used in the

castle, wouldn't Kotaro have noticed anyway?

"Hmm..." Ruri hummed, racking her brain.

"Oh, here they are," Chi cried.

Once Ruri switched her position so that she could tread water, Kotaro flew in with Rin atop his head.

"Ruri!!" cried Rin as she flapped her tiny wings and crashed into Ruri—a crash with little impact considering her small body, but a crash nonetheless. Ruri caught her and rubbed cheeks with her. *"I swear! I was so worried. I couldn't believe you just up and disappeared."*

"Are you all right, Ruri?" asked Kotaro.

"Yeah, Chi helped rescue me."

Kotaro lifted Ruri up out of the water with his wind powers, and Rin flicked all of the moisture off of Ruri's body with hers, instantly drying her. Ruri then proceeded to take a seat on Kotaro's back. Kotaro placed Chi on his back as well.

As they made their way toward shore, Ruri explained what had happened. This led both Kotaro and Rin to the same question: how did these people abduct Ruri from that room?

"I'm certain that my barrier was in place. Yet your presence disappeared regardless. I entered the room immediately, but you were gone without a trace," said Kotaro.

"You're saying you didn't feel anyone else's presence in there except mine?"

"I would've known if anyone with mana like yours was around," said Kotaro, *"but for those with weak mana or no mana at all, I sometimes have problems detecting them. Given that, I suspect these Reapers, as you call them, are one of the two. Be that as it may, that only applies to when they're in the barrier. I should have caught wind of them, though, if they touched it before they entered."*

No matter how hard Ruri tried to wrap her head around it, she couldn't figure out how those two stole her away.

“Well, if we can’t figure it out, all we have to do is nab these ‘Reapers’ and make them spill it,” Rin said, giving a rather succinct answer.

“Now, that’s a good idea. Let’s go looking for them!” Kotaro urged, riled up.

Ruri quickly interjected to stop him. “No, it’s too dangerous. We can’t!”

“But, Ruri, how can you stand just taking all of this abuse lying down? Don’t you want to get back at them?” Rin asked.

“Well...” Ruri trailed off. Now that she thought about whether or not she wanted payback, Ruri’s honest answer would have been a resounding “yes” — she wanted payback with *interest*, in fact. Still, she had almost died a few moments ago, so part of her was still afraid. “Hmm. Yeah, but...”

“You’re just going to take this and go home to cry in your pillow?! This isn’t like you!” Rin asserted.

“Fine, I *get it* already. We’ll do it,” Ruri said, realizing that neither would be satisfied until she agreed.

“Well said! That’s the Ruri I know,” Kotaro said.

“Looks like fun. I’ll tag along!” Chi added.

With that, Kotaro changed his course and followed after the Reapers via Chi’s directions.

“You can find them, Chi?”

“I got a look at their faces back there. So long as they’ve landed on ground, any earth spirit can search for where they are.”

According to Chi, they were already on shore and heading straight for town. Ruri and the others finally made it to the port as well, but they quickly flew past it as they proceeded to scour the city while on Kotaro’s back. As they did, other spirits started to gather around little by little, all of them relieved to see Ruri safe.

As Ruri looked down at the town below, she noticed an abnormal amount of soldiers running about. “Don’t tell me they’re all looking for *me*?”

“Oh, why, I do believe that’s exactly what they’re doing. We haven’t informed

the dragonkin that you're safe yet, so they still think you're missing." Rin replied.

"In that case, maybe we should tell them that I'm safe before searching for the Reapers?"

"That can wait until later," Rin suggested. *"If everyone thinks you're still missing, it will catch these people more off guard."*

"Hmm, but I at least want to let Jade-sama know. He's probably worried sick," Ruri said. She then asked a nearby spirit to go and inform Jade that she was safe and sound. The spirit cheerfully accepted the task and set off.

After seeing the spirit off, Ruri turned her attention back to the dark town, staring with intent. She soon spotted figures. "There they are," she said.

The four of them landed in a spot a small distance away. They stifled their breathing and watched in secret, out of plain sight. The figures didn't seem to notice any of them. The man and woman were heading toward somewhere with great haste through the darkness.

"Aren't they heading toward the castle?" Ruri asked.

"They are. Are they still up to something?" pondered Rin aloud.

Ruri and the others had initially intended on catching the man and the woman right away, but they decided to observe them for a little while to see what they were planning. They followed them while riding on Kotaro, who was being careful not to make any loud footsteps and to keep his distance from them.

They were heading toward the barren back corner of the castle. As the group silently observed, wondering what they could be doing in a nowhere location like that, the duo pulled out what appeared to be bracelets and placed them on their arms. In the next instant, the pair of humans turned into a pair of small rats.

"Hngh!!" Ruri almost screamed involuntarily, but she managed to keep it in. Then the rats disappeared into a gutter that no human could possibly enter.

Once she saw the Reapers-turned-rats scurry off, Ruri finally spoke up. "Aren't those bracelets the same as mine—the one that turns me into a cat?!"

“Hmm, so, if I’m to understand, the Reapers infiltrated the room via the gutters and abducted you that way. Even with my barrier set in place, it wouldn’t have extended to the gutters. Grr, it was a blindspot,” Kotaro explained, giving a calm analysis.

“By the way, Chi. You said you were chasing after some strange rats, right? Strange how, exactly?”

“Two of the rats were carrying another rat on their backs. Come to think of it, I think that’s around when I found you.”

“That means the one they were carrying was me, wasn’t it?! I became a rat?! Oh, God. Gross!” Ruri was not a fan of rodents, and knowing there was a chance she had become a rodent herself sent cold shivers down her spine.

“In other words, they turned Ruri into a rat as well and took her away? Then, that also means they have at least three bracelets capable of turning people into rats,” Kotaro surmised.

“I always thought my bracelet was rare, but is there actually *that* many floating around?”

Racking their brains over that wasn’t going to do them any good, however. Those two had infiltrated the castle and were on their way to do something. They had to let Jade know immediately.

Just as that thought ran through Ruri’s head, a voice echoed from behind her, calling her name.

“Ruri!!”

She turned around to find Jade dashing at her. Jade ran straight at Ruri and took her into his arms. His embrace was so tight that she was having trouble breathing, and she ended up squirming in his arms.

“Jade-sama, you’re kind of... choking me...”

Jade loosened up his grip, but he didn’t release her. Ruri didn’t try to force her way out of his grasp either. His warmth comforted her, and she breathed a sigh of relief, happy to be safe.

“Ruri, thank goodness... I heard you had died and my heart almost stopped

beating. When I went into town to look for you, a spirit came and told me that you were safe.”

“I was in super big trouble, but Chi came and rescued me.”

“I see. Really, thank the lucky stars.”

Ruri stroked Jade’s back, hoping to instill some comfort. Seeing as how Jade was out of breath, he must have been running around the capital in search of her. With him leaning in so close, she could hear the intense beating of his heart as well. It seemed she had unintentionally caused him to worry a considerable amount.

Jade let go of Ruri and gave her a scan from head to toe to inspect if she was hurt. Then he quickly took her into his embrace again, breathing a heavy sigh of relief.

Seeing Jade’s behavior once again reassured her that she was indeed in safe hands, but she remembered that now wasn’t the time to be at ease.

“Oh, right. Jade-sama! The Reapers. The Reapers! The Reapers are rats. The rats are Reapers!”

“Calm down. What are you talking about?”

After taking a deep breath, Ruri explained what had happened after she was abducted and what she’d seen just moments ago.

“I see. I was almost certain that the Church of God’s Light had accosted you, but it was the Reapers, was it? No, they might be in league with one another since they knew what happened to you. And after the Reapers threw you into the sea, they proceeded to infiltrate the castle in rat form?”

“Yes.”

“Then their next target must be either Azelda or Celestine...” Jade assumed.

“Why is that?” Ruri asked, perplexed by Jade’s confident statement.

“Their moves have been garnering too much attention. They set off an explosion and attacked Azelda in front of everyone. Also, for someone daring to assault a Beloved, they weren’t an experienced fighter. Normally, you’d pick someone experienced, right? Since they didn’t, it leads me to believe that the

assailant was a decoy. As of late, I've been constantly adding more people to prevent a situation given Azelda's extreme selfishness in addition to the news about the Reapers. Azelda was afraid of a potential raider and she wouldn't let her followers part from her side even when she slept at night. Our assailant purposely drew attention and got caught in an attempt to lull everyone into thinking that the culprit had been apprehended. Then, the Reapers would strike while everyone had their guards down—I can't deny that all seems very likely now."

"But, if they can sneak into the castle, they could just poison their food instead of flat-out attacking them."

"Both Azelda and Celestine have food tasters."

"Well, talk about capable crisis management..."

"I'll have you know that *you* have food tasters assigned to your meals as well."

"I *what*?!" Ruri exclaimed. This was definitely news to her.

"Of course you would. Humans die easier than dragonkin. Countermeasures must be put in place."

"Well, compared to dragonkin, almost *all* races die easier."

"That aside, if we know how they're infiltrating the castle, we can take measures against them. They've been getting the upper hand on us up until now, but this time *we* can set a trap for *them*," Jade said as he looked up at the castle with a devious smirk.

Chapter 22: Partially Destroyed

It was the dead of night, a far cry from daybreak. Normally, the castle would be silent aside from the faint footsteps of the soldiers on night patrol, but the hourly disturbances sent a whirlwind of activity, unbefitting of the quiet night, throughout the halls.

Amidst the activity, Jade pushed through at a brisk pace. Behind him was Ruri, her entire body covered in a long robe to hide the fact that she was still alive from the Reapers. She followed behind Jade, the hood of her robe concealing her face. Perhaps it was because of Jade's long legs, but as she tried to match his fast stride, she found herself breaking out into a tiny jog. And following behind her was Kotaro with Rin and Chi riding atop him. They were all headed for Euclase's office.

Euclase had assumed leadership in Jade's absence, and people were taking turns coming in and out of their office.

As soon as the five entered, Jade stated, "Everyone except for Euclase, leave," and cleared out almost everyone in the room. Seeing Jade's stern demeanor, not a single person wasted their breath in talking and instead immediately exited the room, leaving only Jade, Euclase, Ruri, and Ruri's entourage left.

Once everyone else was gone, Kotaro put up a barrier in the room. *"I've put up a barrier. No one on the outside will be able to see or hear us conversing."* No one knew if the Reapers were watching, so this measure was put into place.

"Appreciated," said Jade.

"Has something happened? I take it you went off in search of Ruri. Were you able to locate her?" Euclase asked, their brow furrowing from what they perceived in Jade's urgent tone.

Ruri decided this was as good a time as any to inform Euclase that she was safe, so she removed the hood from her head.

Once they saw Ruri standing in the flesh, relief spread over Euclase's face, but

their expression took a stern turn soon after. “What happened?”

Ruri proceeded to tell Euclase the same story she’d told earlier.

“...I see. I can’t believe it. Either way, I’m glad you’re safe and sound, Ruri.”

“Yes, you can say that again,” Ruri said, shuddering to think what would have happened if Chi hadn’t followed along.

“Well, now that Ruri has been found, I will recall the soldiers searching in town. We need all the manpower we can get since we have no idea where in the castle the Reapers have slipped into.”

“No, wait,” Jade interjected. “If you recall the soldiers, there’s a chance the Reapers might realize Ruri is still alive. No good will come from them finding out and potentially fleeing. We’ll let the soldiers proceed with their search and catch the Reapers with the remaining soldiers in the castle.”

“But, Sire, we have no idea where they’ll pop up,” Euclase replied.

“We know their path into the castle, so Lord Kotaro said he’d be able to search for the Reapers using his powers.”

“Quite. All I need to do is search for rats wearing bracelets, correct? It will take some time since I’ll be searching the gutters and whatnot as well, but it shouldn’t be an issue,” Kotaro added.

“Also,” Jade started, “the Reapers are likely going to show up wherever Celestine or Azelda are. Those cretins were apparently employed to kill Ruri, and my guess is that their employer was the Church of God’s Light. I’m certain of it from our apprehended raider’s use of the word ‘glorious leader.’ Added to the fact that they mentioned Ruri’s supposed death, it’s safe to say they knew about the crime the Reapers committed. Since the Church of God’s Light has been persistent with targeting Beloveds thus far, I wouldn’t put it past them to come gunning for their mark once again. Which is why we’re going to lay a trap.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

Once Jade thoroughly explained what he intended to do, Euclase exited the office in order to prepare said trap. However, just as they were halfway out the

door, Jade added, “Also, investigate the belongings of the raider we’ve already apprehended. Considering they made it past security into the castle, it’s likely they can transform into a rat or something just like the Reapers.”

“I will check right away,” Euclase replied.

The raider was apparently locked in the dungeon, but if they possessed the same bracelet as the Reapers, then they could use their small rat body to slip out of their cell. Fortunately, seeing as how there were no reports from the dungeon, it seemed as though they hadn’t escaped just yet, but checking as quickly as possible was entirely necessary.

After Euclase’s office door slammed shut, Ruri turned her attention back to Jade. “Will this be all right? I know you’re setting a trap, but if they overhear talk of the plans, then...” They didn’t know where the Reapers-turned-rats could be listening from—the gutters, the vents, behind the ceilings...

“I’m confident. We have special code to relay important information if there’s a chance of enemy troops eavesdropping.”

“Oh wow, I didn’t know that. In that case, it’s just a matter of whether you can really pull the net over them or not, then.”

“We’ll make do on that end. You, on the other hand, need to evacuate to safety,” Jade declared as if that was how it was supposed to be.

“Huh?!” Ruri replied in protest. “What are you talking about? I’m going to help catch the Reapers as well.”

“What are *you* talking about? They almost *killed* you. Do you want to be exposed to danger again?”

“I’ll be fine; Kotaro and Rin are here. I need to give them some payback for what they did to me.”

A silent staring contest ensued. Ruri had no intention of backing down, holding her glare on Jade. Their deadlock didn’t last for long, though. Jade was the one to crack first.

He heaved a reluctant sigh. “Don’t leave Lord Kotaro or Lady Rin.”

“Rest assured, I won’t!”

"I will be placing a firm barrier around Ruri." Kotaro had already placed a barrier around Ruri, but he summoned a breeze that wrapped around her in order to fortify it even more. It was clear that the invisible barrier protecting her had grown even sturdier.

"There. Now neither arrow nor magic will be able to so much as touch Ruri."

"Thank you, Kotaro," Ruri said, thanking him. "Oh, right. Jade-sama? Do you have the good-luck charm that I gave you before?"

"Yes, you mean this?" Jade asked, pulling out the charm with beads the same color as Ruri's eyes from his breast pocket.

"I hate to ask after giving it to you as a gift, but would it be all right if I had it back?"

"Sure. I wouldn't mind, but do you have something in mind?"

"It'll come very much in handy in fighting back against the Reapers," Ruri said, making her decision based on what the spirits had told her before she came here.

She took the glass beads, which the spirits had transformed into a rather dangerous good-luck charm, from Jade. She had initially passed it off to him, but she regretted doing that now as having it might have prevented the Reapers from almost killing her. However, the fact that they'd almost killed her was exactly why she could use this dangerous charm without any feelings of guilt. She wasn't about to waste sympathy on a couple of attempted murderers. To coin a phrase from her spirit friends, "complete annihilation" was in store for them.

"I see. That charm saved me as well. I was taken aback since I was convinced they were just some glass beads under the guise of a good-luck charm," Jade admitted.

"Huh? Did something happen?" Ruri asked, knowing that something must have befallen Jade if the charm's powers activated.

"Yes, somewhat. However, the good-luck charm not only protected me, but it also helped apprehend the raider."

“Oh, did it? Well, that’s great news.”

The spirits had infused the glass beads with their power without a single consideration for the consequences. Fearing the danger that would come from the beads activating, she had given them to Jade since he seemed like a relatively safe option. However, it seemed they had carried out their function as a good-luck charm after all.

Ruri was actually relieved that her worries were unfounded and that nothing dangerous came out as a result. That being said, since the charm had already protected Jade, there was a possibility that the beads had lost their power, meaning they would prove useless against the Reapers.

“So, does that mean it’s already drained of its effects?” Ruri asked, unable to tell at a glance.

Kotaro brought his nose over to the set of glass beads, deducing, “*No, I can still feel power within them. Only a small fraction of its power was used.*”

“I see,” Ruri said, now at ease knowing that the charm was still usable. “I can use it against the Reapers, then.”

“That force was only a *small fraction*?” questioned Jade, slightly in awe at the amount of spirit power imbued within the beads.



After Jade rescued Azelda from her run-in with the invader, Azelda didn’t return to sector two of the castle. Instead, she rested in a room prepared for her in sector one in the interests of security. The room was tucked in a corner at the very end of sector one, and despite the soldiers hustling and hurrying about the castle, there wasn’t a single one of them around. The only people around, in fact, were several soldiers posted outside the door acting as security. Inside the room, it was dead silent.

“Well then, Lady Azelda, we will be outside, so please notify us if something arises.”

The current resident of the room, dressed in her nightwear and wearing her brown hair down, nodded to the soldier’s words. She waited for him to exit the room and then extinguished her lamp and climbed into bed. It wasn’t long after

that the somber sounds of sleeping sighs drifted through the darkness.

Everything was quiet, as if the commotion up until that point had never existed. However, in this silence came a noise—the clicking of door tumblers.

The door to the bathing room slowly opened and out stepped the duo of Reapers. They carefully approached the bed where Azelda was fast asleep. The wooly carpet muted their footsteps, preventing her from noticing their presence. Once he was close enough, the man placed his hand over Azelda's mouth so she couldn't yell. That was when she finally opened her eyes.

"Heh heh heh, don't scream now," the man said, flashing his murder weapon in a threatening manner in front of her face. It was dark, but with eyes accustomed to the darkness, it was clear that it was a bladed weapon. "Well, not like you'll be able to scream in just a second anyway."

As he kept his hand over Azelda's mouth, the man plunged his sword toward her chest—it hit its mark, lodging itself deep inside. Muffled moans came from her gagged mouth, but they weren't loud enough to reach the ears of the soldiers posted outside. When the man pulled out his blade, her chest started to stain the sheets with blood.

Seeing Azelda go limp and close her eyes, the man smirked to himself. "Mission complete. Now, let's get the hell outta here."

"Right," replied the woman as the two turned around and prepared to flee. That was when it happened.

"Get 'em!!" echoed a voice out of nowhere, breaking the silence. Simultaneously, a huge fisherman's net dropped from the ceiling down on the Reapers, incapacitating them.

"Eek! What is this?!" cried the woman.

"Wh-What the hell is this?!"

The lights in the dark room flickered on, and a wave of soldiers flooded in with Joshua leading the charge. Even inside the room, several soldiers came out from the furniture, from under the bed, and even from the ceiling like ninja. In a matter of no time, the duo were surrounded, leaving them frozen in place and dumbfounded.

However, their surprise didn't end there.

"Yowch!!" Azelda, who had been stabbed just a few moments ago, arose as healthy as could be, clutching her chest.

"Huh?! How?! I stabbed her for sure!" exclaimed the man, shocked that the young girl rose from bed so nonchalantly that it was impossible to guess she had just been stabbed through the chest. He hadn't noticed, however, that Azelda's exclamation was much deeper in tone than one would expect from a dainty young lady.

Clutching her chest, drenched in blood, Azelda glared daggers at Joshua and said, "Hey, what was the hold up on the orders?! I got freaking stabbed over here!"

"My bad, my bad. My timing was a teensy bit off," Joshua replied with a lighthearted smile that looked in no way apologetic.

"That '*your bad*' doesn't actually sound like it's '*your bad*'!"

"C'mon, don't get so mad. He just gave you a poke. Give it two or three days and you'll be good as new. Good thing you're dragonkin, eh, Ewan *darling*? If you were a human, you'd be long dead by now."

"Don't call me 'darling,' you jerk!" The girl that was assumed to be Azelda pulled at her hair—it was a brown wig. She slipped it off, revealing brown hair that was shorter and more amber in color than Azelda's. "And another thing, why in the hell do I have to dress up like a girl?!" he asked, dressed in girl's nightwear. He threw the wig, which was the same length and color as Azelda's hair, straight to the floor.

"What else were we supposed to do? We didn't have anyone else around with feminine enough features to pull off ladies clothing. They wouldn't buy some burly dude in drag for a second and you know it."

"And tell me why couldn't *you* do it?!"

"Whaa? Get real. I don't wanna get dressed as a girl."

"Well, neither do I, *jackass*!"

"Now, now. Calm down."

Joshua's tone caused a vein to pop on Ewan's forehead, but as if he remembered that now wasn't the time to be fighting, he turned his attention to the netted pair. The man and woman seemed to finally comprehend the situation as their eyes glared at everyone around them with disdain.

"Goddammit. How did you know?" the man asked.

"Hmph," chortled Ewan back at the grimacing pair. "Someone saw you both turn into rats and infiltrate the castle via the gutters. So long as we knew where you were, all we had to do was ask the spirits to search for you. We knew where you were walking like the back of our hands. We purposely divulged which room the Beloved of Cerulanda was staying in so you'd listen in. Then we laid a trap."

"Tch!" The man clicked his tongue as he struggled under the net.

"Welp, as anticlimactic as that was, that wraps up this little ordeal. Take them away," Joshua said, giving orders to the nearby soldiers.

As the soldiers slowly walked closer to them, the man and woman looked at one another and nodded as they both struggled under the net to pull out something from their breast pockets—a bracelet. They smirked at Joshua and the others before putting on their bracelets and transforming into rats. Now with their bodies smaller than the holes of the net, they effortlessly slipped out and made a break for the door. The soldiers tried to catch the small animals, but their bobbing and weaving proved to be a challenge. Darting out of the room, they exited into the hallway with the soldiers quickly in pursuit.

The rats ran around in search of a way out, stumbling upon a vent they could seemingly crawl into. They tried to hop into the hole, but some invisible force bounced them both back. They went on to find another likely getaway path, but they were met by the same invisible wall blocking their way.

The reapers continued to flee and search for a way out, oblivious to the fact that they were being *herded* in, little by little. They eventually ended up in the garden, where soldiers were stationed in a circle—almost as if they *knew* the rats would be coming in the first place. Even more soldiers stood on the second floor overlooking the garden, bows drawn and at the ready as they aimed toward the Reaper rats. Jade also stood on the second floor, prepared to give

his men the order to shoot at any time.

The Reapers were completely trapped. They were clearly freaking out; no need to even ask.

A robed figure stepped up to the two rats and removed their hood—it was Ruri. They stared at her in shock, their eyes begging for answers as to how she was still alive.

“Hate to burst your bubbles, but I’m alive and well! Now give up and go to jail!”

The Reapers took off their bracelets and returned to human form. “Goddammit. We’ve got no other choice but to take you hostage now,” the man stated. He took out his weapon and charged at Ruri with his partner.

Jade lurched himself over the second floor terrace in a display of panic, but he soon remembered that Kotaro and the others were right beside her and pulled himself back.

“Oh, heavens! Someone, anyone, please help... *me!*” the battle-ready Ruri said in a contrived manner, tossing the lapis-colored glass beads toward the two.

The marble-sized beads traveled in a clean arc that would put a pro baseball player to shame, flying toward the furious looking Reaper duo. Ruri honestly had no idea what would happen, but the spirits told her to throw the beaded charm at them since it would deliver ample punishment. Apparently, the spirit power stored inside would unleash once the beads reached them. Without thinking much about what that meant, Ruri tossed the charm as hard as she possibly could.

Although she didn’t know what would happen, Jade had mentioned that it protected him. Since he had no objections to the idea, Ruri assumed that this “punishment” wouldn’t be too much of a deal—at least, that was what she extrapolated from everything. She assumed it would be a small hit back against the people who tried to casually kill her because they were hired to do so.

However, Ruri underestimated the sheer power the spirits had loaded into the beads for the sake of their Beloved. Once they reached their target, there

was a bright flash followed by a loud, thunderous explosion and a deep tremor. White smoke filled the area, and the various yelps and screams of people all over could be heard along with crumbling debris.

The shroud of smoke prevented Ruri from knowing what was exactly going on, but there was one thing she did know—this turned out to be *way* worse than she imagined. (*Oh, wait. Did I do something bad just now?*) Ruri muttered in her mind, fearful.

“Ungh! Koff, koff!” Ruri waved her hand in front of her to clear away the dust, even though she knew it was a fruitless endeavor. She could hear shouting, cries of panic, and cries for help all around her, but she couldn’t tell what was going on since her vision was impeded by the smoke screen. After a few moments, the dust finally settled and everything became clear again. But the sight that greeted her made her eyes widen and her face tense in shock.

The beautifully maintained garden had been thoroughly ruined. Flowers lay horrifically scattered about, and parts of the castle building fell in crumbling masses. Not on that, but she couldn’t see the soldiers that had been near where the building crumbled, possibly signifying that they were buried under the rubble. The shrieks and cries for help were probably from them—no, they were *definitely* from them. Even now, she could hear cries from under the rubble saying, “Get this off me,” and “Ugh, it’s so heavy.”

Although they seemed to be pinned under the debris, Ruri felt less pressed to respond to their cries of help since they were all dragonkin. They were tough and sturdy people, so they would be just fine.

Either way, after witnessing her decimate the castle in the matter of seconds, all of the soldier’s eyes fell squarely on Ruri. They all looked at her as if to say, “What in the hell did you just do?!”

“E-Ehehe, maybe I overdid it just a little?” Ruri said with a guilty and embarrassed smile.

“‘Little’ my foot!” Joshua snapped back.

The slew of stink eyes stabbing into Ruri was causing her to feel uncomfortable. She had no idea that those beads would have *this* much force. She only wanted to give the Reapers some light comeuppance, but she wound

up practically leveling sector one along with them. A good-luck charm from the spirits was *nothing* to take lightly.

“The castle...” Jade murmured as he stood with his mouth agape at the sight of the destroyed walls. He quickly regained his senses, however, and ordered, “Search for the Reapers!”

The spot where the Reapers once stood was a veritable mountain of rubble. Since they weren’t dragonkin, this was actually bad news. This was supposed to be a slap on the wrist, but it seemed like anything but.

“Hey, hold on, are they dead? Leave the soldiers for after! They’re not gonna die if they’re pinned under some rubble. Concentrate search on the Reapers!” Joshua commanded, leading the charge with the other unscathed soldiers to move the rubble from the mound.

What would take human beings heavy machinery to accomplish, the physically powerful dragonkin soldiers were able to accomplish with their bare hands as they gradually cleared the debris. Soon, the soldiers excavated the two Reapers, who had taken the blast from the good-luck charm head-on, from the bottom of the pile.

Everyone was convinced that they were dead, but aside from being knocked unconscious and banged up, they were in stable condition. Their injuries were light—too light for an incident of this magnitude—which had everyone scratching their heads.

“I put a barrier up just before impact. It wasn’t as strong as the one I have around you, admittedly, but good enough to protect against mortal harm,” Kotaro spoke up.

“Kotaro, good job!” Ruri responded. Since they needed to interrogate the both of them later, their deaths would have put a damper on that plan. Ruri praised Kotaro’s decision, which pleased Kotaro enough to send his tail wagging in a frenzy.

“Retrieve their bracelets so they can’t turn into rats,” Jade ordered.

“Yes, Sire!” replied his soldiers as they took the bracelets off of the Reapers’ bodies. With their means of turning into rats out of the picture, they could be

safely placed in the dungeon without fear of them escaping.

“That about wraps this up here... I guess?” Ruri said, trailing off into a question as she surveyed the disaster zone before her.

The Reapers were apprehended, but sector one was partially destroyed. Taking the aftermath cleanup into consideration, it was dubious whether you could say that everything was ‘wrapped up,’ but at least the culprits were caught.

Then began the task of excavating the soldiers pinned under the remaining debris. Dragonkin were so sturdy they could walk off a stab to the gut. The fact that they could get away with only a few light scratches from being pinned under heavy debris was fortunate.

With that, the long night came to a close and Ruri heaved a deserved sigh of relief.

Chapter 23: The Interrogation

Although the duo of Reapers took the full brunt of the good-luck charm's powers, they were in stable condition. Not only were their bracelets confiscated and their magic sealed off, they were thrown into the dungeon. The series of fires was put to a close, and it seemed as though everyone could start breathing a little easier.

Once everyone took a break to regain their composure, Jade, accompanied by Ruri, traveled down to the dungeon to proceed with the interrogation. The Reapers were locked away in a high-security section of sector five reserved for the most serious of offenders. They were in a "jail cell" in the technical sense, but instead of the dank and dirty stone walls that Ruri had envisioned, it was actually in pristine condition. It was a brightly lit room with a bed and table, separated off with iron bars. In fact, if the bars weren't there, it would have been hard to even tell it was a part of a dungeon as both the floors and walls were spick and span.

The Reapers, as seen from outside the bars, had bandaged arms and legs but otherwise seemed to be doing just fine. It was a miracle they made it out of that devastation with such minor injuries—the miracle of Kotaro shielding them from the blast at the last moment, of course, and one that Ruri wanted the two to thank him for.

In their cell, the vigor the Reapers once had was now gone. Their expressions were melancholic, like a couple of death-row inmates awaiting their execution. Admittedly, they *did* attempt to murder a Beloved, so that made perfect sense. There was no possible way they would skate by with just a light punishment.

Jade took a step toward them. "I have a few questions for the both of you."

The man quickly lifted his head, clinging to the bars and asking, "If we talk, will you lighten our sentence?!"

"Nonsense," Jade replied. "Trying to kill a Beloved is not a crime that holds a 'light sentence.' Not to mention, you Reapers have killed people across multiple

nations. There is no way I would grant clemency to people as dangerous as the both of you.”

“No, you’re wrong! Neither of us are Reapers!” the man responded.

“Right,” exclaimed the woman, “we’re not!”

The duo couldn’t refute the insinuation of being Reapers fast enough. While it could’ve just been an attempt at talking their way out of the situation, they seemed to be earnestly desperate in their claims.

Ruri and Jade looked at one another before Jade turned back to the man, glaring at him with a stern look. “Explain yourselves. You’re both Reapers, aren’t you? Ruri told me that you both called yourselves that.”

“N-No! We’re tellin’ the truth. We’re no Reapers!” the man exclaimed before launching into his life story.

“We’re originally mercenaries. We came from far away once we heard Nadasha was starting a big war, but it ended so fast that we never got a chance to find work. So, instead of getting paid, we ended up in the red. We couldn’t find decent work to help us earn money for our trip back to our nation, and we were at the point where *surviving* didn’t look likely, much less going back home. That’s when we decided to borrow the infamous monikers—Reapers. Once we did, we got a request right away. Two robed figures. We never saw their faces, but we jumped at the insane amount of cash they offered us.”

“People of the Church of God’s Light?” Jade questioned.

“I don’t know that much,” the man replied. “All I know is they told us to kill the Beloved and they had everything all ready for us. They gave us those bracelets and explained we could get in and out of the castle easily with them. We were simply told that we just had to kill the Beloved, and we followed their instructions to the letter.”

“What instructions?” Jade asked.

The man’s eyes wandered around the room before he took an audible gulp and hesitantly started to speak. “First, we had to infiltrate the castle using the bracelets and scope out the interior—especially the Beloved’s room, the kitchen, and the infirmary. We were told to carefully investigate the position of

each of those places. We've been infiltrating the castle for the past few days. Then, at night, we'd sneak into the room of this nation's Beloved, kidnap her, and throw the castle into chaos. Apparently, our client was aiming to do something in the confusion. Our instructions after we took her was to wrap her up in Spirit Slayer chains, make sure the spirits didn't spot us, and dump her into the sea to kill her."

"Why didn't you take her *after* you killed her? Wouldn't that be easier?" asked Jade.

"The bracelets are magic tools, so they react to mana. If she were dead already, then she wouldn't transform into a rat even with it on her. That's why we needed to keep her alive."

That was a new revelation to Ruri. She assumed her own bracelet operated in the same way, albeit with a different animal transformation.

"Also, our instructions were that once we killed the Nation of the Dragon King's Beloved, we'd come back and kill the Beloved of Cerulanda. We were simply following orders. We weren't trying to kill because we wanted to; we *had* to in order to keep ourselves alive. So, come on, show us mercy!"

"Please!" pleaded the woman.

Ruri was clearly discomfited by these two individuals trying to argue that their hands were forced into murder.

"Whether you were instructed or requested to do so, it was a murder plot, and one that will *not* be taken lightly," Jade said in a voice so low it practically came from the depths of the earth. After all, one false step and Ruri would have died. His rage was justified.

Seeing the two trying to excuse their way into a lighter sentence after everything they'd done filled Ruri with rage as well. She hadn't forgotten the man's twisted smile before he pushed her off into the sea.

Seeing the anger emanating from Jade, the man swallowed his words. "I'm sorry! I won't do anything bad any more! So, please... spare us." The two tossed their pride by the wayside and proceeded to drop to the ground and grovel.

Jade looked down at them with a cold stare, saying, "Do you honestly think

that spouting those empty words will pardon you of your deeds? This is not some *misdemeanor*. You two attempted *murder*. You will both be punished to the full extent of our nation's laws."

The hope instantly drained from their faces, and they both slumped in their cell.

However, someone else present raised an objection—that someone being Rin. She howled while flapping around, her bright red eyes open wide. "*That is not good enough!!*"

Kotaro nodded in agreement. "*They tried to kill Ruri, our contract-bearer. This is no crime to be tried by some nation's laws.*"

"Yes, but..." Jade stammered, completely understanding how Rin and Kotaro felt. It was clear from his scowling face that he wanted to rip the two to shreds right here and now, but as the king of a nation, he was bound to obey his nation's laws.

"*There's no way you'll consider executing them, then?*" Rin asked.

"That's correct..." Even though they tried to murder a Beloved, the laws of the Nation of the Dragon King would not allow the death penalty. Compared to other nations that would put people to death simply for stealing, the Nation of the Dragon King was far more humane; they would punish to the fullest extent, but their fullest extent wasn't *death*.

Rin and Kotaro were extremely dissatisfied, finding the punishment far too light. Jade knew how they felt. Even considering the possibility that the spirits' retribution would plunge the nation into danger, a part of him wanted to put them to death. But Jade couldn't bring himself to do something so offhandedly.

As she looked at the perplexed Jade and the snarling Rin and Kotaro, an idea popped into Ruri's mind. "So, how about this? Would you mind if I were to give them a little punishment, Jade-sama?"

"What do you plan on doing?"

Ruri looked at the two wannabe Reapers' faces and smirked. "First, we'll get some catnip," she started, as if going through a recipe.

Jade raised his eyebrow in suspicion. "Okay, then what?"

"We have those bracelets that turn people into rats, correct? We'll use those to turn them into rats."

"Okay...?" Jade played along, not yet following the plan.

"We'll cover them in catnip and place them in a small cage so they can't turn back into human form. One about this size," Ruri said as she pulled out a small iron cage from her pocket space. It could fit in two hands. She had just so happened to find it when she went into her pocket space before. "So, once we put them in this cage, we'll throw it to a bunch of hungry strays. Spending the whole night like that will be their little punishment."

A short pause descended upon the room.

"Uh, Ruri?" Jade spoke up. "Wouldn't the hungry cats tear them limb from limb if we did that? That's not what I'd call a 'little' punishment by any stretch."

"Oh, don't worry. They'll be in a cage, so they'll survive... Maybe."

The mental image of hungry cats tearing a couple of rats to shreds reached the pair, and their faces turned deathly pale.

Ruri brought her mouth over to Jade's ear and started to whisper something so that the two prisoners couldn't overhear. "I'll place a magic barrier over the cage so that the cats won't eat them. Of course, I won't be telling them that since I want to scare them."

Ruri had been pushed into the dark depths of the sea and forced to experience the slow, looming fear of death firsthand. She wouldn't be satisfied until they felt the same level of fear she did.

"If that will satisfy you, then so be it," Rin said.

"Quite," agreed Kotaro.

With Rin and Kotaro's approval, Jade also accepted the idea, assuming this would ensure a safer conclusion than letting the spirits personally punish them. "Fine, then. If that will satisfy you, we'll make the preparations."

Ruri went to the cell and flashed a somewhat devilish smile at the man and woman. "Try your best not to die, now."

“Eeek!” yelped the two. This plan was, of course, designed to ensure that they wouldn’t die, but since the pair were clueless to this fact, they were stricken with fear.

Ruri reveled in delight as she imagined the comical sight of the two rats sitting in a cage, holding each other in fear as the cats waited right outside, clueless that they were perfectly safe.



After their talk with the Reaper imposters was through, Ruri thought they would be leaving the jail, but Jade proceeded to travel deeper.

“Do we still have business here?” asked Ruri.

“The member of the Church of God’s Light suspected of hiring that pair of fake Reapers is in a cell further back,” Jade replied.

They went through one door and then another until they finally reached the front of a certain cell. Euclase, Finn, and Claus were already standing there. All of them were peering into the cell, looking perplexed. Upon Ruri and Jade’s arrival, they cleared a space in front of the cell.

“Has he said anything?”

“No, he is keeping his lips sealed. And we cannot employ harsher interrogation methods against a child, either...” Euclase said, heaving a sigh and holding a hand against their cheek.

“A child?” Ruri asked as she slowly approached the cell and looked inside.

There, a boy who looked no older than ten years old, dressed in a black ninja-like outfit, sat on his bed. His mouth was practically a straight line, and he glared daggers at Euclase and the others.

Ruri was not only surprised that the captured member of the Church of God’s Light was a prepubescent child, but the boy in question looked familiar.

“Noah-kun?!”

“An acquaintance of yours?”

“We’ve spoken a few times in town. Why is Noah-kun...” The child inside the

cell was the same child from the skewer vendor that she'd met several times in town before—Noah.

Ruri stared at Noah in wide-eyed shock. Why was he in the cell the member of the Church of God's Light was supposed to be in? The answer was clear to her, but her mind couldn't keep up.

Noah was just as shocked as Ruri. He got up from the bed and rushed over as if he was going to grab Ruri's lower body. However, the bars impeded him and his hands didn't reach her.

He violently gripped the bars and shouted, "Why are you here?! Those two were supposed to *kill* you. Why are you still alive?!"

Faced with Noah's intensity, Ruri was at a loss for words despite having a million questions. Hearing the question, "Why are you still alive?!" from a small child—from such an innocent face—positively floored her. Noah clearly wished her dead.

"...They couldn't kill the Beloved. It's all over... I could have seen mom and dad again if they'd just got the job done..." Noah said, his voice sounding as if his hopes and dreams were just crushed before his eyes. He limply slid to his knees on the floor. "I'm sorry, Dad, Mom..." His bitter murmuring echoed throughout the silent dungeon.

It seemed as though Noah was keeping something to himself. The tone of his voice broke Ruri's heart and she forgot about his death wish from a moment ago.

"You want to see your mom and dad? In that case, we can help you do so. *If* you tell us everything," Jade offered.

Noah listlessly looked up at Jade, turning his reproachful gaze from Euclase and the others to his king as if doubtful that he'd grant the wish of the castle raider who had caused so much panic.

Jade, however, completely disregarded that assumption. Not a single person around thought Noah, a mere child, had plotted any of this. Jade most likely wanted to investigate Noah's background and smoke out any cohorts as soon as possible, which was why he offered to help.

Noah, however, seemed none too pleased with the offer. “There’s no way you could do that. Only the leader can. I’ve already failed once. This was my last chance. It was my last chance and I blew it... I’ll never get to see my mom and dad ever again....”

Noah sat slumped on the floor in a trance. Jade and Euclase proceeded to address him, but he didn’t make a peep.

Neither did Ruri. She couldn’t find the words to address Noah, the individual with a death wish for her and the very person plotting with the Reapers to take her life.

Chapter 24: Noah's Reason

It was the night after Ruri met with Noah. She lay in bed and clutched at a throw pillow, unable to shake this uncomfortable feeling eating away at her. Noah was the only thing occupying her mind.

Not only was the member of the Church of God's Light a child, but he was a child that Ruri knew. Yet he was involved in a failed murder attempt on her life. These facts were such a heavy blow to Ruri that it stopped her from thinking straight. However, after a little time, she regained her calm and was able to think properly again.

Seeing how distraught Ruri was, Jade smiled awkwardly and sat on the bed. "It's bothering you, isn't it?" he asked.

"...What is going to happen to Noah-kun now?" asked Ruri. "He's just a child."

"Child or not, he has committed a serious crime."

"But, there is a reason behind it. He said that he wanted to see his mom and dad."

"Be that as it may, I can't let him get by with a lighter punishment."

Ruri knew that. So long as he was in a lawful nation, he had no choice but to accept the appropriate punishment. However, Noah was still young enough to depend on his parents, which was the concerning part.

"Why are you so worried over that child? He tried to *kill* you."

"Yes, that is very true, but... he is still a small child..." Ruri said. She still found it hard to believe that the same Noah with the innocent smile back in town was plotting to take her life. It just wasn't sinking in that the same child would want her dead. "Jade-sama, I want to talk to Noah-kun one more time."

Ultimately, no one was able to get a detailed account from Noah after his outburst. Ruri was confused as to why he would incite this outrageous plot and why he found it necessary in the first place. Ruri figured that she had the right

to know considering she was almost killed because of it.

“Either way, we’ll need to question that child until we finish investigating the details of the incident. You can ask whatever you need by my side. However, no matter what reasons he has, or even if you sympathize with them, I will not lighten his sentence,” Jade said with a sharp glance.

Once Ruri saw that Jade was pressing back a swell of emotions, her eyes widened as she asked, “Jade-sama, are you really that upset?” She’d only now noticed that he seemed considerably unsettled.

“Of course I am. Honestly speaking, I’m upset that you’re even worried about him. I want to make it known to both the child and those fake Reapers just how beside myself with rage I am. However, since he’s a child and I’m a king, I’m trying my damndest to keep myself under control. If I were to let these emotions run free, I don’t think I would stop until all three of them were dead. However, as a king, I cannot kill them before they’re tried by the law,” Jade explained, his eyes burning in anger.

Ruri hadn’t noticed at all because he had been acting normal up until that point, but he seemed absolutely livid. Seeing how Jade was the mightiest of the dragonkin, there would be no one to contain him if he were to go on a rampage. That was why he was desperately trying to keep his rampant emotions in check.

Ruri sat up and wrapped her arms around Jade as if to comfort him in his conflict between his rationale and his impulses.

“If something had happened to you, I would have surely lost control. I’ve been able to keep up the appearance of being levelheaded because you’re safe.”

“I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“I am so glad you’re okay...” Jade said, embracing Ruri, overjoyed that she was safe and sound.



The following day, Ruri headed for Noah’s cell.

“Still, I gotta say, I can’t believe that kid is an underling for the Church of

God's Light. Makes you wonder what they're even thinking over there," Joshua said, showing dissatisfaction. He had accompanied Ruri on her walk through town when she met the skewer vendor's son, so he remembered him. He followed along now out of curiosity. "This isn't something a kid would cook up. There's probably someone behind the scenes pulling his strings."

Ruri agreed, but there was no point in saying anything now. What was done was already done.

In the back of the dungeon, they came upon Euclase standing in front of Noah's cell, in the middle of interrogating the boy. While it felt weird to have Euclase, the chancellor, take time out of their busy schedule post-incident to conduct an interrogation, it seemed Euclase was picked on the basis that Noah might find it easier to talk to someone more feminine. However, despite several attempts, all Euclase received in return was dead silence. They had just about given up. Were they interrogating the pair posing as Reapers, then Euclase might have employed some more harsh interrogation methods, but their hands were tied since they were dealing with a child instead.

Ruri walked up to Noah's cell, where he was refusing to even make eye contact.

"Hey, Noah-kun?" Ruri addressed him. He lifted his head and looked her in the face. "There had to be some reason why a little kid like you would do something like this, right? Talk to me. I might be able to help you."

There was no way that a child could perpetrate these sorts of acts unless there was some sort of outrageous circumstance fueling his decision. While Noah was the person who had tried to kill her, the heart-wrenching sight of him apologizing to his parents yesterday flashed in Ruri's mind, filling her more with sympathy than anger.

Noah, however, treated her to a simple, callous reply. "You can help by *dying*."

Ruri gasped, unable to even respond.

"If I kill the Beloved, then Leader will grant my wish! He will bring my mom and dad back to life!!"

“Bring them back to life? Your parents passed away? Isn’t your father the older gentleman that runs the skewer stall I met before? He seemed in perfect health last I saw,” Ruri replied, suspecting some sort of accident. Actually, she started to suspect if anyone really *could* be brought back from the dead in the first place—notwithstanding her essentially being in a world of fantasy.

“No, that person isn’t my dad. He’s an authority of the Church of God’s Light and the person who took me in and cared for me. My mom and dad were killed a year ago. He told me that our leader could bring them back to life. And our leader said they would bring them back from the dead if I helped in killing the Beloved.”

“Is that possible?” Ruri asked Kotaro, who was sitting near her legs; being a spirit, he would definitely know the truth.

“Not even spirits are omnipotent. There is no way to resurrect the dead,” he replied. There was apparently no way to bring back the dead, magic or otherwise.

“So, they deceived him,” Euclase said with pity.

“I-It’s not a lie,” Noah shot back. “Leader can really raise people from the dead!”

“In that case, let me ask you this,” said Euclase. “What were you planning to do *after* you were caught? You’re by yourself in this jail, and you’ll never see the light of day for the rest of your life. So, how, pray tell, do you plan on reuniting with your resurrected parents? In fact, how would you even be able to confirm that they were resurrected in the first place?”

“Well...” Noah stammered, his eyes wavering in uncertainty.

“Where did the man who took you in go off to? Did they make a small child such as yourself incite this plot while he watched on from afar?”

“Leader gave him orders and he’s on a separate task. It had to be done this way...”

“And just *what* was he tasked with that he would have a child carry out something with such a high probability of arrest?” Euclase asked, curious.

“I don’t know... I was just doing what my caretaker told me to do,” Noah admitted. The once tight-lipped boy was so shaken up now that he was oblivious to the fact that he was answering Euclase’s questions.

“See, there you have it. He didn’t tell you a single thing, did he? Given that, can you safely say he’s someone you can *actually* trust? Witlessly following his instructions even though he made you a far-fetched promise of raising the dead, one he could go back on at any time, is foolishness,” Euclase rebuked in an exasperated tone.

Noah was speechless for a second, but he quickly snapped back. “That’s not true! The dead really do come back to life! I’ve seen it with my own eyes!!” Noah looked at Ruri with an imploring look. “So, please. I’ll do anything. Ms. Beloved said that she’d help, right?”

“You’re asking Ruri to *die*?” Euclase asked, their tone gravelly with rage as they glared right at Noah with a mighty scowl.

“If she does, then Leader will grant my wish. Please. Save my mom and dad!!” Noah desperately pleaded.

Despite his pleas, seeing Noah so casually ask someone to die for some unknown cause made the sympathy Ruri once shared dilute into disappointment. She wanted to do anything she could to help him, but she wasn’t about to give up her life in order to do so.

Ruri declared to Noah in a stern voice, “That won’t be happening, Noah-kun. Just like how your parents are important to you, I have people important to me as well. I can’t—nor do I want to—make any of those people sad,” Ruri explained. She sympathized with Noah’s sentiments of caring for your parents so much that you would be willing to sacrifice the lives of others to save them. However, no one would allow for something so selfish to transpire. “You must know that I would never agree to dying just because you told me so, right? *You* wouldn’t agree to it if someone told you to do so to save a loved one, would you? While I feel sorry for your situation with your parents, do you really think they would be happy if you had to commit murder to resurrect them?”

“Well...” Noah stammered.

Noah cared an awful lot about his parents, which probably meant they raised

him with an immense amount of love. There would be no way they wouldn't be sad over learning that their own son tried to murder someone for their sakes. Even the spirits, wise to all in the world, said that resurrecting the dead was an impossible undertaking. Everything Noah was doing was essentially pointless.

"But, there's no other choice. It's the *only* choice I have to see my parents. But..." Teardrops started to fall from his eyes. Then, as if the floodgates had burst, he broke down in sobs and yelled at the top of his tiny lungs.

It was his first display of a childlike reaction since being imprisoned. He was probably so desperate. He obediently carried out what he was told, unable to discern right from wrong because of his intense desire to see his parents. The price, however, was all too steep.

Ruri looked at Noah stooped over, overcome with an indescribable feeling in her heart.

Chapter 25: To the Nation of the Beast King

“I still can’t believe it...” Ruri said gloomily as she walked out of Noah’s section of the dungeon with Joshua. The experience had left a sour taste in her mouth, to say the least. “What’s going to happen to Noah-kun after this?”

“Hired hit, attempted murder, town-wide arson, poisoning, destruction to the castle—and that’s just what I’m listing offhand. They’ll probably investigate how involved he was in all this and if he has any further offenses, but I’m guessing he’ll be sent to a prison for serious felons along with those fake Reapers, never to be let out into the outside world ever again.”

Ruri never thought that Noah would be pardoned, but it pained her to think of him forced to spend the rest of his life behind bars.

“Isn’t there some sort of Juvenile Act in place?”

“Juve-whatsit?”

“You know, something like reducing an underage child’s sentence with hopes they’ll rehabilitate later in life?” Ruri said. It was a loose interpretation, given that she wasn’t knowledgeable enough in the subject to give a more apt explanation.

“Hmm, that kind of thing exists in your world, eh? Afraid we don’t have anything like that in this one. Adults and children are the same. He may be ‘underage,’ but the age of adulthood isn’t the same across all races. Something like that might be impossible here in the Nation of the Dragon King with it being home to so many different races. Adulthood in humans is fifteen, but it’s a hundred for dragonkin. You can’t use the human scale to determine if a dragonkin is an adult or not, because at fifteen all dragonkin are still actually children. On the flipside, use the dragonkin scale and almost all humans would still be considered underage and would have their sentences reduced.”

Ruri was taken aback. “Wait, adulthood starts at a *hundred*? How old *are* you guys?!”

“Everyone working in the castle is an adult. Dragonkin mature slowly, so reaching adulthood takes that much longer, which, well, explains why we end up living so long.”

That meant that Joshua, the same person standing next to her, and even Ewan, the person who everyone treated like their little brother and who looked no older than her, were all pushing their hundreds.

“Then, that would mean Jade-sama is also...” Ruri said, feeling her common sense crumbling down for the umpteenth time since arriving in this world. She had been told that dragonkin lived for a long time, but the fact that they were all older than her grandfather was a shock to her system.

However, once that shock passed, one person came back into her mind—Noah. It seemed as though he couldn’t avoid a heavy sentence. Noah clearly had been manipulated through his love for his parents, so Ruri considered her options to help him, but nothing was coming to mind. Due to the laws set in the Nation of the Dragon King and due to her unfamiliarity in the ways of this world, this wasn’t an issue where she found it fit to interject. She could probably get him a reduced sentence if she made a self-indulgent wish as a Beloved, but she knew she shouldn’t twist the laws of the nation just because she wanted to exercise her privilege. Even though she *was* a Beloved, there was little she could actually do.

Ruri unintentionally breathed a heavy sigh. Then her rage toward the Church of God’s Light for manipulating a child like that returned. Jade seemed to be ordering an investigation on the situation, but Ruri strongly wished for their immediate capture. At this rate, Noah was going to be the only one arrested, a scapegoat for their ploy.

Joshua then spoke up as if something popped into his mind. “Oh, right. About the punishment you suggested for those fake Reapers? Looks like we’re not able to do that.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You suggested we turn them into rats and put them in a cage, but apparently they’re not turning into rats even with the bracelets on.”

“What do you mean? Did you give them the wrong bracelets?”

“According to them, the bracelets have a usage limit. We tried that Noah kid’s bracelet, but no dice. Explains why he didn’t run away.”

After Jade apprehended Noah, it was quite some time before everyone learned of the existence of these bracelets, which was what prompted them to confiscate the one in his possession. In the meantime, he could have easily turned into a rat and escaped from that cell if he so desired. The fact that he didn’t meant that he exceeded the usage limit and couldn’t transform even if he wanted, according to Joshua.

“Usage limit?” Ruri repeated.

“Yours doesn’t have one of those?” asked Joshua.

Ruri shook her head. “Not to my knowledge... I’ve transformed into a cat plenty of times and I’ve never *not* been able to. I’m not sure about later down the road, though.”

“They only used theirs a few times. Since that was enough to drain them, I’d imagine that their bracelets are either poorly made or cheap knockoffs in comparison to yours.”

“I got this from Lydia’s place, so maybe Lydia would know if I asked.”

“Well, either way, if there’s a lot of these things being used and abused, then it’s a problem. The Church of God’s Light are a bunch of extremist zealots that need to be nipped in the bud *fast*.”

“No objections to that!” Ruri vehemently agreed.

“... *Well, I certainly have one!!*” Rin abruptly interjected. She fluttered in Ruri and Joshua’s faces, stopping them in their tracks.

“What’s the matter, Rin?”

“*Don’t you ‘what’s the matter’ me! If you can’t turn those two into rats, then how are we supposed to punish them?!*”

Rin had a point. Now that they couldn’t turn the fake Reapers into rats, they couldn’t proceed with Ruri’s punishment plan.

Kotaro said, “*I want to strike them quickly... No, that’d let them off too easy. I want them to experience hell on earth nice and slow, then finish off their*

pathetic existences...” His remarks were unsettling, to say the least.

Ruri quickly tried to pacify the situation, saying, “You *can’t* do that. Jade-sama said they would be punished according to the law, didn’t he?”

“*But! But!*” Rin pleaded.

“*Grr...*” Kotaro growled.

Both of the supreme-level spirits were *extremely* dissatisfied. Ruri’s concerns were elsewhere by this point, and to be completely honest, she didn’t care what happened to either of the fake Reapers. However, that sat well with neither Kotaro nor Rin, which left Ruri in a bind until Joshua spoke up.

“I don’t think you’ll have to go out of your way. There’ll be others to take revenge on your behalf.”

“Care to explain?”

“A Beloved’s presence is a cause for celebration in any nation. Inflicting harm on one is met with contempt, and the heavily religious types see it as blasphemy. The jailers *and* the religious prisoners will probably persistently torment them ’till their dying days.”

Normally, that would be a sympathetic situation, but it served them both right for all the torment they caused. Ruri thought that to herself, but then she remembered that those two weren’t the only ones who tried to harm a Beloved.

“Hey, doesn’t that mean Noah-kun is going to get tormented, too?!”

“He’ll be fine. He’s a kid. And they’ll be more sympathetic since he was just being used.”

“Well, that’s less concerning, but... Anyway, that’s how it is, so Rin and Kotaro, you’ll just have to deal.”

“*Grr, fine...*” Kotaro agreed.

“*...Fine,*” Rin followed.

Seeing the two nod their heads in reluctant agreement, Ruri felt relieved.



Ruri parted ways with Joshua and headed toward sector two. She would normally have no business down there, but since she accidentally partially destroyed sector one when trying to catch the fake Reapers, Jade moved his office and bedroom down to sector two for the time being.

As she walked the hallways, someone stopped her from behind.

“Lady Beloved!”

When she turned around, one of Azelda’s groupies that had accompanied her to the Nation of the Dragon King—the marquis’s son—greeted her.

“Can I help you?” Ruri asked in a tone flatter than she’d intended. Her dislike for this man seemed to be irrepressible.

Seemingly oblivious to her tone, the young man spoke with panic. “Lady Beloved, I implore your assistance.”

“My... huh?”

“Our nation’s Beloved suddenly lost her powers and cannot receive the alms of the spirits any longer.”

So much had happened since then that Ruri had almost completely forgotten, but Azelda losing her Beloved powers was fairly recent. To the Cerulandians, that was a far greater issue than any Church of God’s Light or Reapers.

“At this rate, we will face punishment as soon as we return home!” He was part of Azelda’s entourage, but he was also apparently in charge of keeping an eye on their nation’s Beloved. And with their Beloved now devoid of her powers, it most likely meant a state of emergency for their nation. This would be viewed as a failing on their part since they were by her side and couldn’t help to avoid it.

“And? What do you want me to do?” Ruri asked, unable to provide much help despite his plea. She could certainly ask Kotaro to lift the ban on her, but considering that there was a chance she would use the spirits to harm people yet again, she wanted to keep things this way as much as humanly possible. From what she’d seen of Azelda’s personality, she wasn’t the type to reflect upon her actions apologetically so easily.

“Please come to our nation instead.”

“Uh, pardon?” Ruri asked, momentarily unable to process what she had just heard.

“If you come to our nation instead, then the problem will be resolved. Cerulanda can go on without losing a Beloved. In fact, you would be more welcomed than the selfish girl we serve now.”

“W-Wait a second. I’m the Beloved of *this* nation. There’s no way I could go to Cerulanda like that.”

“But you are a human! In which case, you would be much happier being a Beloved in a human nation. You can live far more comfortably there than in this nation filled with monstrous demi-humans. This is not the place for a human such as yourself,” the marquis’s son said with disdain. He was apparently bigoted against demi-humans as a whole. His eyes shone with desperation, like a man at the end of his rope. It sent shivers through Ruri’s body. “And I will humbly be there, by your side.”

“No, I would rather you *not* be there,” Ruri replied, the man’s slimy gaze filling her with disgust.

The young man reached for Ruri. Rin and Kotaro, standing by her side, were about to act until...

“What are you doing?” said a voice from behind. When they turned around, they saw Jade and a few soldiers standing there with stern expressions.

“Jade-sama...”

Jade pulled Ruri over and placed her behind him as if to shield her. He then shot a piercing glare straight at the marquis’s son.

“Eep!” shouted the young man. The color drained from his face, as if he were a weak frog and a ferocious snake was leering at him.

“What business have you with our nation’s Beloved?” Jade asked, looking down at the young man with squinted eyes.

“Oh, yes, well...” he replied, flapping his gums wordlessly.

“Take him away,” Jade ordered to the soldiers accompanying him. The

soldiers hooked his arms and dragged the young man away.

Once he was gone and out of sight, Ruri heaved a sigh of relief.

“Are you all right?”

Ruri nodded. “Yes, I’m fine.”

Jade patted her on the head. Then he looked toward where the young man had been dragged away and sighed. “Now that the whole raider targeting Beloveds matter is settled, I’ve made arrangements to send those people back to Cerulanda quickly. I suspected they might pull something since they’re set to leave tomorrow, but I see they’re taking forceful measures,” Jade said. Seeing that Ruri was clueless as to what he meant, he proceeded to explain. “I had our intelligence operatives investigate Cerulanda. I had my doubts about how Azelda heard the Nation of the Dragon King was so safe and how Cerulanda abided by Azelda’s self-serving request to come here in the first place. Seeing as how she’s so ignorant of the ways of the world, the nation could easily persuade her away from us.”

“Good point.”

“I figured there was some reason they wanted to send her to the Nation of the Dragon King. And when I had it investigated, it was just as I suspected. Cerulanda heard news of a human Beloved cropping up in the Nation of the Dragon King and apparently had designs to bring said Beloved back to their own nation. Most likely, they were fed up with Azelda and her selfish ways, desiring a new Beloved to take her place.”

“Well, I can certainly see where they’re coming from,” Ruri commented, finding herself agreeing with their plans once she thought of Azelda.

“However, an audience with a Beloved isn’t a simple task. Apparently, they used their own Beloved as a key to get inside the castle, ordering a handsome young man to accompany her and entice our Beloved into coming along. They probably thought they could easily convince you if they made you fall in love. After all, Azelda seemed to be under a similar impression.”

The marquis’s son was indeed quite handsome, but Ruri saw Jade, the most beautiful of all the already beautiful dragonkin, every day. There was no way

the young man could have captivated her enough to change her allegiance.

“To them, it would have been a godsend if Cerulanda managed to bring you back. After all, making contact with a Beloved isn’t easy no matter what the nation. But they tried to give it a shot regardless. However, an unexpected situation thwarted their plans.”

“You mean Azelda upsetting Kotaro and being barred from employing the help of the spirits, right?”

“That’s right. With their Beloved lost and forced to return to their nation tomorrow, they were in a mad dash to get you to come back with them. I sent a letter to Cerulanda explaining why she lost her powers along with some grievances. I said that she would not receive the alms of the spirits until Lord Kotaro quelled his rage.”

Conversely, that could also be interpreted as her being able to receive the spirits’ alms as a Beloved again once Kotaro allowed it. Given that, Azelda probably wouldn’t be suddenly treated any differently even if she were to return back to Cerulanda since the possibility of her becoming a Beloved once more was always on the table. That being said, Azelda couldn’t keep being the selfish brat she had been this entire time.

That left the nation in a bind. They would need to keep treating Azelda as a Beloved like always despite the fact she lost the blessings of the spirits, but Azelda no longer had the means to keep up her selfishness. All in all, it was a pretty small price to pay for coveting what another nation had.

“I don’t think that Cerulanda will be trying anything again. And we won’t be inviting them to the castle like this time either,” said Jade.

“So, I take it that means things are wrapped up?”

“Yes, more or less. But, that doesn’t mean everything is over. We’ve caught the Beloved-assassin, but we still haven’t done anything about the Church of God’s Light, the ones behind the scenes. They might come after you and the other Beloveds again.”

The thought of being targeted again filled Ruri with dread.

“So, Ruri, would you like to go to the Nation of the Beast King?”

“To the Nation of the Beast King?”

“Yes. You see, I’ve begun reconstruction on sector one since it’s in disarray, but...”

Ruri was the one who’d partially destroyed the sector due to the good-luck charm’s power, and she couldn’t help but feel guilty about it. “Ulp. Sorry about that,” she said, slumping her shoulders.

Jade smiled wryly, replying, “What’s done is done. Never mind it. This incident served as a lesson, and a good chance to re-evaluate the castle’s security while I’m at it. I’m taking a multitude of countermeasures to ensure no one infiltrates these walls again. However, in order to do so, I’m going to be letting in a lot of people into the first sector—a place where people usually aren’t allowed. Doing so might make security as a whole more lax and security pertaining to you more negligent. Which is why I think you should go to the Nation of the Beast King until the castle reconstruction is finished.”

“I’ll be fine. I have Kotaro and the others.”

“This is for insurance. My heart won’t hold out if you end up missing again. If the Nation of the Beast King won’t do, then Chelsie’s house will work, too. I just thought it would be a good opportunity. You only know about Nadasha and this nation, correct? I thought it’d be good for you to take a look at other nations as well.”

Ruri did only know about those two nations. She had been in this different world for a while, but she hadn’t traveled very far.

As she pondered to herself about what to do, Jade looked as though he had something tough to say, but he continued speaking. “Well, that’s what I’m saying for show, but Celestine was the one who suggested you go to the Nation of the Beast King.”

“Celestine-san did?”

“She said she wanted to do some bonding with you.”

Ruri’s mind wasn’t allowing her to process that statement at face value. After all, this was the same Celestine that confessed her love for Jade. The commotion had prevented them from having any chance to sit down and talk,

so she hadn't been able to clear up the misunderstanding behind her relationship with Jade. Not to mention, hearing the word "bonding" evoked sheer *terror*...

"But Celestine-san still has the wrong idea about the both of us, doesn't she? Wouldn't she just pick on me?"

"She is a Beloved of an allied nation. She wouldn't do something so reckless. And you'd have the spirits along with you."

"Hmm..." Ruri was extremely concerned if she would be able to function while away on foreign ground.

"The Nation of the Beast King is famous as a recreation area. The royal capital is an oasis in a desert, and their hot springs are popular as well."

Ruri's eyes lit up at the word "hot springs." "I'll go!" she said. Her desire to go was now so strong that she deemed any matter with Celestine as trivial and threw it out the window. She'd go even if told she couldn't.

She forgot how long it had been since she'd been to a hot spring. Baths weren't general practice in the Nation of the Dragon King, so she was only able to bathe in the bath house she built in Chelsie's yard when she visited. Other than that, she had to make do with Purification magic.

"I see. I'll tell Arman, then."

"Yes, please do!" Ruri emphatically replied, the idea of hot springs ruling her mind.

Finding her chipper attitude adorable, Jade looked at Ruri with a tender gaze and took her hand. "There's something I want to give you first. Mind if we take this elsewhere?"

"Not at all. Lead the way."

Jade proceeded to take Ruri to the garden on the second floor. This garden was just as well-kempt as the garden in sector one, but because this sector was for entertaining and housing royal guests, it seemed flashier—right down to the more lavish flowers. However, sector one might have been less extravagant overall, but that lack of bells and whistles didn't detract from its quality or its

mellow atmosphere. It was difficult to say which one was better than the other.

Once they came to the wide-open garden, Jade told Ruri, “Stand back a tad.”

Ruri did as she was told, and in the blink of an eye, Jade transformed into his jet-black dragon form.

“Why are you turning into your dragon form? Are you shedding your scales again?”

“No, not quite.”

Her head pointed up toward Jade, Ruri’s eyes stopped on something. “Huh? Jade-sama, that spot right there is a different color. Was that always there?” she asked, speaking of the one spot around Jade’s heart that was colored differently. She had no recollection of it, but it was possible that she had just never noticed.

As she pondered this, Jade used his giant mouth to skillfully pluck a single oddly-colored scale from atop his heart. Then he handed it to Ruri.

“Wow, it’s like some sort of gem.” It was the same shape as one of his shed scales, but with its beautiful jadeite-like color, it was hard to see it as anything other than a precious stone—an unprocessed, freshly-mined gemstone.

Jade returned to human form and pulled out a thin chain necklace. There was a small glass half sphere dangling from it. Taking the odd-colored scale from Ruri, he placed it inside the half sphere. Then he used another half sphere around the same size to cap it off. Finally, he used fire magic to melt the sides shut. He placed the finished necklace around Ruri’s neck.

“Huh?! You’re giving it to me?”

Jade looked in satisfaction at the scale adorning Ruri’s neck, and his lips widened into a sweet and kind smile. After stroking his fingers across the necklace, he trailed his hand over to Ruri’s hair and slowly caressed her locks.

Jade’s romantic gesture was convincing enough that it took Ruri’s breath away in a combination of confusion and bashfulness.

“It’s a good-luck charm. Make sure to keep it close to you at all times. As long as you’re wearing this, I’ll always know where you are no matter where. Just in

case you end up going missing again.”

This necklace was to help Jade know where Ruri was, no matter the place. It was an item that exuded Jade’s desire to keep Ruri to himself, but Ruri herself was oblivious to this. She was filled with innocent joy over her lovely gift.

“Oh my, thank you so much. Look, it’s the same color as your eyes, Jade-sama,” Ruri said, grinning ear to ear. She was entranced by the stone, the same shade of green as Jade’s eyes, and its glass enclosure. “It’s hard to believe a color this different came from your dark dragon body.”

“...It’s because it’s more infused with my mana than any other scale on my body.”

Ruri nodded her head and gave a rather lukewarm reception to that news, almost as if saying, “Huh, you don’t say...”

Jade looked disappointed. “So, you *didn’t* notice that, I see,” he said as he bent down and lightly pecked Ruri on the forehead with his lips.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha...?!” Ruri stammered, her face flushing red.

Meanwhile, Jade remained unaffected, as if he had done nothing out of the ordinary. The sight of Ruri so flustered made him snicker.



“Have a safe trip. We’ll fix the castle as fast as we can,” Jade said.

“U-Um, yes, I will.”

From a short distance away, Kotaro and Rin watched Jade and Ruri’s exchange.

“Hey, does Ruri not even notice that thing is a dragonheart?” Rin asked.

Kotaro shook his head. *“She knows it’s a scale for sure, but she doesn’t seem to know that it’s no ordinary scale. She doesn’t know that it’s relevant to her, nor does she know the special meaning behind someone giving it to her. Maybe we should go ahead and fill her in?”*

Rin thought about it for a second and replied, *“Seems as though the king doesn’t plan on telling her yet. Might make for something interesting, so I say we leave the matter be until Ruri realizes herself.”*

They proceeded to tell the other spirits to keep their mouths shut, to which all of them replied with a cheerful, *“Okay!”*

Although Ruri thought that the scale Jade gave her was a simple good-luck charm, it would be a little longer before she learned the *true* meaning it held.

To be continued...

Side Story: The Big Bracelet Search

This tale takes place before Ruri was exposed as being a human.

“Ruri, I’m beggin’ you!” pleaded Joshua, his hands clasped together. Why was he doing this? Because he wanted to borrow Ruri’s bracelet. “They’re way too alert and I’m not going to be able to conduct my undercover op. But they’d be *totally* off guard if I were a cat!”

Joshua was investigating a certain organization, but it wasn’t panning out as planned. Then he remembered Ruri and came up with the idea to go as a cat.

“*Hmm. Okay, but...*” Ruri hummed. The bracelet was extremely important to her since she was keeping her identity as a human a secret. She was slightly hesitant to lend it out to others.

“Please! Just while you’re working your shift at the diner. I’ll give it right back, honest!”

However, as hesitant as Ruri was, once she was faced with Joshua’s desperate pleas, she folded, replying, “*Make sure you give it back. I won’t be able to get into the castle without it.*”

“Of course!” Joshua said in delighted relief upon gaining Ruri’s consent.

As such, Joshua walked with Ruri on her way to the diner. Once there, they dipped into an unpopulated back alley. Ruri then had Joshua remove her bracelet so she could turn back into her human form.

After gazing at the bracelet with great interest, Joshua placed it on his own arm. In the blink of an eye, he transformed into an orange tabby.

“*Ooh, awesome!*” Joshua exclaimed in astonishment as he looked at his own fuzzy body.

“Since I doubt you’ll be able to take it off on your own, let’s meet up here when everything is done.”

“*Read ya loud ’n clear. My business is in the confines of the capital, so I’ll be*

back here by the time you're off work."

After seeing Joshua off, Ruri headed into the diner in the town next to the capital and started her shift as normal.

This town was basically a passageway to the capital, meaning there was always a constant string of customers coming in—all of them weary travelers trying to get into the capital proper before the end of the day and looking for a short break. However, Ruri wasn't imagining things when she noticed there were far more customers today than usual.

"Today feels kind of busier than usual," Ruri said aloud, catching the ear of the diner owner's daughter.

"Oh, you don't know, Ruri? There's a festival in the capital tomorrow."

"There's a festival?"

"Sure is. Since the capital is a port town, they hold a festival every year to pray to the water spirits for safe passage. Today is the pre-festival celebration, so all these people trying to get to the capital before nightfall are passing through here right around now."

"Oh wow, a festival!" Ruri said, her heart fluttering with the prospect of festival food and other such things.

"You should try going tomorrow yourself."

"But, I have work here..."

"The capital will be packed with people tomorrow. We'd get no customers anyway if we stayed open, so we're closing shop the day of."

"Oh, really?" It had been so long since her last festival that she decided to tell Jade a convincing lie and enjoy herself at this one.

As Ruri struggled to keep up with the dizzying pace of customers flooding into the diner, they eventually got past peak hours.

"Okay, Ruri, you're good to go today."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Since Josha was scheduled to come back, Ruri left the diner and headed toward their impromptu rendezvous spot in the back alley. However, Joshua wasn't there. She figured it wouldn't be long before he came, but despite waiting for several minutes, Joshua was nowhere to be found. After two whole hours had passed, Ruri found herself miffed. She wanted to give up on him and go back to the castle, but she needed the bracelet to get in.

"God, Joshua! You're taking *forever!*" Ruri screamed in frustration, her cries echoing throughout the alley.



After borrowing Ruri's bracelet and turning into a cat, Joshua successfully finished his mission and was en route to the alley where Ruri was waiting. He had walked around the capital enough to practically call it his own backyard, but the change in height made the normal scenery look different.

(Well, this is a pretty cool change of pace. Maybe I should borrow this from Ruri again and take a stroll around the capital,) Joshua thought to himself, positively delighted over his invaluable feline experience.

That was when a crow flapped its wings down to a nearby crate. The black-feathered bird was much bigger than Joshua was currently. He wasn't particularly bothered by its presence, but once he tried to pass by it, it suddenly let out a loud, ear-splitting caw.

He shivered and threw a wary glance the bird's way. *"The hell's your deal? Don't scare me like that."*

Joshua met eyes with the crow. Just one look at that ferocious gaze sent off warning bells in Joshua's mind.

"Oh boy, I have a bad feeling 'bout this..." Joshua said to himself, as the worst case scenario came to fruition.

The crow kept its intense stare on Joshua as it spread open its wings. With a shrill caw, it swooped straight for him.

"Gah! Yowch! Ow!" Joshua mentally yelled as the bird's sharp talons scratched at him. Assaulted by the physically larger crow, he was forced to go on the defensive without a moment to strike back for himself.

The crow swiped its talons at Joshua, aiming at his face, but Joshua instinctively lifted up his arm to defend from the attack—the same arm wearing the bracelet. The crow’s talons grazed Joshua’s arm and caught on the bracelet. It then pulled the bracelet completely off.

“*Aww crap!*” Joshua’s panicked actions had led to the bracelet coming off, and his body reverted back to human form in the blink of an eye.

Shocked to see a cat turning into a human, the crow flew off into the sky—with the bracelet still in its grasp.

“Are you freakin’ serious...?” Joshua said to himself, hopelessly dumbfounded.



Ruri wound up waiting for another thirty minutes, irritated to no end. Eventually, Joshua finally showed up in the alley. Although he had a rather awkward look on his face, Ruri was too mad to notice and launched her frustrations at him.

“Joshua, you practically took *forever!*”

“My bad. I got caught up in some things.”

“I can’t with you!” Ruri exclaimed, but that was when she noticed something. “Hey, Joshua? I’m surprised to see you’re not a cat right now. You managed to get the bracelet off all by yourself?”

“Uh, no, see, about that...” Joshua stammered, acting as if he had something hard to say.

“Hmm?” Ruri tilted her head in confusion.

“...It got taken,” Joshua said in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Huh? What did you just say?”

“Like I said, it got taken. The bracelet, that is.” Joshua said, chuckling in an attempt to diminish the impact of his blunder.

“You... huh?” Ruri paused to process what he said. “You *whaaaaat?!!*” She then rushed over and grabbed him by the lapels. “Explain yourself!”

Joshua clasped his hands together and bowed his head. “I’m *real* sorry. I got attacked by a crow on my way here and it swiped the bracelet. I tried chasing it down, but I couldn’t find it.”

“Where did it get taken?!”

“A side road in the capital.”

“What am I gonna *do*?! I can’t go back to the castle without that bracelet!”

“I’m really sorry. But just wait here; I swear I’m going to find it.”

“I’m going to look, too!”

Ruri needed to find that bracelet fast or she couldn’t return to the castle. If she couldn’t return, Jade would start to worry. And since she was hiding the fact that she was a human, she was naturally keeping the fact that she was working at the diner a secret as well. She would give the excuse of “going for a walk” whenever she left the castle, so Jade most likely thought she was somewhere on the grounds. If she wasn’t in the castle, it would be a disaster.

“Oh, right. We should be able to find it quick if we get the spirits to help,” Ruri said, thinking that would be a good idea.

However, Joshua stopped her. “You can’t have the spirits help.”

“Why?”

“Just think about it. If you ask the spirits for help, they’ll be moving all over the capital. If that many spirits start swarming all over the place, then residents are gonna report to the castle and it’ll reach His Majesty. Then there’ll be a ton of soldiers investigating all over town, so moving around will be tough. Also, you’re the fastest solution for any issue with spirits, so they’d find out you’re not in the castle as soon as they look for you. Actually, they might end up thinking the spirits are freaking out because something happened to you.”

“That wouldn’t be good... But, a wind spirit should be able to find them without having to actually search, right? There’s no way a crow would be where there’s no wind.” A wind spirit’s power wouldn’t work if they were looking for something in the ocean, but wherever a crow would live, there would have to be air. A crow flying the skies should be even easier for a wind spirit to find.

“I’ve been doing that already. I figured the wind spirits’ power would help me find it right away, but I haven’t been able to spot the crow that ran off with the bracelet.”

“So, we’ll have to find it all on our own? We can’t look for one crow in this big capital like that. Also, we’re looking for a winged target, so it might have flown outside the city.” With their search now impossible, Ruri’s panic started to grow in intensity.

“I’ve got some spirits posted inconspicuously around the capital just to be sure. That’s how I know it’s still within the confines of the city. All we can do now is put in the legwork and search,” said Joshua.

“Let’s get back to the capital quickly, then,” Ruri suggested. It was already past noon. They needed to search before nightfall or else searching for a dark bird in the darkness would be impossible.

Ruri quickly returned to the capital, where droves of people were trying to get in for the pre-festival celebration. The inspection going into town was probably a lot more rigid than usual considering the long line outside of the gates.

Ruri was starting to panic, thinking they would have to wait like everyone else despite their hurry to find the crow. However, Joshua practically ignored the line and marched his way up to the front. He said a few words to the gate sentries and easily gained entrance.

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asked.

“Well, I *am* a dragonkin that works in the castle. All I have to do is tell them that I’m on a mission.”

The two of them first headed for the spot where the crow snatched the bracelet away.

“This is it?” asked Ruri.

“Yeah, this is where I was robbed.”

It went without saying, but the crow was nowhere to be found.

“Which direction did it fly off to?”

“That way,” Joshua said, pointing. Then the two of them started walking in

that direction.

The capital was more bustling than usual—either because of today being the pre-festival vigil or tomorrow being the festival itself. Paper lanterns adorned the main street and food stalls lined the sides as festival fever filled the air. The capital was normally dense with people, but it was especially packed today—a fact that made Ruri’s head spin. It was going to be tough moving around to find the crow. Slipping in between people while looking up to search for signs of it was dangerous, and they kept bumping into people on the way, but complaining about it wasn’t going to help. They felt the pressure to find this bird—fast.

However, after a few minutes of walking around, they couldn’t find neither hide nor hair (nor feather) of it, much less catch it. It was starting to become more and more dark, as well.

“Hnghh~ What’re we going to do, Joshua? It’s starting to get dark.”

“This is really bad. If we can’t find it, then...” Joshua trailed off as the both of them pictured Jade throwing a fit upon finding out Ruri was missing. “Well, this is as good a chance as any to let the cat out of the bag about you being human, am I right?”

“Come on, Joshua!” Ruri scolded, annoyed by his irresponsible and carefree response.

“My bad, my bad. No need to get all sore at me. But, if we can’t find that crow like this, we’ll need to think of something or it’s gonna be bad news,” Joshua said as he looked up.

It was already evening and there wasn’t much time before nightfall. Not only that, but the pre-festival celebrations were about to start, meaning the streets would be packed and it would be even tougher to move around.

Ruri scanned the area until something caught her eye—something that made her stare, befuddled.

“H-Hey, Joshua? You said that a *crow* carried off the bracelet, right?”

“Yeah, a crow. Why?”

“Because maybe it’s not still a crow...?”

“Huh? Care to explain yourself?”

“Look over there...” Ruri said, pointing over to the roof of a house on the other side of the street. There a lone black cat groomed itself.

“A cat?”

“Look closer. At its hind leg.”

“Hind leg?” Joshua repeated, looking at the cat’s leg to see an all-too-familiar item there. His entire face froze in surprise. “The bracelet...”

“If it’s wearing the bracelet now, it must mean it slipped onto its leg after it took it from you.”

“Aah, of all the lousy—!” Joshua cried, clutching his head. “No wonder the wind spirits couldn’t find the damn thing.”

“So, even crows can turn into a cat?” Ruri murmured to herself, a bit impressed despite the dire situation. However, as she stood there whispering to herself, the cat suddenly started to move off of the roof. “Oh no, it’s going to run away!”

“Let’s get after it!” Joshua prompted.

The two of them dashed through the bustling street in the direction of the cat, avoiding people all the while. However, it took a lot of time to cross the street; by the time they got in front of the house, the cat was already gone.

“We were so close, too,” Ruri lamented.

“It should be nearby, though,” Joshua replied.

“Should we split up and search?” asked Ruri, thinking that would be an effective measure.

“No, that won’t do. There are already so many people here, and quarrels happening all over, so I can’t just leave you by yourself to let something happen.”

“I’ll be fine; I’m not a child.”

“The royal capital is safe, but not always. If the worst were to happen, it’d be

my head.”

As discontent as Ruri was about that, they didn’t have the time to keep bickering, so she resumed her search for the cat with Joshua. They searched around for about an hour, but the cat was nowhere to be found.

After running around for hours on end, Ruri, a mere human, was understandably tired. Joshua, being a dragonkin, had plenty of energy to spare, but she was at her limit. She wanted to take a break.

Sensing that Ruri was beat, Joshua stopped in his tracks. “Looks like that’s all we can do for today. I’m guessing people at the castle are realizing you aren’t there by now.” It was already pitch-black around them.

“What should we do, then?” Ruri flusteredly asked, no good ideas coming to mind.

“Why don’t you go to my house for the time being?”

“Huh? Are you sure? But isn’t Claus-san going to be there?”

“Dad is busy with work for the festival, so he shouldn’t be coming home tonight.”

Seeing as how any inn in the capital would be booked up due to the festival, Ruri reluctantly agreed.

Joshua’s house was just as big as she remembered it. Granted, it made perfect sense considering his father served as part of the king’s court.

“Boy, Joshua, you’re kind of a rich kid, huh?”

“Well, I have a big house, but almost all dragonkin hold vital positions for the nation, so I never really felt that way.”

They proceeded inside and were immediately greeted by people who appeared to be maids and butlers.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He is staying the night at the castle.”

Hearing that, Ruri and Joshua looked at each other in relief.

“This girl is my acquaintance. She’ll be staying the night here, so get a room and a meal ready for her.”

“Very well, sir.”

“Please, young miss, right this way.”

Ruri was about to follow the butler as instructed, but Joshua stopped her before she walked off. “You just take it easy here. I’ll go to the castle and make up a convincing lie. I think that’ll buy us at least a day.”

“Okay. Sorry for putting you out like this.”

“I mean, it was all my fault to begin with. Anyway, I’ll be back.”

“Thank you.”

After seeing Joshua off, Ruri ate her meal. Once she finished, she was shown to her room, where she plopped down on the bed and let out a long sigh. Then she called in the spirits she’d kept at bay the whole day.

“Guys, you can come here if you want,” Ruri said, allowing spirits to gather in the room.

“Ruri, can we help too?” The spirits had been away from Ruri the whole day, but they seemed aware of the situation.

“Thank you, but it would cause a scene if you all went searching the town.”

“In that case, you can just ask the wind spirits for help.”

“Oh yeah. Joshua had the wind spirits look thinking it was a crow, but since it was actually a cat, they couldn’t find it. Now that we know it’s a cat, we can have the wind spirits look for it.”

Ruri felt a glimmer of hope. It was an arduous task searching the whole capital just by themselves, but she could probably find it right away if she had the wind spirits lend a helping hand. She felt slightly relieved. Her nerves calmed, and she felt drowsiness start to set in. Deciding not to fight sleep, Ruri retired for the night.



The next morning, before the crack of dawn, Joshua woke Ruri up.

“Heeey, Ruri. Rise and shine.”

“Unghh~ Still sleepy...”

“We don’t have time for complaining. We have to hurry and find your bracelet.”

“Oh, right...” Ruri said, reluctantly sitting up while rubbing her tired eyes. After getting herself together and eating breakfast, she left Joshua’s house.

Ruri called out to the wind spirits. “Guys, did you figure out where the cat wearing my bracelet went?”

Several wind spirits filed in and replied, *“Yeah. Um, it’s at the harbor right now.”*

Ruri and Joshua looked at one another and firmly nodded.

Numerous stalls were set up along the main road leading to the harbor, and people were gathering early. Ruri and Joshua ran down the street as the smell of food wafted through the air. As Ruri peered at the stalls out of the corner of her eye and saw all of the people enjoying the festivities, she naturally started to feel envious.

“I want to enjoy the festival too~ Look at the food stalls~” whined Ruri.

“Now’s not the time,” Joshua reminded. “I’ll take you to the festival once we get the bracelet back.”

“Hmph...” Ruri replied, sad because she had to pass by the festival happening right before her eyes.

Now motivated to catch the cat as fast as possible, she dashed at full speed toward the harbor. Once there, she saw what appeared to be an altar filled with candle stands and offerings. It was probably used to pray to the water spirits.

“So, where’s our cat?” Ruri asked, taking a look around. They were at the world’s most distinguished harbor, so it was extremely wide. They had an unobstructed view.

There were people around, but there were no spirits in sight at the moment, so Ruri couldn’t ask them for help even if she wanted to. However, it actually

took less time than expected before the bracelet-wearing cat showed itself.

“Oh, there it is!” Joshua declared as he spotted the black cat wearing the bracelet in between two warehouses on the harbor. He wasted no time in throwing up a big barrier around the sheds so that the cat couldn’t run away. With it in place, the animal had nowhere to go.

“Good thinking, Joshua!”

“I’ll circle around the back. You take the front.”

“Roger that!”

The crow-turned-cat picked up on Ruri’s presence and tried to run in the opposite direction, but Joshua showed himself at the right time, making the cat halt in its tracks. Then Ruri and Joshua slowly started to close in on it. The small gap between the two sheds was only big enough for one person at a time. Unable to cut across, the cat kept its guard up, though it had nowhere left to run.

“Here we go, Ruri.”

“Right.”

“One... two...” both of them chanted in synchronization before pouncing at the cat.

The cat flailed its arms around in desperate resistance, bearing its claws. It was scratching up their arms, but they couldn’t let that deter them.

“Gah, that hurts, you little sonova—”

“Joshua! The bracelet! Take off the bracelet! Oww!”

“Dammit, hold still, will ya?!” Joshua said, grabbing the bracelet and yanking it off in one pull.

As soon as the bracelet smoothly slid off, the “cat” returned to a crow. Now back to its original form, it flapped its feathers and took to the skies, running away from Ruri and Joshua as fast as its wings could take it.

Ruri and Joshua stood there completely exhausted. Ruri had scratch marks all over her arms. However, Joshua, with his sturdy dragonkin body, barely had a

blemish on him. Seeing that, Ruri couldn't help but feel that was unfair.

"Here, Ruri," Joshua said, returning the bracelet.

Ruri felt relieved now that she had the bracelet back, safe and sound.

"Thank goodness~"

"You said it. This all really had me worried," Joshua said, relief also showing on his face.

"Alright! Now we can enjoy the festival with peace of mind," Ruri said.

"Geez, how much does this festival mean to you?"

"Well, I mean, I've never been to a festival here before. Plus, hearing the word 'festival,' gets the blood flowing, doesn't it?"

Joshua just smiled wryly, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

"Come on, let's go, Joshua. You promised to escort me around," said Ruri, giddy with joy.

"Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am," Joshua said in a reluctant manner as he followed behind her.

The excitement from the pre-festival the night before carried over as the main festival bustled with activity.

Ruri first looked around the stalls in order to enjoy the festival cuisine. As one would expect from a port town, there was no shortage of offerings farmed from the ocean, and plenty of stalls offered grilled seafood. Ruri spotted something that looked similar to squid. In Japanese fashion, she thought it wouldn't be a festival without grilled squid, so she quickly purchased one for herself. It indeed had the taste and texture of squid from her world. Once she finished with that, she ate a meat skewer and bought a skewer filled with fruit for desert.

This festival was the biggest event in the royal capital, which showed in its robust lineup of stalls. It also catered to all races with a plentiful array of different foods—something you could only expect from a nation composed of so many races and creeds.

As Ruri pondered over her food choices, she started to feel a little full. After dragging Joshua all over the festival, looking at the street performances happening around her, Ruri finally had her fill. She put on her reclaimed bracelet, turned into a cat, and returned to the castle.

After being away a whole day, Ruri stepped timidly into Jade's office. Joshua, who was with her, was a tad nervous himself.

"Um, hello, I'm back."

"Yes, welcome back, Ruri. Did you enjoy the festival?"

"O-Oh, yes. I did." Ruri had begged and pleaded to enjoy the pre-festival leading into the festival, which was why she had stayed the night at an inn within the capital. At least, that was what Joshua had told Jade and the others.

Jade had seemed suspicious that they managed to book an inn during the height of the festival proceedings, but judging from his obliviousness now, it seemed the lie had convinced him. Ruri looked at Joshua and they both breathed sighs of relief.

"You're back awfully early. Your first festival and you didn't stay for the fireworks?" Seeing Ruri's confused look, Jade asked, "You didn't know? It's tradition to end the festival with a large firework display."

"Oh, I didn't know. That's unfortunate."

"Oh, come to think of it, it does end like that," said Joshua, seemingly remembering that fact just now.

Ruri wanted to enjoy the festival to its end, but she figured it was already too late to head back. She found herself disappointed about missing the last spectacle.

Jade stood up and suddenly picked Ruri up. "If you'd like to see them, I know just the place," he said. He proceeded to lead Ruri over to the garden in sector one. The cityscape lay spread below, and the port, where the fireworks would be set off, was in clear view.

Jade pulled his pocket watch from his breast pocket to check the time.

“Should be any moment now.” It wasn’t long before a gigantic flower bloomed in the night sky accompanied by a loud bang.

“Wow, there it is, Jade-sama!” Ruri said, naturally delighted.

“Indeed,” Jade replied with a smile as he gazed at the giant burst of light.

Viewing fireworks from above as opposed to normally viewing them from below was a novel change of pace, but it was beautiful in its own right.

The last gigantic firework shimmered brightly in the sky and slowly vanished. The fleetingness made the end of the festival sink in. There was probably a loud chorus of cheers erupting in town right about now. Next year, Ruri definitely wanted to see the show while experiencing the mood of the festival in town.

As if he heard Ruri’s thoughts, Jade said, “Let’s attend the festival together next year.”

“Can we? Aren’t you too busy since you’re king, Jade-sama?” In yearly fashion, Jade was so busy with the various odds and ends surrounding the festival that he had no time to spend enjoying it.

“I’ll manage.”

“Are you sure?”

“I have Claus and Euclase around. It should be no problem if I slip out for a little bit.”

Ruri could picture Euclase sighing at the extra work and Claus racking his head in frustration. Ruri mentally begged for their forgiveness.

Jade added, “Joshua being the only one to enjoy the fun isn’t fair. I want to go around the festival with you, too.” Since Jade didn’t know of the problem haunting Joshua and herself while the festival was going on, he was under the assumption that she was simply having the time of her life together with Joshua. He wanted to festival hop with Ruri too.

Ruri smiled wryly at Jade’s childish pouting. *“Well then, I look forward to next year.”*

“Yes, I personally can’t wait.”

As she watched the fireworks light up the night sky, Ruri hoped that she could walk around in human form by next year.





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by Kureha

Translated by David Evelyn Edited by Suzanne Seals

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